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Transforming Referral-Based Marketing in Small Architecture Firms: A Value-Centric and Multichannel Approach

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Abstract: Despite possessing strong technical expertise, many small architectural firms continue to experience stagnant business growth because professional competence is not effectively translated into customer trust and market visibility. This study aims to identify the key marketing challenges encountered by small architectural firms and develop an integrated marketing framework that supports sustainable business growth. An exploratory qualitative multiple-case study was conducted involving two Indonesian architectural firms and ten clients selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal three interconnected marketing challenges: the Verification Gap, where offline reputation fails to generate digital trust; the Silent Value, where professional expertise is not translated into customer-perceived value; and the Loyalty Paradox, where satisfied clients rarely become digital advocates. Building on these findings, this study proposes the Multichannel Value Communication Model (MVCM), which integrates digital validation, value-centric communication, and continuous customer engagement into a unified multichannel marketing strategy. The proposed model offers both theoretical and managerial contributions by providing a practical framework for strengthening digital credibility, communicating professional value, and converting customer satisfaction into sustainable business growth.

Keywords: architectural firms, professional service marketing, multichannel marketing, customer journey, customer engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Professional service firms operate in environments characterized by information asymmetry and high customer uncertainty, making trust and reputation central to purchasing decisions (Grönroos, 2017; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2021). This challenge is particularly evident in architectural services, where clients often lack the expertise to evaluate service quality and therefore rely on external cues such as portfolios, testimonials, and professional reputation (Ostrom et al., 2021). For small architectural firms, limited resources and market visibility further increase the importance of communicating expertise and customer value effectively

(Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018). However, despite possessing strong technical capabilities, many firms continue to depend on referrals and personal networks, limiting their scalability and competitiveness (Nobre & Faria, 2017; O'Cass & Sok, 2016; Skjølsvik et al., 2017).

Digital transformation has fundamentally changed how customers search for and evaluate professional service providers. Beyond traditional word-of-mouth, customers increasingly verify firms through websites, online portfolios, social media, and electronic word-of-mouth before initiating contact (Babić Rosario et al., 2016; Guesalaga, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Stephen, 2016). Although digital platforms offer opportunities to strengthen visibility and customer trust, many small firms still use them primarily as promotional tools rather than as strategic communication channels (Centeno & Hart, 2019; Chatterjee & Kar, 2020). Consequently, digital transformation requires firms to align communication, customer interaction, and business strategy in ways that reduce uncertainty and strengthen customer confidence (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Ismagilova et al., 2020; Ritter & Pedersen, 2020).

Beyond digital visibility, contemporary service marketing highlights customer engagement, transparent communication, and collaborative value creation as essential for developing long-term relationships (Brodie et al., 2017; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Digital platforms allow firms to communicate expertise through educational content, project documentation, and authentic storytelling, thereby reducing information asymmetry while strengthening trust and brand credibility (Grewal et al., 2020; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Tarnovskaya & Bertilsson, 2017). As a result, professional services are increasingly evaluated according to their functional, economic, and experiential value rather than technical attributes alone, emphasizing the importance of customer value propositions, value-based selling, Service-Dominant Logic, and value co-creation (Li & Wei, 2018; A. Payne et al., 2017; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018; Skålén et al., 2018; Terho et al., 2017; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). These perspectives contribute to stronger customer satisfaction, loyalty, and competitive advantage (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2017; Iglesias et al., 2019; Kumar & Reinartz, 2016; Prentice et al., 2019).

As customer interactions become increasingly digital, architectural firms must coordinate segmentation, positioning, communication channels, and customer experience within a coherent multichannel strategy. Behavioral segmentation and value-based positioning help firms better understand customer needs despite limited resources (Blankson & Cowan, 2021; Dibb & Simkin, 2016; Kotler & Keller, 2022), while integrated marketing communication and omnichannel strategies ensure consistent customer experiences across referrals, websites, social media, and direct consultation (Ailawadi & Farris, 2017; Batra & Keller, 2016; E. M. Payne et al., 2017)). Effective channel integration further strengthens customer confidence throughout the customer journey (Herhausen et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2020).

