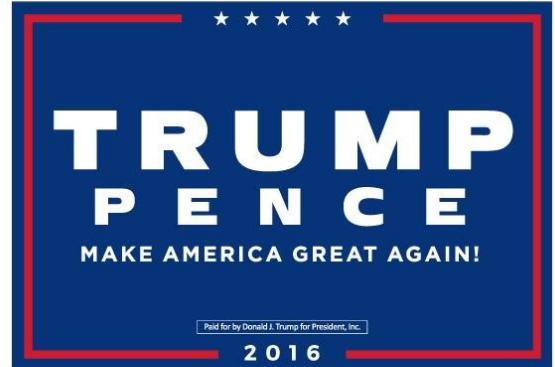


“Stronger Together” we can “Make Surveying Great Again”



No matter which side of the political isle you are on, the slogans of each 2016 presidential candidates would work well for us Professional Land Surveyors trying to revitalize our industry. To “make surveying great again”, we must be “stronger together”. I’ll leave the debate about whether our industry was ever “great” to the blogs. Even as cynical and jaded as some of us are, we love this profession and want to see it become revitalized (or vitalized). There are so many hot topics to be addressed such as education, experience, a lack of surveyors entering the industry, professional liability, regulations (or lack thereof), regulation enforcement (or lack thereof) and financial prosperity (or disparity), new technology, the list goes on and on. I hope to address some of these in future articles.

One of my favorite topics falls under the “stronger together” slogan. We surveyors are our own worst enemy. In my opinion, we surveyors do more damage to our industry and fellow surveyor than any other adversary. This is especially true when it comes to the pricing of a project. We start out by calculating the actual cost to complete a project. I realize that each surveyor has different fee structures, however, the effort to complete a job should be relatively the same. So why do we constantly hear from our customers “your competition was half your cost and he/she has a stamp just like you”. Is our friend down the street doing less work on the project, discounting their work, or have half the hourly rate as you? Let’s hope that our friend is not going to do less work than you unless they have some competitive advantage such as already having worked on the site. One possibility is that we surveyors will typically work to make a project right even if we aren’t getting paid for it. If we are salaried, we will work the extra hours to protect our reputation. How much protection does this provide? I contend that it degrades the professional rather than protect our reputation. Sure, maybe it keeps us out of the ethical “surveyor’s jail” that we all want to avoid. But it perpetuates the devaluing of the real price we should be charging for a project.

Furthermore, we all know we should be charging a price that is based more on value than cost. I’m not talking about market value. Market value may have already deteriorated. But we keep creating those estimates based on the hours to complete the task plus overhead and some value for profit. If we really

took into account all the effort (I mean ALL of the effort) required to calculate the hours involved, we might be surprised just how much effort it takes to complete a project. We still have a hard time charging what the value of the work is worth even if we took everything into account for pricing.

I'm not naive. I realize I'm talking about utopia, but we can't get out of the cost pricing "cellar" if we don't ever give value a consideration. Attorneys take 33% to 40% of a project and realtors take anywhere from 6-10% of the price of a sale. I'm not saying that this form of pricing also takes into account the value, but it does avoid basing the cost of a project at the same value no matter the risk or level of effort. Is it reasonable to charge the same for a boundary survey of a \$100,000 home as we do for a \$1,000,000 home, or a \$5 million dollar commercial property? You can be assured your liability and risk goes up with the value of the property.

Maybe the previous comparison is a bit controversial. Let us talk about one that may be a little less controversial. We already gave away the time saving on a given survey using global navigation satellite systems (GNSS). How much time does using GNSS equipment save on any given project over traditional methods of measuring? It is a moot point now because we only charged for our time involved rather than the value. This value may have been what it used to cost in time to do the same project before GNSS equipment. This is however, "beating a dead horse", because that "ship has sailed". It should be a good lesson to remember when we talk about pricing.

So now to the project that caused me to get on this soapbox. I was pricing a project that involved the opportunity to use traditional surveying, laser scanning, and/or unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). In my mind, there is a value to the project that is much higher than the cost to do this project with any of the aforementioned technologies. Realistically, we may never get to make surveying that great. Assuming that using a laser scanner and/or UAS would reduce the time involved to complete the project (which is not always true) we should be able to charge the price the project might cost using traditional methods. Don't forget the possibility that these new technologies provide much more information rich data that intelligent decisions can be based on. Furthermore, this technology may require significant capital and training investment that should be recovered. Our first instinct is to charge the lower price of all the three methods. Is it the good nature of us surveyors? Maybe it is the competitive nature of some that think they will charge the lower prices to beat out the competition. Some think they would rather lose less money than not have the revenue at all. I have experienced this is usually a downward spiral that is hard to recover from when you take on jobs that are losers (that could be an article alone) just to lose less. I contend that we are not doing ourselves, nor the industry, any favors by giving away the value of the project in the same manner we gave value (cost savings) away by utilizing GNSS equipment. The next thing we know (and maybe it has already happened using these new technologies), we will be working the extra hours (for free) to make our rock bottom price work out or to compete with the friendly surveyor down the street who priced it based on cost (or less). This is a downward spiral that we should try to avoid. We see this price deflating mentality cause surveys to be offered at prices that appear to lose money on a project. What does this cost based pricing do to our reputation by the public? Does it make our work look more like a commodity or a valued professional service?

Maybe some of us are happy to have a "lifestyle business" and just enjoy our civic duty. There is nothing wrong with that, but let's make it a lifestyle that is based on a value pricing model rather than cost alone. Again, this all sounds utopian and unrealistic to abide by. However, this is a slippery slope if we don't make some changes. Will we slide so far that we consider using offshore labor like our friends in

the photogrammetry industry have been doing for years? I sure hope not. Realizing that we have the responsibility of being in “responsible charge” of our work, I have seen this requirement be stretched very far in states that still require surveyors to be in responsible charge of photogrammetry projects (like Arizona, which I am a fan of). So far, in fact, that the “surveyor in charge” is sent “offshore” themselves to oversee the work being done in other countries. Then we would have a bigger problem than just pricing a project based on cost. We then proliferate the idea that we can drop our prices even below our current cost. No less, give away jobs. I’ll save more on this controversial discussion for later articles.

The point is, we should not give our work away and we should not price projects on cost alone. How do we implement this? Maybe we should steal a slogan from an age old anti-drug campaign, “Just Say No”. I was in a unique situation at one point in my career where I was able to say no. My bottom line, quality of life, employee morale, and customer satisfaction all improved. Utopian, I know... but we have to start sometime. We will be better off if we can “make surveying great again” by being “stronger together”.

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