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Jamie Scott Lytle

Katie Yee, left, the Chief Relationship Officer at Latitude 33 Planning and Engineering, has been key to the company's growth, says Principal Matt Semic and Associate Principal Melissa Krause.

Engineering Firm Built Bridges Within the Company Culture

SERVICE: Latitude 33 Pursued Education Market, Other New Opportunities

By SARAH DE CRESCENZO

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San Diego — A San Diego-based engineering firm that shrank to a shadow of its former self during the Great Recession has bounced back after diversifying its customer base and improving company communications, both internally and with customers.

Since its founding in 1993, Latitude 33 Planning & Engineering had prided itself on its longstanding relationships with clients. Building business had always been dispersed among the

firm's principals, rather than consolidated in one role, said Kris Taylor, the firm's chief financial officer and one of its most veteran employees.

"We never wanted to spend overhead money on marketing and business development," Taylor said.

That, she said, proved to be shortsighted.



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Latitude 33's Chief Relationship Officer, Katie Yee, left, brought much-needed coordination to the firm, says Principal Matt Semic and Associate Principal Melissa Krause.

So in 2015, Katie Yee joined the Scripps Ranch-based firm as its first director of business development and marketing. Last month, she joined the C-suite as the company's first chief relationship officer; she also became one of seven shareholders in the firm.

It wasn't until Yee arrived and took charge of those tasks that the firm realized what it had been missing, said Melissa Krause, who last month was promoted to associate principal.

"We didn't know what we were missing until we got it," she said. "It was a complete paradigm shift."

Yee said she found communication — both with clients and within the company — had become siloed, rarely making it out of each principal's team.

"As the company had grown, they had taken on so much more responsibility running the company and running their teams that it was hard for everyone to really know what everyone else was doing," she said.

She bolstered the firm's internal communications to ensure principals weren't pursuing the same business opportunities, unbeknownst to one another, and that all employees were hearing the same message from leadership.

"It was all about how we operate as a team internally as well as our relationships externally, our reputation, how we're dealing with clients — both of those are such important parts of my role," she said.

Impact of Recession

Building those relationships became more complex following the Great Recession as Latitude 33 diversified its client base.

“It’s about finding people in the new market sectors and making sure they know what we’re good at,” Yee said.

Since inception, the firm’s main work had been on private residences; the real estate crash reduced that revenue flow to a drip.

By 2009, the company had shrunk from more than 40 employees to 16.

“We realized we needed to get more focused on smaller, infill mixed-use development; we focused more on higher education, health care and in public works for the first time,” principal Matt Semic said.

Since then, Latitude 33 has become the executive engineer for the University of California, San Diego, working on everything from student housing projects to the Altman Clinical and Translational Research Institute building.

“The education piece has been one of our largest growth markets,” Taylor said. “The K-12 market has been strong, but it’s really the higher education that has led to growth for us and we’re choosing to stay on that path and keep that diversity as residential starts to tail away.”

Their work with UC San Diego has led to similar relationships with other Southern California universities, for some of which they also have become (or expect to soon be) the executive engineer.

Living Document

The firm has also grown its Geographic Information Systems (GIS) offerings; they’ve mapped the UC San Diego campus and are in discussions to do so at other institutions. They’ve proposed to do so for businesses in other industries, too, including health care and telecommunications.

“Anytime someone needs a living document that maps out their services, the attributes to those services, maintenance ... we’re able to provide that,” Yee said.

They’ve also added drones to their toolbox, allowing them to give bird’s eye views of some projects.

The Great Recession didn’t just pull away revenue, though: it also made it difficult for the firm to find engineers with the level of experience they preferred, Semic said.

Instead, they hired younger engineers and showed them how they could carve out a career at the company.

“We had struggled to find people in the industry that matched our personality who had five to seven years of experience, which is a big reason why we decided to promote from within and higher younger engineers to train,” he said.

Interaction With Leadership

A draw for some new hires has been the tight-knit environment, which includes regular interaction with the firm’s leadership team, Krause said.

“We’re in the grind with staff every day,” she said. “There isn’t this huge line separating us on a daily basis.”

Semic, who joined Latitude 33 in 2009 when engineers were being laid off in droves, said that collegiality inspired him to join the company.

“A lot of people at the time said it was the stupidest thing I could have done, switching to a company where I was the first in the door and would have been the first out if things had gotten worse,” he said. “I knew we’d come out of this strong together.”

Yee said Latitude 33 employees often spend time together, whether on a midday run or over an after-hours brew from the first-floor keg, which gives the firm a familial feel.

“Planning and engineering — especially engineering — has an old-school mentality to it,” Yee said. “What I like about this company is that it’s almost like an engineering company with a startup mentality.”

LATITUDE 33 PLANNING & ENGINEERING

Founded: 1993

Founders: Randi Coopersmith, John Eardensohn

Headquarters: Scripps Ranch

No. of local employees: More than 50

Revenue: Between \$10 million and \$20 million in 2016

Description: Planning and engineering firm with experience in residential, educational, health care, commercial, military, public works and hospitality work.