



Excellence alone won't get you the job

By Lynda Falkenstein

Q: What are the biggest mistakes consultants make?

A: Among the biggest and most commonly-made errors today is the assumption that "excellence" alone will get you the job. This is naive thinking at best. Today, excellence is almost "ordinary." While excellence is important it must be in the context of a special niche if it is to sort you out from the crowd, a fact of life for consulting in the Nineties.

Q: What kind of overhead can I expect as I develop my consulting business? I understand that consulting can really be a low-budget operation.

A: Figuring overhead is one of the areas that gets many consultants into a lot of trouble—mainly because they underestimate the potential costs and/or totally ignore some of the most vital expense categories. The range for overhead in virtually all serious consulting practices is somewhere between 90 and 150% of pre-tax net income. "Impossible!" you say? If you are sitting there in disbelief, check out the following items to be sure they were included in your numbers: Medical? Dental? Retirement? Paid vacations? Professional development? And the best category of all, Marketing! Nearly 30 percent of your professional time must be allocated to this activity. And where, if not in overhead is it going to get paid for? All the benefits you would otherwise receive from a "conventional employer" should be built into your own fee and overhead schedule.

Q: I'm in outplacement right now and am thinking about doing consulting until the right job comes along. Do you have some pointers on how I can get this moving until the right job comes along?

A: STOP!! Consulting is definitely not for you. The worst thing a person can do is approach consulting as a panacea for unemployment. It is a profession and has to be approached just that way—not as a stopgap between one "job" and another. While you can certainly prosper doing "part-time" consulting, it sounds as if you should be attending to landing what I call conventional employment.

Q: How do I give references?

A: When asked for references, provide them quickly and graciously. Your question raises some other issues of considerable importance, however. First, if you are being asked for references on a regular basis, something is incomplete in your marketing program. You should not be having to prove yourself on a regular basis. Whatever system you have in place should be "pre-selling" you to your public so that you don't have to be extolling your virtues through references. A major goal should be to get out of the reference-giving business altogether. Secondly, if you do provide references, make sure you know what those people are going to say. Don't assume you know. You should inquire of anyone you offer as a reference just what they would say about you and your work. And thirdly, any materials you send out in response to a "reference" list should stress OUTCOMES rather than titles. Remember, clients hire you for only one reason—RESULTS!!

Q: Is there a reliable form for resumes which will get me in my client's door? I've been to every secretarial service in the city and have the best looking resumes but they haven't produced any business. What should I do?

A: First, I'm not surprised you haven't gotten any response from your resume mail-out campaign. In fact, I would have been surprised if you had! Standard resumes and conventional brochures are two of the biggest wastes of money I see naive consultants make. Consulting business, especially the right kind, simply doesn't come about from the process you are describing. So, my answer is NO. There aren't any resume forms which will do the job. What you need to do is implement a marketing system emphasizing results and success. The right kind of newsletters, seminars and other high visibility approaches will get people calling you.

Lynda Falkenstein has achieved national recognition as the consultant's