

## THE CONSULTANT'S PERSPECTIVE

Presented by Sarla Langdon, MIPR, Markmaid Ltd 9.10.03 at the WDA Consultant's Conference, Treforest

I have been a marketing and advertising consultant for 23 years. The first job I ever had was with an advertising and marketing consultancy namely Levers International Advertising Services (LINTAS) and I have worked for consultancies ever since till I set up my own.

Not all of us have such a background in consultancy. What we all do have in common is that we bring experience and expertise in one particular field of business – the sort of expertise that we hope will benefit businesses.

It was good to hear the positive feedback from a satisfied client. This is what puts a smile on a consultant's face---when a client finds the consultancy useful and the course of the project runs smoothly from beginning to end with agreement on all sides. But this is not necessarily the only measure of success.

The purpose of the consultancy, I'm sure you will all agree is not so much to force one's point of view on the client, but rather to encourage a focus on a specific problem, to offer alternatives that stimulate the client to home in on solutions s/he feels comfortable with and can implement within his/her own capability

## THE CHANGING ROLE OF CONSULTANTS

A hundred years ago when I started working in my first consultancy firm we only ever had large multinationals as clients. Our training came from the Unilever/Procter& Gamble hegemony – and this was the training on how to deal with mass production for mass markets using mass communication and a constant stream of new product development ideas. As far as work was concerned, for us the small business simply didn't exist except perhaps as one of thousands of stockists/retailers of our products

I personally had my first eye-opener when my employer took on the government's Small Scale Industrial Development Corporation as a client. For the first time we learnt about the structure of an

SME and the mini-scale on which it operated. The most important thing I learnt was that the principles of management and marketing were the same no matter what the size of the company. And this was an excellent preparation for working in Wales. When I first came here in 83 all the consultants I met were attached to the Big 8 accountants or to the big management consultancy firms. The small independent consultant is as much a result of the changing economic profile of Wales as the microbusiness itself.

The prohibitive cost of consultancy advice was a major factor in deterring smaller firms from using consultants. The DTI broke the ice with their 50% consultancy grant which was still aimed at larger companies; the real changes came about with the TEC grants for consultancy support for small business in the early 1990s. These grants are now widely used as administered by the WDA, Business Connect and other public sector bodies. They are easily accessible, not too bureaucratic in operation and have made it possible for the microbusiness to professionalise itself and to aim for excellence by tapping into sources of expertise at affordable prices

#### THE CHANGES IN CLIENT PROFILE

The old order significantly yielded place to the new in the Eighties with Maggie Thatcher's dream of an entrepreneurial society. Initiatives like the Enterprise Allowance Scheme and a range of free business training programmes added to the growth of the numbers of small businesses

In Wales the arrival of Obj 2 funding assistance made it possible for a new crop of SMEs to start up and grow – often under the careful eye of business advisors in managed workshops

- The death of 'dinosaur' companies (Coal, Steel, Petrochemicals) and the attendant closures of industries released another crop of entrepreneurs who were being trained to change from being employees to starting new businesses. This was accomplished by means of enterprise agencies set up by their erstwhile employers e.g. British Steel, BP Chemicals, British Coal

- Other large companies also found the need to become lean and mean operators and redundancies were the order of the day creating another wave of entrepreneurs who used their redundancy money as a stake to set up a small business. Some of them, of course were senior executives with experience and expertise who were introduced logically into the consultancy circuit.
- The awareness that specialist consultancy is necessary to ensure successful growth for the SME has been driven home to the business community by public sector bodies like the WDA, the Training and Enterprise Council under various guises, by Business Connect and the Enterprise Agencies. This is unprecedented in the UK's business history and has created a new wave of very demanding small businesses
- The trend continues as a stream of expensive new employment regulations from the EC (resulting from our signing of the Social Chapter) forces companies across the board to keep staffing levels to the minimum. Growth in terms of manpower has ceased to be a measure of business performance and down-sizing has become an ongoing objective, resulting in an increase in the number of 'small' businesses

#### THE CHANGING NEEDS OF CLIENTS

The situation we face now as specialist consultants is that the majority of our clients are microbusinesses employing less than 10 staff. This reflects the figures for the Welsh economy -95% of all Welsh business employs less than 10 staff.

- Many microbusinesses, though their principals have worked in large companies, have not been aware of the function of departments other than their own and are alarmed to discover how much more than their own particular skill goes into the running of a successful business - no matter how big or small. They did not realise how many hats they would be required to wear and are in a constant state of uncertainty. The modern specialist has to be able to teach, reassure and empower the client – far more is required of the consultant

than with large clients where there is enough in-house expertise

- As a result, consultants today have to be of the highest possible calibre, highly qualified specialists in their field, because the microbusiness depends on them for more than some specific advice on a specific problem
- Much more is demanded of the consultant because edges are blurred in a microbusiness between marketing, management, HR and financial consultancy but the level of expertise required is higher than ever before – the consultancy advice could make or break a small business. Each specialist consultant needs to be aware of the scope of other disciplines so that clients can be signposted accurately where necessary
- There is also a danger of overloading the client with information s/he is not going to use. Signposting needs to be done with care so that the client is given what s/he can comfortably deal with, as against everything they ought to know .As clients grow smaller the consultant needs to be better informed

## THE IDEAL CONSULTANT

- Gone is the old image of a pompous, stuffed shirt spouting jargon – today’s specialist consultant must be pleasant and easy to talk to so that clients no longer erect the traditional defensive barriers that impede the progress of the consultancy
- Public sector consultants have to sell products – we private sector consultants have to diagnose problems and supply solutions according to the clients’ needs. Sometimes you have to be more of a veterinary doctor – the client is inarticulate and uneasy with your questions and forming a diagnosis is difficult without adequate information.

- The specialist consultant has to shake off the old mantle of professional aloofness and needs to pitch in and think like an entrepreneur offering more task-centric recommendations than abstract observations. It was easy when dealing with multinationals to recommend throwing more money and more people at a problem –such facile solutions are simply not feasible for the microbusiness or even for an SME
- Today's consultant not only needs to communicate clearly and lucidly with no hint of jargon; s/he needs also to check at every stage that the client has understood the issue on the same terms by re-asking questions using other parameters
- AT WHICH POINT I WILL ASK YOU IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR EVEN COMMENTS