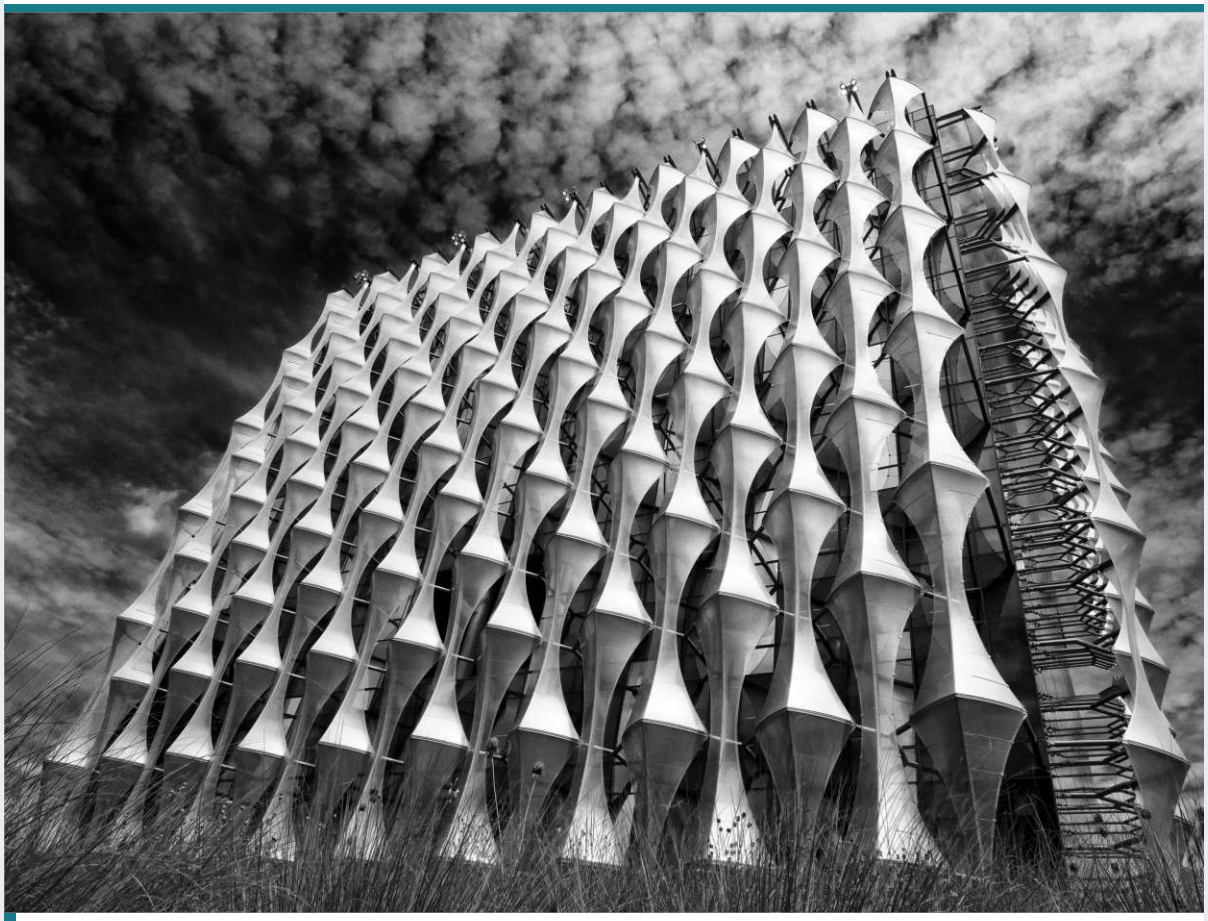
KUBES STEEL

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THINK BIGGER

Most Companies Define Their Territory by Their Immediate Customers. That’s the Wrong Map.

When you take a step back and look at where your work actually ends up — not just who you invoiced — the picture is often remarkable. At Kubes Steel, we learned this lesson the hard way. Here’s what we found.

That building in the photograph is the United States Embassy in London, England. Every aluminum component on that facade came from a fabrication shop in Stoney Creek,

Ontario — a city most Londoners have never heard of. The company that made them thought of itself as a regional fabricator. The building says otherwise. This issue is about learning to read the right map.

THE TRAP OF THE IMMEDIATE CUSTOMER

Most industrial companies — fabricators, manufacturers, processors, suppliers — define their market by the companies they invoice. The customer list becomes the mental map of the business. If your customers are mostly within 200 kilometres, the business feels like a regional operation. If your customers are a mix of local and national names, it feels like a national business. That map, however, only shows the first transaction. It stops at the loading dock.