Although previous studies have advanced digital transformation, customer engagement, value creation, omnichannel marketing, and customer journey research (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Tueanrat et al., 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021), these perspectives have largely evolved as separate streams of research. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to how customer value should be communicated consistently across multiple touchpoints throughout the customer journey, particularly within small professional service firms. This gap is especially relevant for architectural firms, where business growth depends on converting technical expertise into customer trust, perceived value, and long-term relationships. Addressing this gap, this study explores the marketing practices of two Indonesian architectural firms through a qualitative case study and proposes the Multichannel Value Communication Model (MVCM). Rather than presenting another integrated marketing framework, the MVCM explains how customer value can be communicated across three sequential stages, Digital Validation, Value-Centric Communication, and Continuous

Engagement, to strengthen trust before purchase, communicate professional value during service delivery, and encourage customer advocacy after project completion.

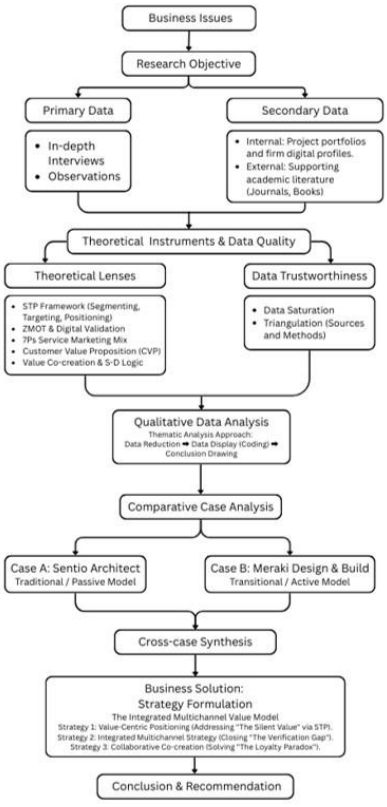
METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach using a multiple-case study design to examine the marketing transformation of small architectural firms in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand clients' perceptions, experiences, and decision-making processes in selecting architectural services rather than to test predetermined hypotheses. As noted by Creswell & Poth (2018), qualitative inquiry is well suited to exploring complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts.

Two Indonesian architectural firms, Sentio Architect and Meraki Design & Build, were selected as the research cases. A multiple-case study enables in-depth investigation while preserving the contextual conditions in which business phenomena occur (Yin, 2018). Comparing two firms with different marketing orientations also allowed theoretical replication by identifying both common marketing challenges and contrasting communication practices across cases.

The research followed five stages: (1) identifying the research problem, (2) collecting data through interviews, observations, and document analysis, (3) applying relevant theoretical perspectives and quality assurance procedures, (4) conducting thematic and cross-case analysis, and (5) synthesizing the findings into the proposed Multichannel Value Communication Model (MVCM). This process ensured that empirical findings were systematically synthesized into a practical communication framework for small architectural firms, as illustrated in Figure 1.



Source: Author's Design

Figure 1. Research Design of The Study

Data Collection

Data were collected from primary and secondary sources to obtain a comprehensive understanding of marketing practices and customer experiences in small architectural firms. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and direct observations, while secondary sources included company documents, digital communication materials, project portfolios, and relevant academic literature.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling because they had direct experience in selecting, evaluating, or collaborating with architectural firms (Campbell et al., 2020). The study involved ten respondents representing homeowners, entrepreneurs, and corporate clients aged 27-61 years, providing diverse perspectives on digital validation, customer value, and marketing communication. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed from the research objectives and literature on professional service marketing, customer value proposition, customer journey, value co-creation, and digital marketing (Kallio et al., 2016). Interviews explored participants' experiences in selecting architectural firms, evaluating digital information, and perceiving customer value, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent before being transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To complement the interview findings, observations were conducted by examining the digital presence of the two case firms, including their websites, Instagram accounts, online portfolios, and promotional materials. Consistent with netnographic principles, these publicly available digital artifacts were used to examine branding, customer value communication, and online interactions (Kozinets, 2020). The integration of interviews, observations, and documentary evidence enabled methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Data Analysis Method

The collected data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis supported by the interactive qualitative data analysis framework. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes across participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021), while the interactive model guided the ongoing processes of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification throughout the study (Miles et al., 2020).

