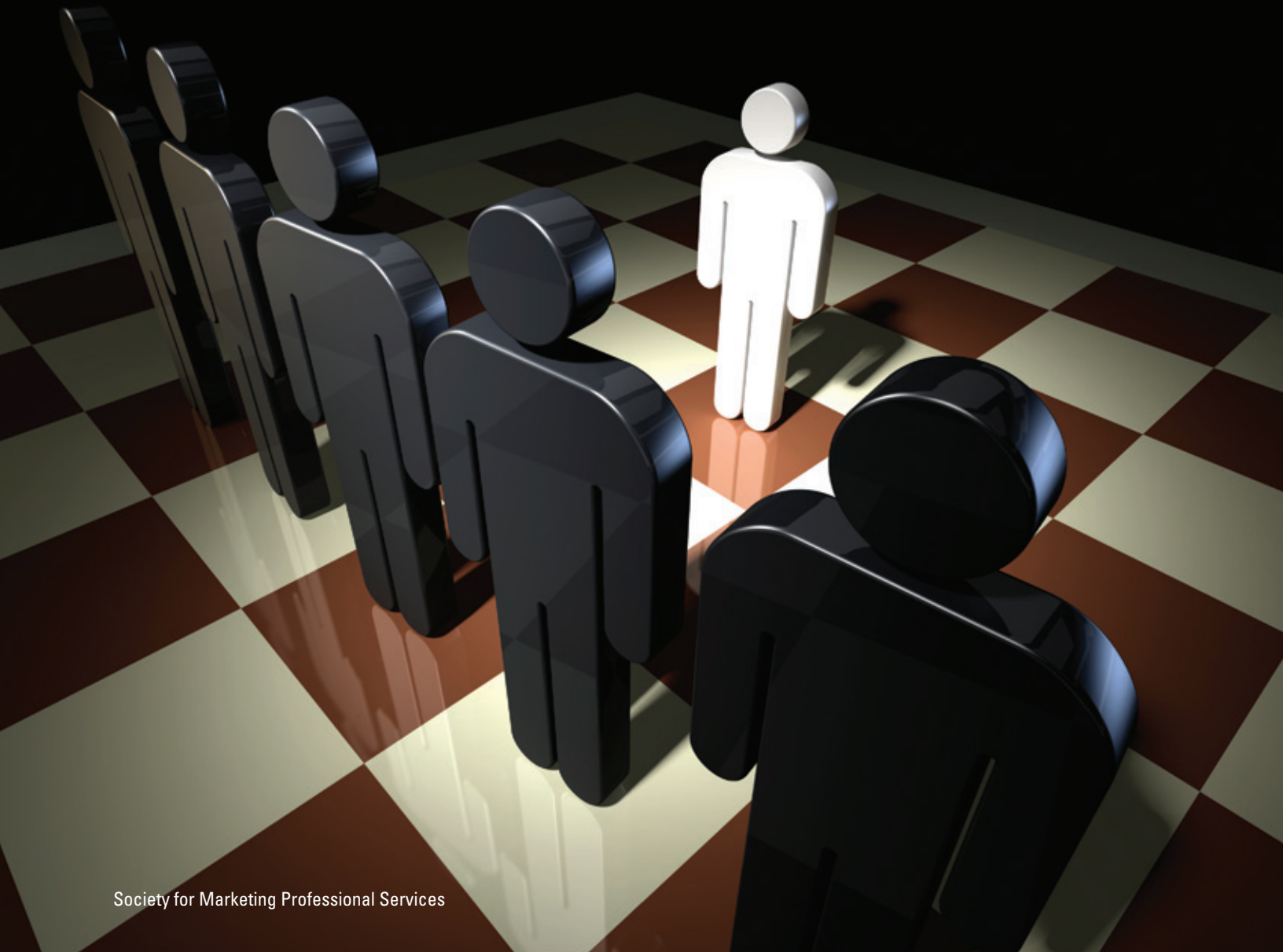


ON POINT:

# David Slays Goliath

How Firms Are Winning Against All Odds  
(Or How the Underdog Became the Top Dog)

BY HOWARD J. WOLFF, FSMPS



Plenty of marketing experts will offer advice that usually makes sense to heed: Don't go after a job if you don't have a good chance of winning it. But who can resist the opportunity to pursue something seemingly beyond reach that you have little likelihood of landing—especially if it's a plum project?

If you are selective about your audacious attempts, when you are successful, it can be a terrific thrill. A big win is not just good for morale; it also can be a strategic way to kick-start your firm's efforts to enter new markets and build new client relationships.