The more revealing question is not “who are my customers?” but “where does my work end up?” Because the answer to that second question — if you take the time to trace it — is almost always larger, more impressive, and more geographically diverse than the first.

This is not a minor distinction. It changes how you think about your business, how you position it to new customers, and what kinds of work you believe you are qualified to pursue. Companies that understand where their work truly goes tend to think bigger. Companies that only know who they invoice tend to stay local.

THE ICEBERG MODEL — WHAT’S ABOVE AND BELOW THE WATERLINE

Think of your supply chain position as an iceberg. The part above the waterline is what you can see from your own desk — your customer, your invoice, your delivery address. The part below the waterline is everything that happens after your work leaves your facility. That’s usually the more interesting part.

ABOVE THE WATERLINE — WHAT YOU SEE

A purchase order from a customer you know. A delivery address. An invoice paid. The immediate transaction that defines most companies’ understanding of their own market.

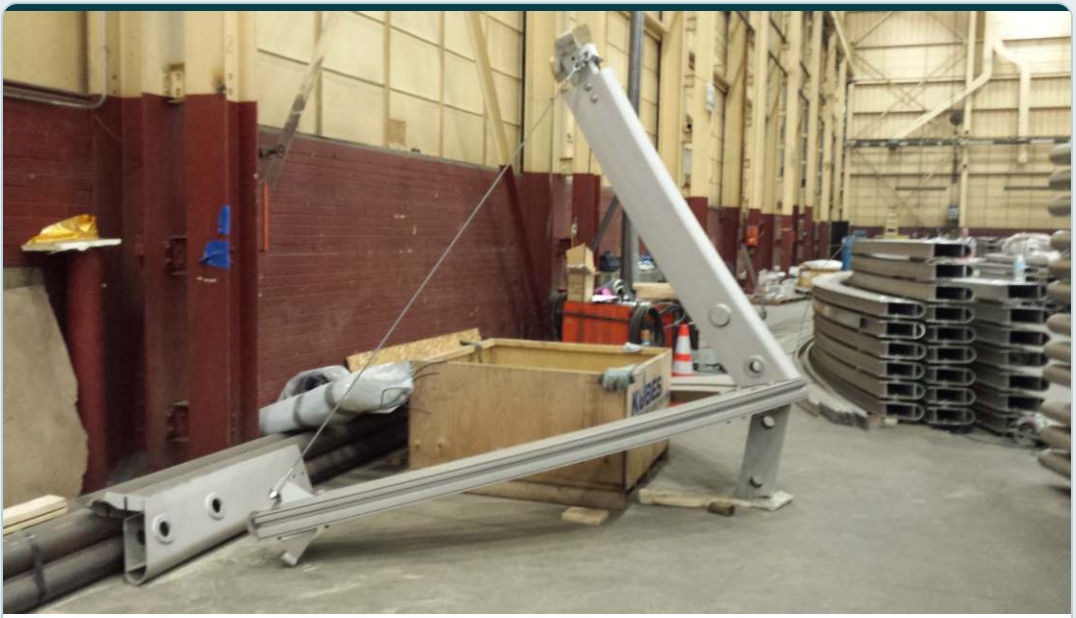
BELOW THE WATERLINE — WHAT YOU BUILT

Your customer’s customer. The project your work goes into. The building, the bridge, the machine, the vehicle. The city it ends up in. The country. The legacy. The thing

that will exist for decades and that thousands of people will walk past, work in, or depend on — without ever knowing your name was part of making it.

Most companies never trace the iceberg below the waterline. Those that do discover they have been building things far more significant — and far more widely distributed — than they realized.

A CASE STUDY IN THINKING BIGGER



This photograph was taken in the Kubes Steel fabrication facility in Stoney Creek, Ontario. The aluminum components stacked on the right, and the one being inspected in the foreground, are headed to London, England. The Kubes Steel crate in the background will carry them across the Atlantic. At the time this photo was taken, nobody in London knew these pieces existed. Within two years they would be part of one of the most photographed buildings in the city.

TRACING THE CHAIN

Kubes Steel in Stoney Creek, ON received an order from a specialty contractor in Buffalo, NY.

↓

Birdair Inc. — the world's leading tensile architecture contractor — was building the facade system for a major international project.

↓

Kieran Timberlake Architects of Philadelphia had designed a building with a crystalline aluminum facade requiring 190,000 individual custom components.