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim before being coded inductively. The coding process was informed by concepts related to customer journey, customer value proposition, Service-Dominant Logic, value co-creation, customer engagement, and multichannel marketing, while remaining grounded in the empirical data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Codes with similar meanings were grouped into broader categories and refined through repeated comparison across interview transcripts, observations, and supporting documents (Miles et al., 2020).

The themes were then reviewed against the complete dataset to ensure they accurately reflected participants' experiences (Miles et al., 2020). This process produced three overarching themes, Verification Gap, Silent Value, and Loyalty Paradox, which became the foundation for the proposed Multichannel Value Communication Model (MVCM).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

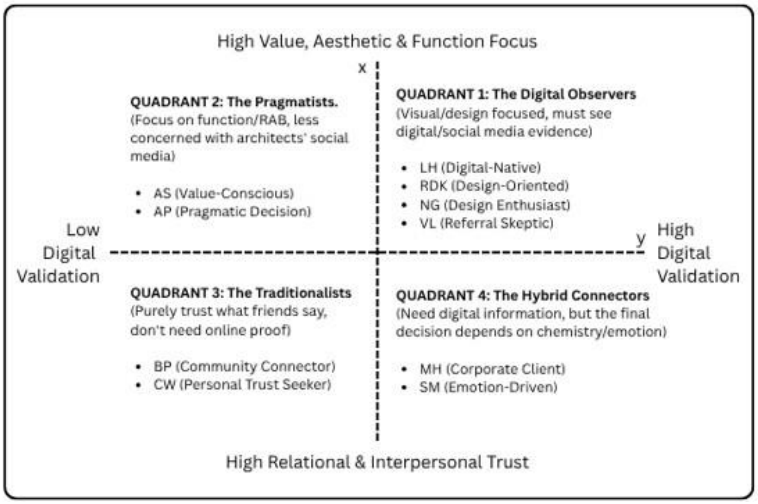
Analysis

The empirical analysis draws on interviews with ten informants representing past, current, and prospective clients of small architectural firms, supported by a comparative case study of Sentio Architect and Meraki Design & Build. Respondents varied in age, occupation,

project objectives, and digital literacy, providing diverse perspectives on customer decision-making throughout the architectural service journey.

The analysis identifies three behavioural patterns that underpin the analytical themes of this study. First, customers increasingly relied on digital validation before contacting an architectural firm. Although younger respondents depended more on websites, Instagram, and online portfolios than older respondents, digital verification was evident across all age groups. Second, respondents evaluated architectural firms based on functional and economic value rather than aesthetic quality alone. Third, satisfaction was closely associated with transparent and collaborative communication throughout the project, indicating that relationship quality plays a central role in customer loyalty.

Building on these findings, respondents were mapped into a Client Persona Quadrant (Figure 2) using two behavioural dimensions: digital validation needs and primary decision focus. Four customer segments were identified, Digital Observers, Pragmatists, Traditionalists, and Hybrid Connectors, each demonstrating distinct expectations regarding digital credibility, value communication, and interpersonal interaction. These personas provide the analytical foundation for the three themes discussed in the following sections: Verification Gap, Silent Value, and Loyalty Paradox.



