

# FEARLESS BIG

## Break Into The

### How To Sell Your Consulting Services To The Fortune 500

*By Phillip M. Perry*

Imagine yourself sinking into a cushy boardroom chair, clearing your throat and sounding off about management concepts to enraptured executives at top corporations such as General Electric, ExxonMobil and IBM. It's the dream of every consultant.

And why not? We're talking big bucks here, and what great bragging rights! Everyone admires the privileged individual who consults with Fortune 500 companies.

Dreaming's not doing, of course. Consultants who've been there say that access to the world's big movers and shakers requires more than a fat resume packed with technical skills. Your personal competence has to be packaged in a pretty box that positions you as a valuable asset to prospects.

"Consultants to top corporations have to understand the distinction between the 'what' of consulting and the 'how,'" warns Mark Haas, chair of the Institute of Management Consultants USA based in Washington, D.C. "Many people have the 'what' – the technical expertise and industry experience. But they lack the 'how' – the professional consulting skills and behaviors that allow their expertise to help organizations."

Still, NASE Members who sell consulting services – from PR and IT to engineering and organizational – can acquire the polished skills and credible reputations necessary to work with big blue chip companies. Here's how.

## Understand Your Client

When it comes to breaking into the big leagues, the No. 1 consulting skill is the ability to get a firm handle on a prospective organization before making contact.

"If you are consulting to people who make broad decisions about running a company, you have to achieve a holistic understanding of their organization's entire managing environment," advises Haas.

In specific terms, you have to explain how your advice will help the company achieve its goals in light of factors such as these:

- The customary ways of doing business in the prospect's industry
- The organization's day-to-day decision-making process
- The legal framework within which the company must operate
- Restrictions and opportunities that may arise from the logistics required for moving merchandise or personnel
- Internal office politics
- Environmental factors and the impact of competition

Got cold feet yet? Obtaining this kind of deep background is a challenge: It means investing a good deal of time studying all of the available news stories and market reports, subscribing to news feeds, and even getting acquainted with bloggers. It also means interviewing as many people as you can, within the company and at suppliers and competitors. You need to do anything, in short, that will add depth to your prospect's portrait.

Once you have the big picture, though, you'll be able to present your advice in the form of a new ray of light that illuminates your client's entire business landscape.

"You need to see your prospect's world in a way its current top managers can't," explains Haas. "Otherwise, they can get one of their own staff people to do your job."

If it all sounds like a lot of work, that's because it is. Many consultants invest up to six months assembling a file on a company before approaching with an idea. And the only way to make that kind of investment pay off is to aim for a long-term commitment rather than a one-night stand.

"Successful consulting to top corporations has to be more than a project business," says Haas. "Trying to do one project at one place and then moving on to another is a hard business to maintain."

Haas practices what he preaches. His client list includes a number of corporations that have used his consulting services for more than 20 years.

## Network to Success

Knowing your territory is one thing; taking that first step toward the client is another. Just how do you get an introduction?

Don't overlook the direct approach if you've done the homework outlined above. Suppose you're an environmental engineer and you've learned that XYZ Corp. is building a new plant. You've interviewed 20 people and you can see that the organization needs something specific to succeed, something you can provide.

"If you can bring something really valuable to the table, then you can go in as an equal partner," says Haas. A phone call to the appropriate project manager can be followed up with a letter describing just how you can improve your prospect's life.

But, finding the right contact person is a key to success.

To understand why, consider the ramifications of our story about the environmental engineer. Maybe XYZ Corp. is a huge outfit, but the consulting relationship began with a call to a single person.

"It's quite possible to work with any sized company, once you realize you are not selling to the company but an individual. The trick is to find that individual," says Alan Weiss, president of Summit Consulting Group in East Greenwich, Conn., and author of the widely-respected book "Million Dollar Consulting" (McGraw-Hill, 2002).

