



# Ten Things an Architect Can Do to Help Your Business Succeed in a Challenging Economy

By Steve Schmitt, AIA

*President, Merriman Schmitt Architects*

I once heard a successful business leader say that the secret to his success was having his pants on when opportunity knocked.

He went on to explain that his business had experienced a number of tough times over its lengthy history. But the actions taken during those times were probably the best business decisions he ever made. Tough times, he said, were a time to reflect, retool and prepare for the time when eventually opportunity would again be knocking.

Today's business climate presents a unique opportunity to business owners, real estate developers and everyone in the building industry to prepare for the next opportunity. Anyone who's been through slowdowns before knows that eventually they end and when they do the winners in the next round are those that will be ready.

This paper provides 10 examples of how building owners and managers can take advantage of a relationship with their architect to weather the current climate and be ready when the storm subsides.

## 1. Update Building Plans Now

Jane Smith calls looking for 50,000 square feet of office space for her company. Do you have 50,000 feet available? Is it contiguous within the building? If not, could you move a downsizing tenant to a smaller space to free up room for Jane? And, if Jane's ready to pull the trigger, are you ready to provide her with CAD files today that she can use for space planning and permitting?

Most building owners struggle to maintain an accurate catalogue of available square footage and accompanying drawings. Tenants come and go – altering the space as they do. If as-built drawings even exist (and they rarely do on older buildings), they may show little resemblance to the current space configuration.

Your architect can help prepare for Jane's call – and possibly help close a deal -- by accurately cataloguing your space now. Among the tasks you should consider:

- Verify building square footage and BOMA calculations;
- Generate clean, accurate base sheets in CAD for future space planning and permitting;
- Work with existing tenants to strategize options for expansion, space consolidation or downsizing; and
- Work with your architect to obtain clean, accurate marketing materials on available space.

## 2. Review Your Brand Image

Architects possess the knowledge and tools to help you put your best foot forward. When the competition for deals heats up, you don't want to lose an opportunity to tired, out-of-date marketing materials.

A solid firm can help you with:

- Creating a compelling look to the firm through updated marketing pieces online and in print;
- Providing you with professionally shot architectural photography which they may already possess;
- Offering compelling lease materials;
- Generating building design schematics for existing and future projects; and
- Delivering flat and three-dimensional site plans that help clients visualize a project before it takes shape.

## 3. Improve and Update Existing Projects

The business park or retail development that attracted quality tenants and high lease rates 10 years ago might look a little tired today, or fail to provide the type of amenities that compete in the current market environment. Your architect can be called upon to:

- Create architecturally significant signage that provides a boost in exposure for your project;
- Design low-cost amenities, including public spaces, walking trails, outdoor dining, or enhanced lighting;
- Convert unsightly hardscapes to green spaces; or
- Help turn a single-use project into a mixed-use development to help generate increased traffic and project synergies.



Three-dimensional lifestyle renderings help potential clients visualize the vitality of your development.

## 4. Master Plan Land Holdings for Future Development or Sale

You already know that a picture paints a thousand words. For many potential buyers, visualizing the possibilities of raw land is difficult. Your architect can help paint a picture for potential buyers by developing various plans for a property and illustrating the possibilities in two or three dimensions.

Well-capitalized investors continue to look for sites with excellent development potential. Simply providing a

well-conceived site plan may be all it takes to turn a fishing expedition into a profitable exercise.

Those with existing commercial developments may also want to consider updating their site master plan to represent the current uses and revisit plans for future possibilities on remaining tracts. On outdated master plan that doesn't reflect current trends may tell potential buyers that your efforts are haphazard and lack discipline and structure.

Updating old master plans to add density or amenities in keeping with current trends is a good way to stay up-to-date with buyer expectations. Urban appeal, walkable communities, and mixed-use developments are in high demand.

## 5. Rezone Now for Enhanced Options

A slow economy is a good time to seek rezoning to add value to your property. Your rezoning request now has less competition and is likely to move more quickly through the process; and municipal planners, public officials and the general public are also likely to be more open to aggressive zoning if it promises a boost to the local economy.

Your architect can help with rezoning proposals by helping create the necessary illustrations for potential use, providing exhibits for rezoning cases, and answering questions at public meetings.

## 6. Eye Candy Sells

Effective packaging sells. An architect may be able to help you more effectively sell a project by providing you exciting three dimensional visualizations of potential projects for proposals and marketing packages. In addition, your architect may be able to help by:

- Showing how dated, vacant product can be enhanced to compete with new development;
- Illustrating how old buildings can take on an attractive "adaptive-reuse" image; or
- Creating "lifestyle" images for mixed-use projects to help sell the project before its built.

## 7. Streamline and Improve Prototypes

A slowing economy helps expose flaws in building prototypes. An architect can help you revisit your existing prototype to remove unnecessary cost, streamline and speed construction, or appeal more to changing tastes both on the interior and exterior.

Architects can also provide schematics showing adaptations of existing prototypes for various regions of the county. We can take basic prototypes and adapt them to fit coastal, mountain, or historic environments – making site adaptation and incorporating design restrictions simpler once you're ready to expand again.

## 8. Improved Space Planning Needs Increase as Economy Slows

Economic change brings numerous challenges to how to manage your existing space. Some business units need to grow while others are shrinking. You may also be trying to add density in existing space rather than lease or purchase new space. Your architect can review your needs, assess your current spaces, and recommend ways to maximize your investment to reduce occupancy costs.

You might be considering:

- How to convert hard-walled private offices to a denser, more flexible open plan environment;
- Consolidating far-flung business units into a central location;
- Re-configuring an existing building in lieu of building or leasing new space;
- Creating more leaseable or sub-leaseable space through tenant movement; or
- Improving productivity by re-organizing space so business functions that need to be close to one another can be.

Additionally, if you've been considering a move, but the timing isn't right, your architect can show you how to redesign your interior to help you obtain many of the benefits of new space without the expense or moving.

## 9. Put Your Architect on Your Sales Team

Can we move this column? How about that window? Can that wall come down? Those are just a few of the questions we hear – and can quickly address – when we accompany potential customers on a walk-through of a property. Having an architect on hand when a real estate professional is showing a property can be the difference between a maybe and a yes to a proposal. We can provide an expert opinion on possible modifications to a previous upfit and potentially mollify issues that arise that could prevent closing a deal or keeping a prospect looking at other options.

Bringing your architect into the selling process also shows that you have a team already in place that's comfortable working together and ready to jump on a project when they're ready to sign.

## 10. Sell Your Green for More Green

If your building isn't green enough for today's eco-conscious climate, maybe your architect can help. Many existing buildings already incorporate green principles you may not be aware of. Your architect can assess the current building and your space to identify green features that can be marketed now.

We can also explore ways to obtain LEED-certification on your existing building or on your upfit within a non-LEED-certified building. We can provide a plan that you can implement immediately or phase in as normal systems end their lifecycle and need to be replaced.

For new shell buildings, we're helping developers "pre-certify" spec buildings to LEED specification to enhance demand and create a competitive edge.



A three-dimensional site plan enhances your marketing package.

**For more information on how architects can add value in uncertain times, contact:**

Steve Schmitt, AIA  
Merriman Schmitt Architects  
704-377-1177  
sschmitt@msacharlotte.com

[www.msacharlotte.com](http://www.msacharlotte.com)