There are many stories about coming out of nowhere to beat the front-runners. Here are three that offer valuable lessons which, if taken to heart, can increase your odds of winning against all odds.

### Case Story 1: Small firm with no experience in a project of this scope and scale wins huge job against stiff competition.

Several years ago, when **Craig Park, FSMPS**, was a principal in a 25-person technology consultancy practice, he received a letter from a project manager at the J. Paul Getty Trust requesting his firm's qualifications for its new museum in Los Angeles. This was to be one of the largest museums in the world.

Aware of the significance of this billion-dollar project, Craig had been tracking it for years but was told by the architect only recently that it was too early for their involvement. Now he learned from the project manager's letter that they were ready to engage a technology advisor to assist with the development of exhibition, learning, and presentation facilities for this 1.2 million-square-foot project. That was the good news.

The bad news was that 25 firms were invited to submit credentials. The other sobering reality that made this a long shot was the only remotely relevant museum-like experience Craig's firm had was the Boudin Sourdough Bread Museum on San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf (part of a restaurant) and the art gallery at The Hess Collection winery in Napa. Undaunted, Craig focused the firm's "relevant experience" on technology and education clients who demanded high-resolution imagery and collaborative learning spaces. In addition, he tailored the response to emphasize the firm's planning and design processes along with a history of budget accuracy and cost control.

"A company's ability to respond to an unplanned event, good or bad, is a prime indicator of its ability to compete."

—Bill Gates

Several months later, his firm learned the field had been narrowed down from 25 firms to 6, and they were to interview for the project in the architect's office, presenting to the managing principal, design director, and interior design lead, as well as the museum's project manager, chief information officer, and real estate director.

Each firm was allocated 30 minutes to present qualifications, followed by 15 minutes of questions and answers. Craig's firm was number four of the six interviewees. Figuring their odds were slim—knowing that several of the other contenders were large, multi-office national firms with extensive museum experience—Craig limited their presentation to a few images of high-quality display-oriented spaces and focused the discussion on process, bringing along several samples of work products to illustrate the approach to communication, documentation, and cost control. Knowing this project could take another decade to design and build, he also emphasized his ability to help clients look to the future and anticipate technology (and the required infrastructure) for applications that no one could even imagine.

Seventy-five minutes into the 45-minute interview, the 3 members of the client team asked to be excused. Returning to the room, they announced that they wanted to hire Craig's firm "now" and that the contract would be with them directly rather than as a sub-consultant to the architect. The next two firms to be interviewed were told that a selection had already been made.



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IMAGE: COURTESY OF GOETTSCH PARTNERS

*This huge mixed-use project with a 53-story tower, in downtown Chicago, was won by a firm that had neither the client relationship nor the name recognition of its competitors.*



IMAGE: COURTESY OF GOETTSCH PARTNERS

What can we learn from this experience of winning against all odds?

- First, find out what the client's real needs and concerns are likely to be.
- Second, acknowledge your weaknesses but play to your strengths.
- Third, make yourself indispensable to the client and a key part of his/her success.

P.S. The resulting dollar value of the Getty Center contract grew to five times Craig's initial proposal. Moreover, the relationship with the client grew so strong that, for a substantial additional fee and with no competition, the firm was engaged to work on several other Getty facilities, including the renovation and expansion of a second museum, the Getty Villa.

**"It's alright to be Goliath but always act like David."**

—Philip Knight

## Case Story 2: Local firm with no client relationship beats the incumbent and out-of-town "starchitects."

When Goettsch Partners (GP) was shortlisted by a local developer for a major mixed-use redevelopment project in downtown Chicago, the firm learned it was one of six in the running. The competition included two other local firms (one of whom had a strong relationship with the client and had done the concept design for this project) and three big-name NYC firms: Pei Cobb Freed, KPF, and SOM.

Why even bother competing when they had neither a relationship with the client nor the high-profile reputation of the bigger, better-known firms? The folks at GP thought this project was right in their sweet spot. The scope included two underutilized office buildings: One would be torn down and developed as a new 53-story, 1.4 million-square-foot office tower; the second, of more historic significance, would be renovated and redeveloped as a boutique hotel.



In strategizing and structuring its approach, the firm zeroed in on its core strengths in several key areas that would benefit the client: Class A office expertise in Chicago; hotel experience around the world; and deep renovation/restoration knowledge locally, including a number of adaptive reuse projects. They focused on their combination of experience and expertise to make it through the qualifications submittal and proposal stages. When they reached the interview stage, it was time to offer proof of why they would be the best choice.

