

Can You Teach an Old Firm New Tricks?

A traditional firm breaks the mold with a bold new growth vision.

BY RICH FRIEDMAN



Are you, as a leader, encouraging bold ideas that have the potential to transform your firm? Across the AEC and environmental consulting industry, firms that have

been around a long time get lulled into doing things the way they've always done them. That's not always the best path forward—even when it's working well enough. I'd like to share the story of what happens when a firm that's been around for 120 years starts thinking very differently about its future.

Alden Research Laboratory, a 100-person engineering firm that provides hydraulic modeling, flow testing, and fisheries biology services, has a clear market niche. Just a few private firms in the US do what this company, located in Holden, Massachusetts, does. Its workforce is composed of highly specialized technical experts. For more than 100 years, they've built a business on trusted relationships and a passion for solving difficult fluid dynamics problems.

But like many firms in the industry, that alone doesn't insulate the company from the ups and downs of the economy or within the industry. That alone is not a plan for sustainable, reliable growth or for energizing and recruiting great talent.

For Stuart Cain, Alden's president, growing the firm's business into its next century means doing it in a way that offers more control over the workload and deepens the firm's sense of purpose as well as its profit margin.

Adding disciplines and becoming an EA firm—an option leaders considered—didn't fit the firm's core purpose or its small-firm values. It would also put the company into competition with a portion of its client base. Instead, Alden is reinventing its value proposition from the ground up, transforming the business from a back-end service provider to a visionary engineering partner and technology incubator.

To get there, the firm has embarked on a three-pronged strategic approach to future development, with each part designed to build on the firm's unique history, core mission, and current operations.

1. Shifting the value proposition

While Alden is well regarded for its ability to answer clients' tough challenges with strong, innovative solutions, the company's services are most often requested well into the design and construction process. Yet Cain knows that his firm can best serve utilities and municipalities, as well as the EA firms who service them, when it's consulting on the front end to advise and influence facility design, construction, and operation.

So, leaders are intentionally repositioning the firm to be that partner. For facility owners, that means shifting the value from buying modeling services to a more comprehensive solution: identifying the needs that they may not realize they have, preparing and complying with changing regulations, and reducing cost and time by testing and modeling up front to determine needs.

2. Sharing knowledge and education

In-house seminars, webinars, and professional articles are a part of Alden's marketing toolbox. The focus is on knowledge sharing, advising, and engaging with clients on a more academic level as a leader in fluid dynamics consulting and education.

"We've always followed the traditional marketing plan of visiting clients, conducting seminars, and attending trade shows," Cain says. "We now see our role as teaching clients and helping them become more educated in areas they did not know would benefit their business, whether it's identifying facility challenges before they become problems and adversely impact operations or helping utility owners minimize the impact of regulations on their bottom line."

3. Developing technology

Alden has a documented history of innovation, from the invention of the Alden dynamometer in the 1900s to the advanced hydro turbine technology it developed for the Department of Energy in 1998.

"We come up with innovative ways to solve client problems all the time," says Cain. "We've thought that we could be helping others with these innovative design modifications, instruments, and technologies in cases where we own the intellectual property, but developing that has not been a focus for us."

It will be now. By leveraging its in-house technical skill and encouraging employees to incubate new ideas, Alden aims to become a global innovator of products and technologies that are essential to the industries it serves.

Reinventing your firm's mission and vision isn't an overnight proposition, but Cain reports the effort has already begun to energize staff. Three director-level employees have been tapped to champion each of the three strategy areas. Another is tasked with leading efforts to financially invest in the firm's bold vision. One staff proposal for a new technology product is already under evaluation. The company is also soliciting important external feedback through a comprehensive survey of key clients.

When presenting the new direction to employees, Cain challenged them to think about where they see themselves fitting into the Alden of the future and invited personal discussions with employees who weren't sure where they fit in.

"It's got our people thinking in more creative ways," he says, "and that is already proving to be great for our clients."

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