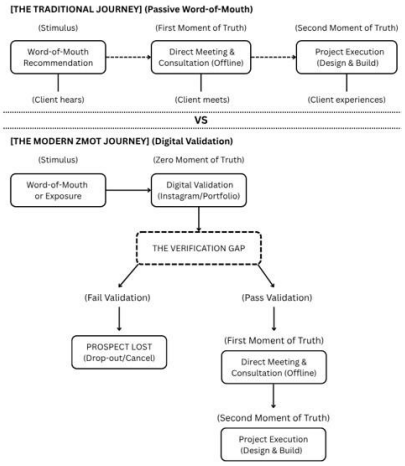
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Figure 2. Client Persona Quadrant

The respondent personas also help explain the positioning of the two case-study firms. Sentio Architect primarily adopts a portfolio-oriented marketing approach that appeals to Traditionalists and Pragmatists through referrals but provides limited digital evidence for digitally oriented customers. In contrast, Meraki Design & Build combines project portfolios with educational content, behind-the-scenes documentation, and a human-centered communication strategy, making it more attractive to Digital Observers and Hybrid Connectors. Despite these differences, both firms still have opportunities to strengthen value communication and long-term customer engagement. These findings establish the basis for the three analytical themes discussed in this study: the Verification Gap, Silent Value, and Loyalty Paradox.

Interview findings indicate that referrals remain an important source of initial awareness but no longer determine purchasing decisions. Respondents consistently verified architectural firms through Instagram, company websites, online portfolios, and Google searches before initiating consultation. This behavior reflects the Verification Gap, where offline reputation must be reinforced by credible digital evidence before direct interaction occurs.

The shift is illustrated in Figure 3, which contrasts the traditional referral-based journey with the contemporary Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT) journey. In the traditional process, recommendations led directly to consultation, allowing architects to establish credibility through face-to-face interaction. By contrast, the modern customer journey introduces an intermediate verification stage in which prospective clients evaluate digital touchpoints before making initial contact. When firms fail to provide sufficient online evidence of their expertise, trust declines during this stage, and potential clients may discontinue the purchasing process before any consultation takes place. This behavioural transformation aligns with the customer journey perspective proposed by Lemon & Verhoef (2016) and the omnichannel decision-making framework described by Tueanrat et al. (2021) and Lemon & Verhoef (2016), which emphasize that consumers increasingly integrate offline and online information throughout the pre-purchase process.



Source: Author's Design

Figure 3. Customer Journey Map (Traditional vs. ZMOT)

Interview evidence reinforces this pattern. Several respondents explained that referrals served only as initial references and were consistently followed by evaluations of Instagram accounts, websites, and online portfolios before contacting an architect. Informants VL, LH, RDK, and NG agreed that the absence of convincing digital evidence reduced trust and often led them to discontinue further consideration. These findings indicate that digital validation has become a prerequisite for establishing cognitive trust rather than merely a supplementary information source.

To explain this phenomenon, the findings were interpreted using the 7Ps Service Marketing Mix. The Verification Gap arises not from the absence of digital platforms but from insufficient Physical Evidence, limited Process transparency, and promotional content that emphasizes visual outcomes over professional capability. This finding extends the ZMOT concept by demonstrating that prospective clients assess not only online visibility but also the credibility of the information presented. It is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the role of omnichannel communication, digital credibility, and electronic word-of-mouth in reducing uncertainty during professional service selection (Bleier et al., 2019; Bowen & Ozuem, 2019; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Ismagilova et al., 2020; Istanbulluoglu, 2020; Kannan & Li, 2017; Stephen, 2016; Thaichon et al., 2020).

The empirical findings support the Customer Value Proposition (CVP) perspective, which argues that competitive advantage depends not only on delivering superior services but also on effectively communicating how those services solve customer problems and create meaningful value (A. Payne et al., 2017). Similarly, value-based selling literature suggests that customers evaluate professional services according to anticipated functional and economic

outcomes rather than technical specifications alone (Terho et al., 2017, 2022). Within architectural practice, this implies that firms should communicate design decisions in terms of efficiency, usability, cost optimisation, and long-term performance instead of relying exclusively on visual presentation.