Despite the odds, GP's director of business development, **Matt Larson**, said they went in it to win it. The client indicated, "It's not a design competition, but we're interested in your ideas." According to **Michael Kaufman**, a partner in the firm, "We took that to mean it *was* going to be a competition, and we were determined to demonstrate to the client that we had given this more thought and more analysis and more energy than anyone else."

In the two weeks leading up to the presentation, **James Goettsch**, working with two designers, created a series of sketches and study models. Whereas other firms came in with a single design concept, GP presented and discussed the merits of eight alternative approaches. They proposed, for instance, turning the parking 90 degrees, which increased the efficiency of the whole plan. In reviewing the issues addressed in the various schemes, they conveyed their knowledge of the code requirements as well as a unique understanding of and working relationship with the city's landmarks department. The client was so impressed not only with their understanding of the issues but also with their problem-solving skills that they awarded GP the job.

How did the underdog become the top dog? According to the client, GP won this job by:

- demonstrating their knowledge and expertise, not just talking about it
- illustrating how they would address and resolve complicated design issues

- emphasizing the "hands-on" role of design leader and president James Goettsch, FAIA, throughout the project (while the out-of-town firms clearly would assign much of the design leadership to lower-level staff)
- showing their interest and zeal by exploring alternative solutions

### Case Story 3: Firm with no track record in the building type impresses client with their enthusiasm.

Years ago, it was announced in the *Commerce Business Daily* that the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons was planning to build a facility in Honolulu. Among the criteria for selecting an A/E team to design the project, the lead firm had to have an existing office on Oahu.

It seemed pretty far-fetched that a hospitality design firm specializing in resorts would even go after this job. But, here was the rationale: WATG had several projects coming to a close and would be looking at possible layoffs in a tough economy if it didn't land something big. It was the largest architecture firm in the state and had the capacity to mobilize quickly if it were to get the job. Most importantly, since there was no existing federal prison in Hawaii, WATG knew that none of its competitors had designed one, so that leveled the playing field.

WATG teamed up with HOK San Francisco, which would do the security planning and engineering. But the competitors also were smart enough to team with Mainland firms that had correctional facility experience and expertise, so that didn't create any strategic advantage.

