

A proactive marketing approach in consulting

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Why marketing?

Marketing is essential for success in the consulting business. It is ultimately directed at convincing prospective clients that their needs can be met and their problems solved through your specific services.

Many consultants fail or maintain only a marginal income because of poor marketing; they may not know how to market, do not like marketing, do not want to market or do not have time to market. Participants at the Commonwealth workshop in Vanuatu unanimously confessed that poor or absent marketing skills were their institution's main weakness.

Marketing considerations should have a prominent place in the strategy of educational institutions in small states wishing to enhance their capability for undertaking consultancy work. The environment most institutions operate in is highly competitive, and the situation is even more complex since the competitors are, in many cases, providing the funding for the consultancy.

Market audit and programme

To improve your marketing efforts, you and your teaching institution should start by reviewing and assessing your past marketing practices. A marketing audit is a useful diagnostic tool for this purpose.

Generally speaking the audit would:

- Examine past and current marketing practices (organisations, information base, strategy, programme, techniques, activities, budgets and costs) and assess their contribution to the development of the firm/company/institute.
- Compare the findings with the marketing approach of direct competitors and other consultants.
- Consider what changes in marketing will be necessary in order to meet new requirements of the market.
- Suggest measures for making the marketing function more effective.

A marketing plan

Your marketing programme (or plan) is a document in which you define your marketing objectives and strategy, and determine what measures to take in putting the strategy into effect. It can be a separate document or it can be treated as part of your strategic planning system.

In your marketing plan you should:

1 Define your skills and services

You should have a clear idea of the nature of the services you will be offering to potential clients. You may have decided on just one particular area of interest and speciality, or you may have decided on several areas that you will promote as unique areas, either to the same client or to different categories of client.

2 Target prospective clients

Identifying possible client consulting opportunities is the next step in the marketing plan.

3 Increase awareness

Make the public and potential clients aware of your services and create a demand.

4 Follow up leads

Naturally, once interest has been aroused by your effective marketing, you must quickly follow up any lead to arrange a meeting.

5 Meet prospective clients

Basically, there are two sorts of meeting:

- When you are following up a general lead and your task is to identify your client's needs and decide how you might help.
- When you are responding to an invitation to 'bid' for an assignment, probably in competition with other consultants. In this case, you may obtain all the information you need to prepare a proposal at a single meeting. Alternatively, it may be necessary to conduct a more extended survey, which might or might not be paid for by the client.

6 Prepare the proposal

If the first meeting with your prospective client has been purely exploratory, your proposal may simply outline your understanding of his/her situation, the help you could provide and the benefits to him/her of that help. If you are pitching for a specific assignment, you would set out in detail your definition of the problem, how you intend to solve it, how and when you will do the work and how much it will cost.

Some fundamental principles

Successful marketing in consulting services is guided by some general principles.

1 Do not sell more than you can deliver

Marketing creates expectations and makes commitments; over-marketing may create more expectations than your organisation is able to meet.

2 Do not misrepresent yourself

The temptation to offer and sell services for which your consulting organisation is not really competent is high.

3 Never forget that you are marketing a professional service

The professional nature of your services, your client's sensitivity and the local cultural values and norms must not be lost sight of.

4 Balance skills and standards

Aim at an equally high technical performance in marketing and in execution.

5 Remember that marketing does not end with signing the contract

Consultants used in the execution of assignments should be of a similar calibre to those involved in the marketing. Also remember that execution has a significant marketing dimension. Effective execution could lead to repeat business, and to obtaining the references required for building up your professional image.

6 Regard the client's needs and desires as the focal point of all marketing

Keep your marketing efforts client-centred rather than consultant-centred. Your client wants to be convinced that you understand his/her problem and that you can help him/her, not that you are a brilliant professional.

Marketing techniques

Educational consultants in small states may find the following techniques particularly useful.

1 Networking

Word of mouth is one of the oldest and most efficient ways in which an organisation becomes known to new clients.

