

For this Hot Firm leader, it's all about the client

Pay close attention to what they have to say and get it done.

Joncie Young, president of **KSA Engineers, Inc.** (Longview, TX), finds true joy in imagining, designing and then building something. But that alone doesn't guarantee success. In this interview, the leader of the number 48 firm on the *The Zweig Letter* 2010 Hot Firm List talks about how he led this 161-person consulting engineering firm to a spot among the best.

The Zweig Letter: First of all, how does it feel to be a Hot Firm?

Joncie Young: We are very excited to be named a Hot Firm for the second year in a row. This just validates our belief that KSA is a great company to work for and do business with!

TZL: How did you get to where you are today?

JY: KSA has made it a practice throughout our 32 years of doing business to hire the right people and provide them with challenging and rewarding work. In turn, our employees take ownership of their work and provide a high level of service to our clients.

TZL: What is the best part of your job?

JY: Imagining, designing and then building something. So many people never get the chance to have a job that produces tangible results at the end of the day. I am fortunate to be able to work on so many projects that improve the quality of life in the communities we serve. KSA is also more of a family than a job. Many of my colleagues have been working by my side for more than 20 years. KSA is just a place people don't leave.

TZL: What is the number one business issue you are facing right now? What do you do about it?

JY: The current state of the economy has been challenging for everyone. New projects are scarcer than in past years, and the competition for those projects has grown significantly. With fewer projects and more competition, you have to be at your best at all times. At KSA we have made some fundamental changes in the way we approach business. We are spending more time and resources on strategic planning, employee training and productivity tools. We have also increased our marketing efforts to make sure our message is reaching the right people. These changes seem to be paying off for us.

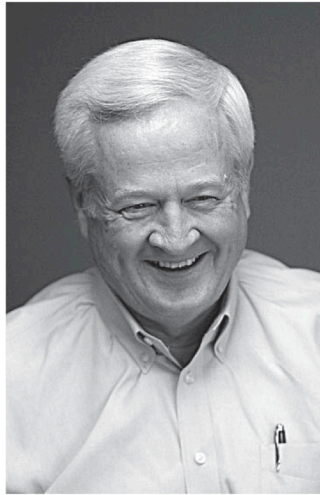
TZL: How has the A/E industry changed since when you first started your career?

JY: Let me start with what hasn't changed. Those who succeed in our business are paying attention to what their clients are telling them and then following through to deliver on the promises

made. What has changed significantly over the past 30 years is the power of software to aid in the design of our projects. On the one hand, this technological advantage has made it possible to maintain reasonable fees and meet rising labor costs. On the other hand, this same capability brings with it the risk of designs that can now be produced by inexperienced designers that may not have the judgment and experience our projects require.

TZL: What do you think it takes to be successful?

JY: Good communication and trust—with both our clients and our staff members. Communication of expectations and ideas is the primary differentiator between successful and unsuccessful projects and companies.



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TZL: Do you have a mentor?

JY: Yes. We owe a lot to my predecessor, who led our company through a financially difficult time in the '80s. He established a corporate culture of paying attention to what our clients have to say and then getting it done. "We are not artists," he used to say, "We're business people. Give them a realistic schedule and budget and meet both."

TZL: What's your best piece of advice for future and current professionals in the A/E field?

JY: For those still in college, study communication skills. Being able to communicate your ideas and designs both verbally and in writing is key to the success of the design professional. For current professionals, build trust with your coworkers. People know who they can trust and will work alongside such leaders to accomplish almost any goal set before them.

TZL: What's the most difficult part of your job?

JY: Not to dodge the question, but I do not see my job as difficult. We do not always succeed, but we always agree on a direction and have a good time working toward these goals.

TZL: What lesson learned would you pass along to a recent college graduate embarking on a career in the A/E field?

JY: As a young graduate, I spent a very long time sizing a culvert and proudly went into my supervisor and spent a very long time explaining all of the intricacies of my design. After my incredible demonstration of intelligence, he looked at me and said, "Joncie, I don't care about all that &%\$#. Just tell me how big the pipe needs to be." Lesson learned—just solve the problem and give people what they are asking for. It's not about you or your ego. ■