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MARKETING

Engineering firm hires chief with an unusual title



STAR-TELEGRAM/RON JENKINS

Carter & Burgess hired Chief Marketing Officer Laurin McCracken to identify emerging markets and take the firm into the future.

■ Carter & Burgess' new chief marketing officer will help determine strategies for business development.

By SANDRA BAKER
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

FORT WORTH — Web surfers, who Google the name Laurin McCracken find that the first several hits refer to sites about his watercolor paintings and exhibitions.

It isn't until several entries into the Internet search list that one discovers that McCracken is a well-known architect and urban planner and an award-winning marketing professional. He's also somewhat of a pioneer, one of only a few chief marketing officers in the professional services industry.

It might seem an odd combination of talents and interests.

McCracken, 63, has brought his professional experience and hobby to Fort Worth, recently joining Carter & Burgess, a Fort Worth engineering and architecture firm, as chief marketing officer.

"This could be the job I've wanted for the last 15 years," said McCracken, who came to Fort Worth from Looney Ricks Kiss Architects in Memphis, where he was the marketing and strategies officer. McCracken had worked at an architecture firm in Dallas from 1982 to 1994 and knew of Carter & Burgess' reputation.

What grabbed him, though, was the po-

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sition. Few professional services companies, and in particular architecture, engineering and construction firms, have marketing professionals in the so-called C Suite along with the CFO, COO and CIO, also called the chief financial officer, chief operating officer and chief information officer.

Carter & Burgess' move, which elevated its vice president for corporate marketing to the upper executive level, means McCracken reports directly to Ben Watts, the president and chief executive, the top "C" officer. His office is about four doors down the hall from Watts'.

Engineering firms across the country are growing rapidly and evolving into one-stop shops, offering a full palette of services, including architectural services. The landscape is becoming highly competitive, and Watts said the firm needed to find a marketing professional with well-defined skills to take it into the future.

"It's a different approach," Watts said of the post. "We realized very quickly that traditional ways of marketing engineering services had to be changed."

Andrea Fitch, national president of the Society for Marketing Professional Services, said she applauds Carter & Burgess for being progressive in ti-

ling a chief marketing officer.

"This will pay off in dividends," Fitch said. "They are thinking far beyond themselves and are thinking strategy. It's a smart move on their part. It will allow the firm to thrive."

In the past, professional services firms like Carter & Burgess had marketing teams or departments whose tasks were to develop such things as proposals and brochures. Now, marketing professionals are often also called on to cultivate and handle business development and nurture and maintain client relationships. Chief marketing officers play a huge role in defining and developing a company's culture, internally and externally, Fitch said.

The title of chief marketing officer recognizes the importance a marketing professional plays in a company's overall performance and strategy, Fitch said. But of the 6,000 members in her organization, Fitch said, she can count on one hand those that hold the chief marketing officer title.

"It's a trend in the past several months that is changing," she said. "The tide is changing."

Last week, First Command Financial Planning in North Richland Hills named Dennis Holland chief marketing officer.

At Carter & Burgess, Watts said it took him a year to fill the post, as he

interviewed eight candidates before he met with McCracken. Watts said he wanted to find someone who could define emerging markets and get the company on the leading edge.

It is a leap of faith, giving someone a blank sheet of paper to work from, Watts acknowledges.

"Ten minutes into my conversation I knew he was the man. I can't define it," Watts said. "Laurin is the perfect person to take us there."

McCracken has a bachelor's degree in architecture from Rice University and a master's in architecture and urban planning from Princeton University. His work in marketing professional services began in 1976 at Fujikawa, Conterato, Lohan Associates in Chicago, where he created a marketing program that is credited with doubling the firm's size. During his tenure there, billings increased by 300 percent, according to his biography.

He guided an international expansion for RTKL architecture firm in Dallas, which raised the firm's international earnings to 40 percent of overall earnings, up from 5 percent.

He has also served in marketing positions for HNTB Architecture in Kansas City and Alexandria, Va.; Global Design Alliance in Washington, D.C.; and McCluer Architects in Chicago.

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McCracken, a native of Meridian, Miss., was awarded an SMPS marketing achievement award in 1997 for outstanding contributions in marketing for the architecture, engineering and construction industry.

Based on history, Watts said, he predicts that Carter & Burgess will grow to about 5,000 employees in a few years, up from 2,800 now among 28 offices in 17 states and Washington, D.C. It was founded as an engineering firm in 1939, but architecture services now account for about 25 percent of its business and are among the company's fastest-growing divisions, he said.

Seven of the most recognized industry publications rank Carter & Burgess among the largest firms. *Engineering News-Record* ranks the firm as the 29th-largest of the top 500 design firms, for example.

McCracken said he is just getting

his feet wet in his new role, but he has all kinds of plans. Among them, he said, he's going to be talking to bankers and real-estate professionals and investors to get a grasp of the market.

McCracken said engineering and architecture firms have a hard time planning three and five years out, and that is a reason it gets hard to stay ahead of the competition.

"Everybody's crystal ball starts to get hazy at that point," he said. "What I'm really interested in is getting out there and collecting all this information. It will strengthen the services we already have and it will get us into emerging and increasing markets."

Although McCracken has found success in marketing architecture firms, he has also found success as a watercolorist. He paints still lifes and is influenced by 16th- and 17th-Century Dutch painters.

McCracken began painting about five years ago, but he has already been in several prestigious competitive exhibitions and his work has been featured in national watercolor magazines. He is a signature member of the National Watercolor Society. Some of his original paintings sell for as much as \$5,800.

"I am as passionate about my job as I am my painting," he said.

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