



**Company:** Thornton Tomasetti

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### **What was the problem or challenge that you were trying to address?**

I work in the AEC field - that's Architecture, Engineering, and Construction. Therefore, much of my work in corporate sustainability is about working towards achieving sustainable design on all our projects, which for the most part are buildings - from skyscrapers and stadiums to offices and residences and everything in between. The challenge, however, comes from trying to move sustainability into professions within the building sector where it has not traditionally been a goal, such as structural engineering.

The first response of a structural engineer to most suggestions to bring sustainability strategies into a project is most likely to be, "I will do it if the client asks for it but my clients are not asking for it." In other words, we do what we are paid to do - and rightly so, because sustainable design can mean additional up front costs that shouldn't be borne by the engineer.

But here is the problem - the building sector is a major contributor to Climate Change. At least 40% of greenhouse gas emissions can be traced to the building sector, but the incentives to reduce emissions from buildings are still largely only available to a few disciplines in this field including architecture, where the USGBC's LEED certification program has had its greatest impact.

This incongruity trickles down to my firm, which is primarily structural engineers, in that reducing greenhouse gas emissions from buildings is seen as "not my problem." Not so true, because there is lots of evidence showing that structural design can have a big impact on reducing emissions.

### **How did you solve it?**

To address this problem and engage our clients who are ultimately the decision makers, we can educate our clients and hope for a good outcome. We recently discovered an additional path - we can advocate for public policies that will offer incentives to our clients to demand sustainable design on more projects and from a more diverse group of building professionals.

Advocacy is sometimes the missing strategy in corporate sustainability efforts. Auden Schendler, Vice President of Sustainability at the Aspen Ski Company, said in an Orion Magazine article:

*The most important corporate climate action might not take place in the factory or the boiler room, but in Congress, in the streets, and on the barricades.*

The AEC sector is not usually the first to get involved in advocacy. We have to be careful not to alienate our clients - who as I mentioned are not always asking for sustainable design and who have various opinions on Climate Change.

So, we started our foray into climate change advocacy carefully with the "gateway drug," the Climate Declaration. The Boston-based NGO Ceres organized the Declaration, which invites businesses from any sector to sign a statement to the U.S. government that basically says: Tackling climate change is one of America's greatest economic opportunities of the 21st century and it's simply the right thing to do.

This first step involved a long thought out request to our executive leadership and the wait for approval. It helped that there were hundreds of other signatories including many well-known companies, but what really helped with getting the group's approval was a window of opportunity: Ceres would be announcing the signatories in New York City, where my firm is headquartered.

Once we signed the Declaration, we got to see our company's name alongside General Motors, which caused some excitement. And our President and CEO got a kick out of seeing our name displayed on the large screen in Times Square, along with the other signatories. We felt pride in what we had done.

Since signing the Climate Declaration, Ceres has come back to us asking us to add our company name to other advocacy statements, and we've been quick to support these efforts. We signed a letter to the President supporting carbon pollution standards for power plants and another letter to governors asking for state implementation of these standards; a statement supporting the signing of the Paris Agreement and calling for swift action on the EPA's Clean Power Plan; and most recently a letter to governors in the Northeast to ask them to build on the success of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) and continue to lower the emissions cap on the electricity sector.

Dipping our toes into advocacy doesn't mean that we stopped following the more traditional routes for change within our sector - we continue to educate our employees and our clients; support green building certification programs; and regularly contribute to the dialogue in our field.

### **What impact(s) have you seen from your initiative?**

The most immediate impact is that the firm now sees its role as more active, not just as a passive responder to the client. We have learned that advocating for climate action can help our business.

We still have work to do towards seeing our advocacy result in clients requesting sustainable engineering. Our company was one of the few engineering firms to sign the Climate Declaration, and we decided to do something about this inequity. Partnering with Ceres, the US Green Building Council, and the Carbon Leadership Forum, we initiated the Building & Real Estate Sector Climate Declaration. This Declaration specifically invites companies in our sector to get involved in climate change advocacy. Still in its infancy, over 70 firms including several of our clients have signed the Declaration at this time.

Our participation in these efforts has awarded us with new forums for business development. Recently, I was invited to speak at Greenbuild - the largest conference in the building sector - on this topic, along with my partners in the Building & Real Estate Sector Climate Declaration initiative.

This Just One Thing - deciding to step into the role of active advocate for climate action - has enabled my firm to have a hand in creating the kind of business that we want to be engaged in.