The findings further align with Service-Dominant Logic, which conceptualises value as something co-created through interaction between service providers and customers rather than embedded solely within the final service output (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Throughout the interviews, respondents described consultation sessions as collaborative processes in which architects interpreted client preferences, budget constraints, and functional requirements before proposing design alternatives. Such interactions illustrate that architectural value emerges through dialogue and shared decision-making, consistent with previous studies on value co-creation in professional services (Li & Wei, 2018; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018; Skålén et al., 2018). The present findings also reinforce previous research demonstrating that innovation capability alone is insufficient to generate competitive advantage without corresponding marketing capability capable of communicating that value effectively (O'Cass & Sok, 2016). In professional service firms, technical excellence and value communication therefore function as complementary rather than independent capabilities.

Overall, the Silent Value indicates that the primary marketing challenge for small architectural firms lies not in technical expertise but in communicating its value effectively. Rather than emphasizing completed projects alone, firms should clearly explain the functional benefits, design rationale, and collaborative processes underlying architectural decisions to strengthen perceived value before discussing project costs.

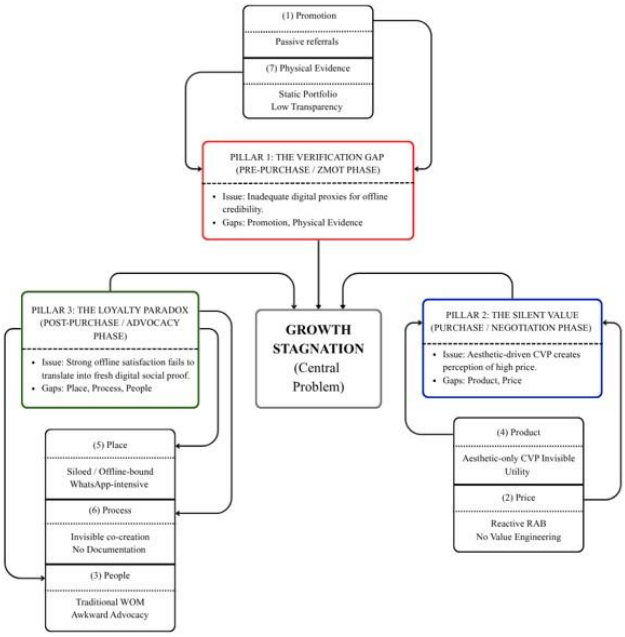
The final analytical theme, the Loyalty Paradox, refers to the inconsistency between high customer satisfaction and low levels of post-project digital advocacy. Although respondents reported positive service experiences, these rarely translated into online reviews, social media engagement, or other forms of public advocacy. Instead, loyalty remained largely confined to private referrals, limiting the firms' long-term digital visibility.

To explain this phenomenon, the findings were interpreted using the Place, Process, and People dimensions of the 7Ps Service Marketing Mix. Both Sentio Architect and Meraki Design & Build successfully developed strong client relationships during project delivery but lacked structured mechanisms for transforming satisfied clients into digital advocates. In particular, communication remained concentrated in private channels such as WhatsApp and face-to-face meetings, preventing positive customer experiences from strengthening the firms' online reputation. This finding supports the omnichannel perspective that customer journeys require seamless integration across communication channels to sustain customer engagement (Herhausen et al., 2020).

Second, the Process dimension demonstrates that firms generally consider project handover as the end of the customer journey rather than the beginning of post-project engagement. As illustrated in Figure 4, customer interaction reaches its emotional peak during project completion, yet this moment is not followed by structured activities encouraging testimonials, project sharing, or continued online interaction. The absence of a formal post-project engagement process creates a "missing link" between offline satisfaction and digital advocacy, preventing firms from transforming completed projects into visible social proof. These findings reinforce customer journey research emphasizing that post-purchase interactions constitute an essential stage of value creation rather than merely the conclusion of service delivery (Tueanrat et al., 2021; Voorhees et al., 2017).

Third, the People dimension highlights a cultural barrier characteristic of small architectural practices. Architects typically prioritize authentic professional relationships and therefore hesitate to request online reviews or social media endorsements, perceiving such requests as inconsistent with professional norms. Interview evidence indicates that this

hesitation unintentionally reinforces passive advocacy, whereby satisfied clients willingly recommend architects in private conversations but rarely express similar support through digital platforms. This behaviour limits the scalability of traditional word-of-mouth despite high levels of customer satisfaction and aligns with previous studies demonstrating that proactive social selling behaviours are required to institutionalise customer advocacy in professional service contexts (Guesalaga, 2016).