2 Professional publications

Writing articles, books and reference publications for managers, academics and professionals in your sector is becoming increasingly popular. Careful choice of publisher is essential, as reputation is important.

3 Public information media

Keeping in touch with the press, television and radio can lead to free media exposure which may be more effective than costly advertising.

○ News releases

If you are about to give a seminar or presentation, consider an advance news release. Find out who the contact person is and phone so he/she will be expecting your news release. Ask him/her what format is preferred and explain why you feel the topic is of interest. A well-written news release may be used by several media.

○ Radio and television talk shows

Identify the appropriate contact person and explain the benefits to the listeners or viewers of your appearance on the programme.

○ Quotes and articles

Cultivate relationships with editors and reporters so you come to be seen as a quotable expert. Articles may be written about you, if you can show some newsworthy feature. Look at economic, social, political or legislative factors for news angles with an effect on the public at large or your target group in particular.

- Letters to the editor
Write a letter that is topical, relevant and reflects a controversial or divergent opinion; mention that you are a professional consultant in the field. If you are reacting to something previously published, refer to the earlier article.
- Writing articles
Write articles about your area of expertise that you believe would be of particular interest to the readership of your chosen publication. Articles in leading newspapers and periodicals definitely bring in more new business.

4 Education

- Seminars and workshops
Invite clients or potential clients to attend a session on a topic of real concern to them. It is essential that participants perceive the seminar as being a direct help. Those who attend are expressing an interest in the topic and in your expertise. They may be potential clients.
- Lectures
Many organisations or professional associations need speakers for conferences, seminars and training programmes. Identify the contact person and suggest subjects which you could talk about. Fees, if any, may not be high but the publicity is invaluable.
- Teaching
There are many opportunities to offer your services as a part-time or occasional lecturer on professional courses in your field. You are primarily looking for credibility, exposure and contacts.

5 Advertising

There are various forms of advertising, each with advantages and pitfalls. It is advisable to use a professional public relations or advertising agency for any major (and expensive) advertising campaign.

- Direct mail
Mailing publicity material is a widely-used technique. A good-quality mailing list is essential. Material should be professionally designed and give meaningful technical information together with evidence of your approach and knowledge of the business. If possible, include something about recent work. A short description of your firm and profiles of senior staff should be included.
- Directories
It is advisable to be listed in directories that are well-known and enjoy a good reputation since such may be used in establishing a short list of consultants.
- Brochures
Brochures should be properly designed and contain good-quality information. There are many ways to use them. They can be used in a direct mail campaign or mailed in response to a request for information; they can be left with a prospective client after a meeting; they can be distributed at a seminar or sent out the next day as follow-up.
- Newsletters
This frequently-used and subtle form of advertising can give you credibility, as well as provide advice to readers. A newsletter can be distributed along with your brochures. Ensure you address the newsletter to key people in target organisations.

6 Professional and social activities

Your professional, social and cultural activities provide opportunities for informal contacts which help make you 'visible' to a number of potential clients. For example, membership of professional bodies, giving talks, serving on committees and working parties, and voluntary social and community service.

- Donating your services

Donating your service to a worthwhile organisation as a gesture of goodwill can enhance your image and result, directly or indirectly, in referrals. However, you should be cautious about the time involved.

Marketing objectives

Marketing objectives should clearly express what is to be achieved, qualitatively and quantitatively, by marketing activity over a period of time. It is preferable to combine several marketing techniques (reinforcing each other if possible). The mix of marketing techniques to be used should be consistent with your organisation's existing and desired professional image and market penetration on the one hand, and its financial and professional resources on the other.

Newcomers to the consulting business cannot afford to wait until the market comes to them; they have to give priority to techniques that rapidly put them in direct contact with potential clients.

Marketing information system

Marketing requires a considerable amount of information: on markets for services, on individual clients, and on your own marketing activities and capabilities. This information is diverse and voluminous and needs to be organised systematically. This requires:

- definition of the kind of information to be collected, stored and analysed
- determination of the method and frequency by which this information will be updated
- assignation of responsibility for collecting, updating and analysing the information.