Not surprisingly, consultants trumpet networking as a great tool for reaching the top. What may be surprising, though, is the type of networking that works best. For many consultants, rubbing elbows with individuals in social settings works better than participating in professional groups.

If one-to-one contact is so important, what better environments for meeting people than social settings, the informal nature of which encourages just the kind of communications that foster trust?

"Expand your network to include everyone you know from your postal carrier to people in your church to teachers at your child's school," advises Haas. "You have no idea how much business I have gotten through my kid's soccer team."

After all, the parents who are sitting in the bleachers on Saturday afternoon include moms and dads from major corporations.

"Everyone is a potential referrer," says Haas.

## Create Trust

Your presentation will need to answer two questions that all prospects have in their minds.

Here's the first: Can you do something for me? The answer will depend on your competence and the results of the aforementioned homework.

Here's the second: Do you have my interests at heart? The answer to this is less straightforward and will depend on your communication skills, which must convince the client that you are a person to whom company secrets can be confided.

"Consultants always think they are selling competence, but large corporations are really looking for trust," notes Haas. "They are, after all, giving up some power to the consultant."

Make sure you emphasize how you want to assist the client – and thereby, of course, cultivate a mutually rewarding long-term relationship. Warns Haas: "Clients who think you are in it just for the money will not commit."

"It all comes down to value and being able to articulate a value proposition," says Jay Kent-Ferraro, president of Empowerment Technologies in Tulsa, Okla., and a successful consultant to many large corporations. "So many consultants make the mistake of leading with their methodologies. The problem is that everyone has methodologies. What you need to emphasize is the specific way that you can improve the prospect's organization."

### Build A Back Story

Although one-to-one networking is the essential part of your marketing plan, you can take steps that put your image in a favorable light. Here are three ideas:

#### 1. Write books and articles

"A commercially published book will help your career tremendously," says Weiss. "It helps you establish your brand, and encourages the large corporations to see you as an expert."

Published articles, too, are staples in most consultants' marketing folders. Don't forget, though, that Fortune 500 folks are already hit with a barrage of such materials. You want to make yours stand above the crowd.

Rather than a straightforward how-to piece such as "How to Write a Strategic Plan," consider something more substantive. In an opinion piece, for example, write about how and why certain forces in play (such as changes in federal law) will impact a certain industry.

Even better is a major trend article. What are the big forces now underway in an industry and what do organizations need to do as a result? "This kind of

piece illustrates that you are interested enough in the client's industry, that you understand the context enough to really do something valuable," explains Haas.

#### 2. Cultivate speaking events

"I am a big believer in this," says Michael Beitler, who advises many Fortune 500 companies from his base in Greensboro, N.C. "I joined the National Speakers Association to polish my skills. When you are seen as a keynote speaker or a workshop leader, there is an implied endorsement from the organization that you are an expert."

#### 3. Teach

"Teaching at a business school helps enhance your credibility," says Haas. "It also helps you hone your presentation on a particular topic and improves your ability to communicate your key points."

#### Get Certified

Before you hire a lawyer or architect you make sure they're licensed. No such assurance is available, though, for a consultant. Absent a similar professional stamp of approval, how can you convince prospects of your credibility?

Carrying out the advice in this article is fundamental, of course. But you can also become certified by a professional organization such as the Institute of Management Consultants USA, [www.imcusa.org](http://www.imcusa.org).

Membership in such an organization is useful because it helps enhance trust, a basic need of your client. And serving the client is the bottom line.

"Successful consultants to the big corporations feel a deep personal responsibility to their clients," says Haas. "They feel as if they have a calling to improve management and help leaders make better decisions."

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Phillip M. Perry has interviewed hundreds of consultants in his 20-year career as a freelance writer.

## Three Resources For Consultants

1. **Institute of Management Consultants USA**  
[www.imcusa.org](http://www.imcusa.org)
2. **National Speakers Association**  
[www.nsaspeaker.org](http://www.nsaspeaker.org)
3. **"Million Dollar Consulting"**  
By Alan Weiss