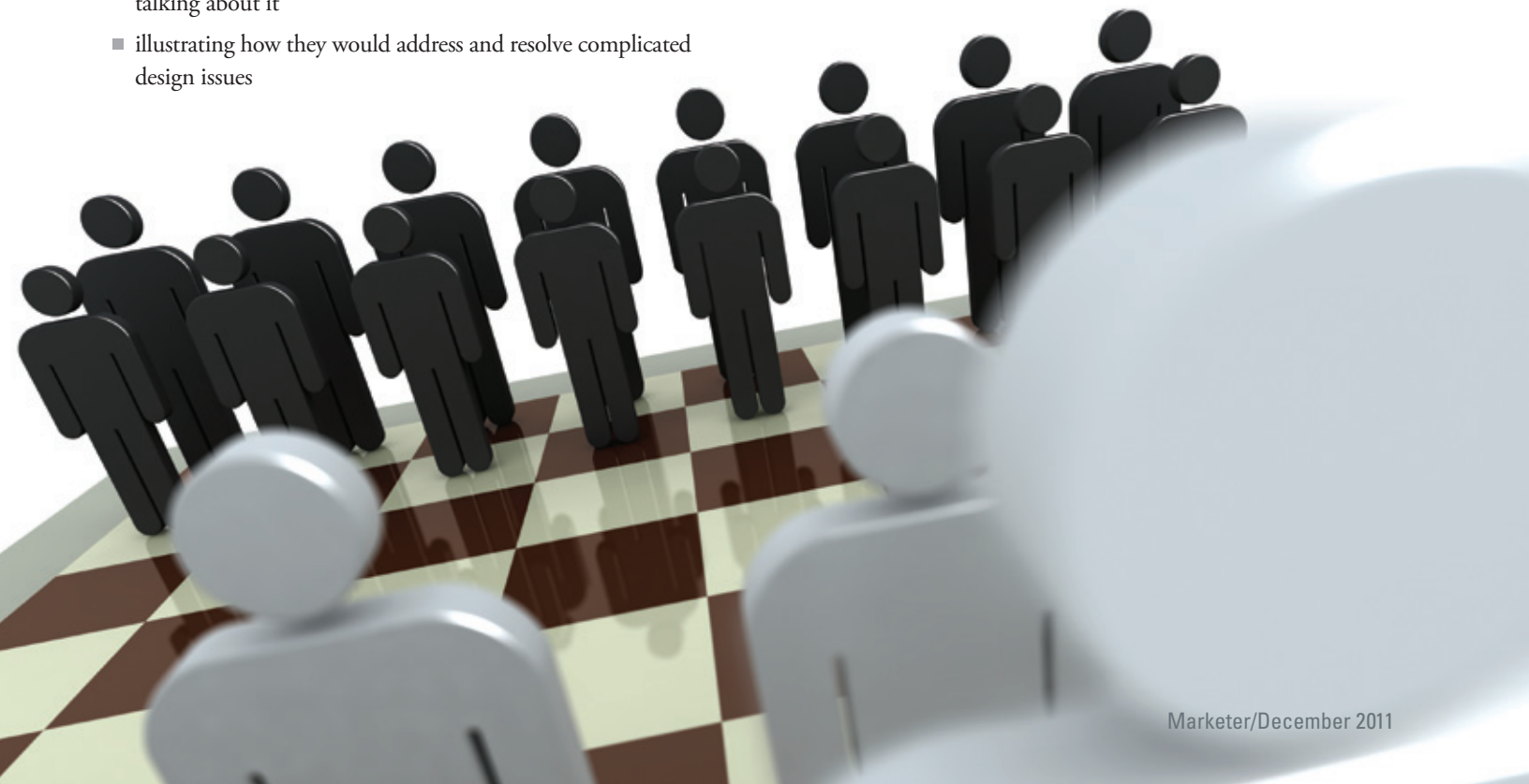




PHOTO: COURTESY OF WATG

*The Federal Detention Center in Honolulu was designed by a firm specializing in hotels and resorts (with no prior experience designing correctional facilities).*

WATG submitted its qualifications and was shortlisted along with four other local firms, all of which had more experience with public-sector work. The WATG team was able to convince the selection committee that its work on hotels was relevant, since, like prisons, they were 24/7 operations with rooms, food service, laundry, and security. Never mind the jokes about it being a one-key hotel, or an extended-stay, limited-service property, or “Club Fed.”

Now, with the odds being one in five, efforts kicked into high gear.

In my capacity at the time as director of marketing, I called everyone on the selection committee at the Federal Bureau of Prisons in Washington, DC, and learned they would be coming to Honolulu to conduct the interviews in the design firms’ offices. In my conversations, I learned the following key piece of information: Money for the project had been appropriated in the budget. If they didn’t get started right away, they were at risk of losing it.

So, in addition to hoping to impress them with our charming personalities and somewhat relevant experience, we needed to illustrate that we not only had the capacity to do the job but also that we were ready to go immediately.

The interview was scheduled for a Tuesday. On the preceding Friday tragedy struck. Our 15-story office building suffered a major fire that started in the department store on the ground floor and took more than 10 hours to extinguish, causing heavy smoke damage to our offices.

Society for Marketing Professional Services

On Saturday, we were able to lease temporary space in a building across the street, get into our old space, and remove enough of our stuff (computers, printers, etc.) to be set up to conduct business on Monday. The local TV news interviewed us in our new “offices” as part of a follow-up story on the fire, which highlighted how quickly we were able to get back in business... though we were working at makeshift desks, sitting on upside-down trash cans as stools, and in a completely open office with not a single partition.

We let the selection committee know of our change in venue for the interview and turned adversity to advantage. We showed the news footage as evidence of our ability to move quickly and let them know that we were ready to go and excited about their project. We ended with a guided tour of the “office,” with each staff member sporting a two-inch button that read, “Ready to Go.”

When we were notified that we got the job, I asked for a quick debriefing. Since all the teams were equally qualified, they said, it was the eagerness of our group that tipped the scales in our favor. “We were impressed with your enthusiasm and wanted to work with you.”

## Lessons Learned

Here are some pointers learned from all these stories.

1. Know why you’re going after the job. You need a business justification for spending time and money pursuing a long shot.
2. Get to know the client’s hot buttons and make sure you hit them.
3. Assess the competition and position your firm as distinct. Make it easy for the client to select you.
4. Go in it to win it. Half-hearted attempts will fail every time against hungry, aggressive, energized firms that are going all out to beat you.
5. It’s not one thing that wins it. It’s a series of calculated steps, effectively and comprehensively implemented. It’s not about gimmicks or shortcuts. It’s about competitive intelligence, enthusiasm, and hard work.

*Note from Author: If you have a case story of this nature that could benefit others, send me a couple of paragraphs with your contact information for me to follow up. I am writing a book on this subject, and there is room for more. ■*

## About the Author



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