Source: Author's Design

Figure 4. Thematic Network: The Root Causes of Growth Stagnation in Small Architecture Firms

Interview evidence reinforces this finding. Informants SM, BP, and CW consistently described strong satisfaction and trust toward their architects, yet loyalty was expressed primarily through repeat commissions and interpersonal referrals rather than online reviews or social media engagement. These findings suggest that limited digital visibility results not from customer dissatisfaction but from the absence of structured mechanisms that encourage post-project digital advocacy.

These empirical findings extend relationship marketing and customer engagement literature by demonstrating that satisfaction should not be equated with advocacy. Rather than representing the endpoint of service delivery, customer satisfaction functions as an intermediate outcome that requires continued interaction before generating long-term organisational value (Brodie et al., 2017; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Likewise, customer experience should be understood as a continuous sequence of interactions across multiple touchpoints rather than isolated service encounters (Voorhees et al., 2017). Consistent post-project engagement therefore becomes essential for transforming emotional loyalty into visible digital advocacy that strengthens future customer acquisition (Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017; Herhausen et al., 2020; Ismagilova et al., 2020). Furthermore, from a Service-Dominant Logic perspective, value continues to be co-created after project completion through ongoing interaction and resource integration rather than ending with contractual delivery (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

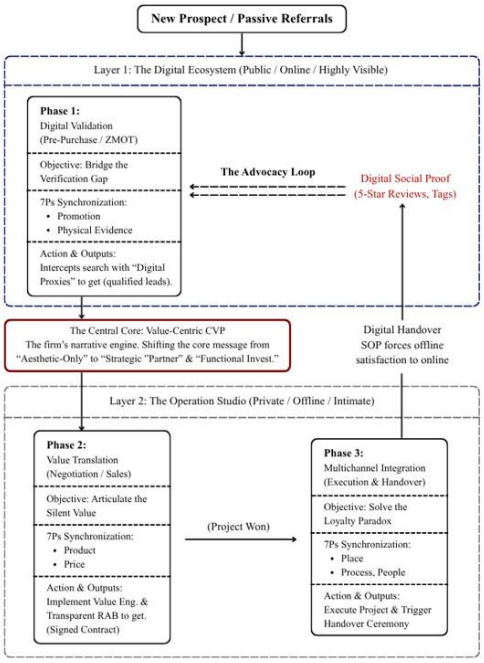
Overall, the Loyalty Paradox demonstrates that the principal challenge facing small architectural firms is not generating customer satisfaction but systematically converting that satisfaction into sustainable digital engagement. While strong interpersonal relationships

remain the foundation of professional architectural services, they require structured multichannel strategies to transform private appreciation into public social proof. This final analytical theme completes the empirical framework developed throughout the study and provides the conceptual basis for the proposed Integrated Multichannel Value Communication Model (MVCM) presented in the following section.

Business Solution

The findings indicate that the Verification Gap, Silent Value, and Loyalty Paradox are interconnected throughout the customer journey, highlighting the need for an integrated marketing approach that combines trust formation, value communication, and long-term customer engagement.

To address these challenges, this study proposes the Multichannel Value Communication Model (MVCM) (Figure 5), which integrates Digital Validation, Value-Centric Communication, and Continuous Engagement into a unified multichannel marketing process. The model reflects the contemporary customer journey by coordinating digital promotion, consultation, and relationship management across multiple online and offline touchpoints to deliver consistent customer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2015).



Source: Author's Design

Figure 5. The Multichannel Value Communication Model (MVCM) Framework

The Digital Validation phase addresses the Verification Gap by strengthening digital credibility before consultation. Rather than relying solely on referrals, firms should integrate websites, social media, online portfolios, Google Business Profiles, and project documentation to provide consistent evidence of professional competence. This approach supports customers' digital verification process and strengthens trust across multiple touchpoints (Kannan & Li, 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Tueanrat et al., 2021).