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That building was the United States Embassy in Nine Elms, London, England — one of the most significant government buildings constructed anywhere in the world in the 21st century.

Above the waterline: a purchase order from a customer in Buffalo. Below the waterline: 190,000 aluminum components on the facade of a landmark building visited by thousands of people every day in the capital of England. The fabrication shop thought of itself as a regional supplier. The supply chain put its work on a different continent.



THE FINISHED FACADE

Each hourglass-shaped aluminum fin interlocks with its neighbours to form a living screen that shifts with the light. The design intent was fully realised because every component arrived consistent, on spec, on time.



UNDER CONSTRUCTION, 2016

The structural grid being installed on site in Nine Elms, London. The components fabricated in Stoney Creek are visible here being fitted piece by piece — 190,000 of them, shipped across the Atlantic in Kubes Steel crates.

FROM THE MILL TO THE WORLD — HOW FAR DOES STEEL REALLY TRAVEL?

Our last issue looked at the steel mill as an economic anchor — how a single integrated plant creates an ecosystem of fabricators, machine shops, engineering firms, and service companies within its region. That was the view from the mill looking outward.

This issue flips that lens completely. Because the steel that leaves those mills doesn’t stay regional. It passes through the hands of fabricators and processors, gets shaped and assembled and shipped, and ends up as part of structures and machines and buildings that could be anywhere on earth. The coil of flat-rolled steel leaving ArcelorMittal Dofasco in Hamilton today might be — within eighteen months — part of a bridge in Chile, a stadium in Qatar, a hospital in Germany, or a government building in London.

Every company in that chain — the service centre that cut it, the fabricator that formed it — companies like Kubes Steel — the specialty contractor that installed it — played a role in putting Canadian steel on that project. Most of them would describe themselves as regional businesses. None of them would put Chile or Qatar on their market map.

They should.

THE CHALLENGE — TRACE YOUR OWN ICEBERG

Pick five of your most significant recent customers. For each one, ask a simple question: *what did they build with what we made, and where is it?*

- If you supply a fabricator who builds equipment for the mining sector — where are those mines? Northern Ontario? Western Australia? Chile? Kazakhstan? Your steel is there.
- If you supply a contractor who builds industrial facilities — where are their clients' plants? Across the province? Across the country? Across the border? Your fabrication is in those plants.
- If you supply a specialty contractor who works on landmark architectural projects — where do those projects get built? In your city? Or in cities you've never invoiced a customer in? Your work is on those buildings.
- If you supply an OEM that exports its products — every country your customer sells into is a country where your components are operating. You are, in a very real sense, a global supplier. Your customer map just doesn't show it yet.

The answers to these questions change how you talk about your business, how you market your capabilities, and what kinds of projects you pursue. A company that knows its work is on three continents does not pitch itself the same way as a company that thinks it serves a 200-kilometre radius.

HOW TO START THINKING BIGGER

ASK BETTER QUESTIONS

When a new customer calls, ask where their project is going — not just where their shop is. "What are you building and where does it end up?" is a question that

FOLLOW THE PROJECT

When a significant project is completed, find out what it looks like finished. Search for it. If your work is on a building, a bridge, or a landmark — document it. That documentation tells a story about your

reveals the true scope of the work you're being asked to contribute to.

capability that no sales brochure can replicate.

REWRITE YOUR MARKET STORY

Once you know where your work really goes, update how you describe your business. "We serve customers in the Golden Horseshoe" and "our work has been installed on every continent" can both be true of the same company. Only one of those sentences opens doors.

PURSUE THE SUPPLY CHAIN

If your work ends up on landmark projects via specialty contractors, go find more specialty contractors. The customer who put your work on a building in London is more likely to know the next customer who needs the same capability than the customer around the corner.

"You are not a regional supplier who happened to ship something to London. You are a company whose work stands on one of the most significant buildings constructed in the 21st century. Those are not the same company."

The difference between them is not capability. It is perspective. The capability was always there — in the shop, in the equipment, in the people. What changes when you trace the iceberg is how you see yourself, and therefore how you present yourself to the market, what work you bid on, and what partnerships you pursue.

The next time you ship an order, ask yourself: what am I really building, and where is it going to end up? The answer might be more remarkable than you think.

FROM KUBES STEEL

Kubes Steel — Part of Supply Chains That Reach Further Than Our Address Suggests

From a steel mill in Hamilton to a specialty contractor in Buffalo to a landmark building in London — that is one chain we have been part of. There are others. If you have a project that needs rolling, bending, or precision heavy fabrication — wherever it ends up — we would like to hear about it.

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