

# Seal the Deal



Carrie Printz, Esq.

**W**hether you are new to recruiting or an experienced pro, it is always worthwhile to review current issues and practices.

Hiring the best employees to fill positions in your firm is at the very least a competitive process. Top candidates have choices. While your firm is a "buyer," it must also "sell" candidates on the value of becoming part of your team.

This process begins well before you even meet the first candidate. It demands planning an effective strategy to attract the individuals most suited to succeed at your firm. Here are some of the things we have learned from our clients about how they work to hire the employees they want...

#### Before you begin the interview process:

- Prepare a marketing booklet about your firm. Include it with a packet of information for each candidate, including current press releases and articles written about the company. Incorporate success stories. Present this information to candidates in advance of their first meeting or have it available on your Website.
- Carefully choose the people that will interview candidates. Train them in good interviewing techniques and assure that everyone speaks

with the same "voice" about the firm.

- Appoint an enthusiastic, organized person to manage the interview process for each candidate. Empower them to arrange appointments with firm members and to enforce the integrity of the schedule. Make them accountable for their efforts.
- Identify your firm's strengths and future prospects.

#### During the interview process:

- Use the first meeting with a candidate to set the mood for the interview process. Explain what the candidate can expect; exhibit enthusiasm. Address any issues that are important to them—such as any timing concerns they may have about their move.
- Keep interviews scheduled close together. Maintain interest—don't allow the process to drag.
- Clearly communicate your firm's strengths and future prospects, your expectations of the candidate and personalized goals. Explain how your firm helps support new hires to assure their success.
- Make sure members of the interviewing team clearly understand what you are looking for and present this consistently.
- Maintain constant contact with candidates to show your firm's continued interest.
- Respect and maintain the privacy of candidates. Never reveal confidential information to them. Never reveal information about them to anyone outside

the firm or to anyone within the firm not involved in the interview process.

- Think of candidates as the people you will entrust with your firm's future.

Here are some interview questions that are most effective in evaluating candidates.

#### Re Present Position:

- What's the best thing about your current firm?
- What are some of the types of matters or projects you are working on?
- What are your roles on these matters? (Look for leadership roles, initiative, and other exceptional traits related to the position you are interviewing for.)

#### Re Next Position:

- If you ask, "What are you looking for in your next position?" you may receive a pat answer. Instead ask, "Describe a position you would consider to be an exceptional opportunity for you." If warranted, probe further.

- Why are you interested in this firm?
- When do you want to start in your new position?

#### Re Personal Matters:

- Be aware of questions that are illegal to ask, or are inappropriate.
- Where do you see yourself in five years?
- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- What is important to you?

#### To Wrap-up the Interview:

- What questions would you like me to answer?

If writing will be a part of the candidate's job, ask for a writing sample. It should be a strong representation of the candidate's work. If it is not of public record, client names and confidential information should be carefully edited to protect anonymity. If candidates are not careful with their current firm's work, they will probably not be careful with yours.

Careful planning and good communication will give your firm the competitive edge that will help you seal the deal with candidates you want to hire. ●

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## Consulting

# Establishing a Successful Consulting Practice



Melanie Lester

**O**ne of many things women excel at is sharing... sharing our successes and failures, our wisdom and the lessons we've learned along the way. When I started my consulting practice 8 years ago, it was with much help and

advice from other professional women. The time has come for me to return the favors and share some of my own lessons-learned.

#### It's worth taking time to write a business plan.

It doesn't have to be long—mine is under 5 pages. But the act of writing the plan helped me look at my business from different angles. For example, I realized that my competition included not just established consultants, but also professionals who fall victim to corporate downsizing.

Two website that are helpful when writing a business plan are [www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov) and [www.bizplanet.com](http://www.bizplanet.com).

**Chart new territories...never assume you can't do a project unless it's totally out of your field.**

Too often we underestimate the breadth and depth of our experience. Yet tackling new challenges is what consulting is all about. (After all, if you want to do the same thing everyday, you wouldn't be choosing to go down the consulting path.) By fearlessly taking on a wide range of challenging projects you acquire more skills and increase your marketability. It helps to keep in mind that you probably have a network of people willing to help answer

questions that arise.

This brings me to the importance of networking.

One rule of thumb is to dedicate one day a week to networking, especially when starting out. Call everyone you know, and that means everyone. I told my chimney sweep about my new business; it turned out one of his customers was CEO of a large healthcare company. With "Mr. Chimney's" help, I landed a new client! Remember...word travels!

**It's okay to negotiate the assignment, but don't negotiate your fee.**

Remember you're worth the money you are charging (or else you shouldn't be asking for it!). If a client thinks your estimate is too high, look over the assignment together to see if you can agree to make some adjustments to the assignment in order to come within her budget. Agreeing to limit the number of face-to-face meetings and reducing travel time by spending fewer days on-site are two good ways to reduce the total project cost without negotiating your fee structure.

**Projects almost always take more hours than initially anticipated.**

Unanticipated revisions, reading through additional background materials and changes in client direction are just some of the things that add hours to a project. I initially underestimated the billable hours needed to complete a project. Now when estimating a project, I calculate how many hours the project should take and then double it. I almost always end up within 10% of my estimate. It's important to make sure the deliverables are clear and mutually agreed upon in writing

before taking on the assignment.

**Getting compensated isn't just about doing hard work...it is hard work!**

Early on I expected clients would pay my invoices promptly. After all, many of them are Fortune 500 companies with large Account Payable departments. Was I naïve!...it's not uncommon for companies to hold invoices for 2 or 3 months. It pays to ask the Accounts Payable department if you qualify for a small business exemption from their 60 or 90 day policy. Many companies will pay small businesses within 5-7 days, if you ask.

**Invest in being accessible and appearing professional.**

We want our clients to feel they are getting outstanding service from a highly professional consulting company. This requires some investment in technology. Some things I can't live without are my wireless laptop; my "hands free" cell phone; a cordless phone with 3-way calling and a mute button that works(!); and voicemail service—it's more reliable than an answering machine. Having my own domain name ([mlesterconsulting.com](http://mlesterconsulting.com)) looks much more professional than using [aol.com](http://aol.com) or [verizon.net](http://verizon.net) in a business e-mail address.

My latest investment is my Blackberry®. I use it all the time to pick up e-mails remotely... and it can frequently substitute for schlepping a laptop along on short trips!

Some things clients expect you to have are a

dedicated fax line—so they don't have to call ahead to send a fax or hear a busy signal when you're receiving a fax. And a dedicated office phone number, because clients shouldn't have to ask your 5-year-old "receptionist" to please put mommy on the phone!

**Call Waiting—it's good to have it, just don't use it!**

Having Call Waiting means that while you are on the phone, all other incoming calls go directly into voicemail—so you can return the calls promptly. The problem is that it entices you to place the 1st caller on hold—something you should never do when talking with a client. If you absolutely must know the identity of the 2nd caller, buy a caller ID box that shows who's calling. Personally, I'd rather not risk being tempted to put a client on hold.

The end of the year can be rough on consultants...be prepared to enjoy some time off!

It's frequently difficult to get new assignments at year-end. Companies don't have money left in their budgets to hire outside consultants, not to mention that everyone's focused on wrapping things up, not starting new projects. Worst of all, management decisions to cut back on consultants are often made in November/December... so don't be surprised if an assignment ends suddenly. It's important to put money aside throughout the year in preparation for the "slow season." The good news is that consulting usually picks up in mid-January! Besides, winter's a great time to learn to ski or to take the kids ice skating! ●

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