The Value-Centric Communication phase addresses the Silent Value by shifting communication from technical features to customer benefits, including functionality, cost efficiency, and long-term asset value. This approach aligns with customer value proposition, value-based selling, and Service-Dominant Logic by emphasizing customer outcomes and collaborative value creation rather than organizational attributes (O'Cass & Sok, 2016; A.

Payne et al., 2017; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018; Terho et al., 2017, 2022; Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

The Continuous Engagement phase addresses the Loyalty Paradox by extending customer relationships beyond project completion through testimonials, Google Reviews, project storytelling, and follow-up communication. These activities strengthen customer engagement, stimulate electronic word-of-mouth, and reinforce long-term relationship networks that support future business opportunities (Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017; Brodie et al., 2017; Herhausen et al., 2020; Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

Overall, the roadmap operationalises the Multichannel Value Communication Model (MVCM), enabling small architectural firms to implement improvements systematically while monitoring progress through measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

Implementation Plan and Justification

Table 1. Comprehensive MVCM Implementation Roadmap Matrix

Implementation Phase & Strategic Initiative	7Ps Focus	Assigned PIC	Key Performance Indicator (KPI)	M 1	M 2	M 3	M 4 – M 5	M 6	M 7 – M 11	M 12
PHASE 1: SHORT-TERM (Quick Wins)										
1. Claim & Optimize Google Business ProfileStandardize firm details for local SEO.	• Promotion	Admin	100% profile completeness; top 3 local search appearance.		X					
2. Standardize Value Engineering RABRestructure pricing explanation.	• Price • Product	Principal Architect	20% reduction in client pushback during negotiation.		X	X				
3. Implement Digital Handover SOPDistribute QR codes at handover.	• People • Process	Principal Architect	Min. 80% of completed projects generate a 5-star digital review.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
PHASE 2: MEDIUM-TERM (Asset Development)										
1. Develop Curated Micro-WebsiteArchive uploaded built-evidence case studies.	• Physical Evidence • Promotion	Freelance Web Dev.	Min. 5 case studies published; 30% increase in profile visits.				X	X		
2. Initiate "Value Co-Creation" DocumentationRecord ongoing design process.	• Process • Physical Evidence	Junior Architect	2 behind-the-scenes content pieces shared per project/month.					X	X	X
PHASE 3: LONG-TERM (Integration)										
1. Operationalize the Advocacy LoopIntegrate digital reviews into the pitch deck.	• Promotion • Product	Principal Architect	40% increase in conversion from passive referrals to contracts.						X	X

2. Periodic Strategy & Ecosystem AuditRefine CVP and digital assets.	All 7Ps	Principal Architect	Sustained YoY revenue growth and expanded market reach.	X	X

Source: Author's Design

As shown in Table 1, the implementation roadmap consists of three sequential phases over a twelve-month period. The short-term phase strengthens digital credibility through Google Business Profile optimisation, value-engineering templates, and digital project handover to address the Verification Gap. The medium-term phase develops digital assets, including a professional portfolio platform, project documentation, and case studies, to support Value-Centric Communication. The long-term phase emphasizes testimonials, Google Reviews, project storytelling, and periodic evaluations to encourage customer advocacy and address the Loyalty Paradox.

Overall, the roadmap operationalises the Multichannel Value Communication Model (MVCM) by translating its three communication stages into practical initiatives. The phased approach enables small architectural firms to implement improvements systematically while monitoring progress through measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the marketing challenges faced by small architectural firms stem not from limited technical capability but from the inability to communicate professional value consistently throughout the customer journey. Three interconnected challenges were identified: the Verification Gap, the Silent Value, and the Loyalty Paradox. To address these challenges, this study proposes the Multichannel Value Communication Model (MVCM), which provides a practical framework for strengthening digital credibility, communicating professional value, and fostering long-term customer relationships.

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