

SELLING PROFESSIONAL CONSULTING SERVICES IN A COMPETITIVE MARKETPLACE



BY ROBERT W. LYONS, FRCI

As in all businesses, without steady sales, consulting firms will struggle financially. In tough economic times, keeping the sales pipeline full is even more challenging. Dropping prices may be a solution to closing the deal, but doing so often results in devastating results for the firm in the long term. What is the best solution?

First, remember that clients would rather buy than “be sold.” They want to work with people and companies that understand their needs and can help solve their problems. They want true value for the dollars spent.

Here are the top ten strategies that can help consultants generate more sales and revenue for their company:

1. Sell to existing clients first.

The easiest clients to sell to are existing accounts. Most companies have additional locations, divisions, and subsidiaries. Find them and target them.

2. Get referrals from existing clients for new prospective clients.

Ask existing clients for referral contacts and letters to those contacts that they think may be in need of services. This type of referral breaks down many of the barriers normally faced on a cold call.

3. Target markets for new clients.

Identify the vertical markets of business with which the company has had its greatest success (e.g., retail, offices, schools, hospitals, churches, government, manufacturers, etc.) and contact companies in the service area that are in those sectors.

4. Improve collateral materials.

How does the company brochure look? When was the last time the company’s logo and literature were updated? What about its Web site?

Are the materials that are distributed to prospective clients professional looking, with a strong and clear message? Consider making an investment in all the company’s collateral materials (including business cards) to create the best first impression possible.

5. Take the time to develop a professional proposal.

Client proposals should clearly reflect that the services and results requested by the client are achievable by the firm. Make sure that everything included in the scope of services is detailed in the proposal. Don’t miss the opportunity to explain why the firm’s services are needed and the urgency with which

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they should be provided. Develop a list of client and project references for situations in which the company has successfully provided similar services. Provide résumés of personnel who may be assigned to the project. Include other experience and qualification references that distinguish the firm as the best choice for the work. Don't be afraid to include more information than has been requested; it is better to offer more information than not enough.

6. Personally deliver proposals.

If a client and project are worth taking the time needed to prepare a written proposal, then they should be worth the time it takes to hand deliver that proposal and make a personal presentation to the targeted client about the proposal's content. Consulting services are best sold on a face-to-face basis. Mail carriers or UPS and FedEx drivers are not part of your sales force, and neither is the fax machine!

7. Be active in the industry and in the community.

Networking is critical in any business today. Make a commitment to stay involved in building envelope and waterproofing industry associations and in the local community

where work can be obtained. Consider advertising in appropriate forums as well as exhibiting in trade shows.

8. Hire a salesperson.

One of the dilemmas faced by small consulting firms is that the same people perform the sales and the billable work. This causes the roller coaster syndrome of inability to keep a steady flow of business backlog in the firm. When someone is busy doing work, he or she cannot be out selling and promoting work. When the firm runs out of work, it takes time to build up a backlog to keep a steady flow of revenue coming in.

9. Get feedback from clients.


It is critical to solicit feedback from clients on how the firm is doing. The only way to improve service is to get feedback on what clients like and dislike about the company. Know the firm's strengths and assets as well as its weaknesses. Constantly strive to make improvements in the

business. Don't assume anything. Be ready to act on the feedback received.

10. Develop a multifaceted marketing program.

Sales and marketing are clearly two distinct functions. In general, marketing is everything that a firm does to create a sales opportunity. Some of the things that fall into a marketing program include:

- Collateral materials
 - Letterhead and business cards
 - Company brochure
 - Service brochures
 - Reference lists
 - Testimonial letters
 - Résumés
 - Project profiles
 - PowerPoint® presentations
 - Videos
- Web site
- Trade shows
- Advertising
- Seminars and speaking engagements
- White papers

The more of these initiatives that a company can invest in doing, the more sales opportunities it will experience. Remember, nothing happens until the sale is made! 

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