

Altman Dedicated Direct

STRATEGY... TACTICS... RESULTS

Column: "After the Phone Rings ..."

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Topic: **Maximizing Value from Consultanting Resources**

There are varied reasons for hiring consultants – limited staff, getting involved in areas with limited internal expertise, special one-time projects and so on. Consultants are also called in to tackle vexing problems you are too close to “see the forest for the trees”.

Having determined you need consulting assistance, finding the right consultant takes a little time. Ask colleagues and vendors for referrals, sharing with them the kind of consulting support you are looking for. Research potential consultants through trade associations such as ERA, the DMA or IMC (Institute of Management Consultants) as well as trade publications that provide supplier listings on web sites or in print.

Many consultants operate independently, but some work collaboratively with others that have complementary skills. Size of firm isn't important, but type of experience is. Just because a consultant helped your colleague to locate a great new fulfillment center, doesn't mean that they know enough about continuity programs to help you successfully develop one.

If initial discussions cause you to feel there is a good fit between what a consultant offers and what your firm needs, request a written proposal. It should document an understanding of the challenge you are facing, identify what steps and actions they propose to address your challenge, and what fees they'll charge.

If the proposal makes sense to you, it's time to check referrals. This is critical! Ask for 3-4 who will speak candidly. Take the time to ask plenty of questions before making your final decision and signing the proposal. You'll also want to ensure both parties sign a confidentiality agreement for both your protection.

Now that you've hired a consultant, how do you ensure you get the value you deserve and the project is completed successfully? The first key is sharing information. You've hired someone to help you deal with a vexing business challenge; don't tie their hands by holding back information, good or bad. The more your consultant understands your business, the better they will be able to identify a strategy that makes sense in the long run. Assign one person on your staff to be responsible as the liaison with the consultant to ensure communication and information flow. This will save both sides time. And ensure your vendor partners are aware of your consultant's role as well. It's likely your consultant will need to be in touch with them at some point for information or assistance.

Periodic meetings, reports or other updates regarding progress on the assignment make sense, but needn't be formal. I've had assignments managing a DRTV or catalog launch where daily communication occurs as a matter of course, and additional updates would be redundant.



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If things seem like they are going in the wrong direction, be candid about your concerns as soon as they arise. The consultant is applying their best knowledge and effort towards addressing your challenges, but you know your business better than they can. Not only is it important for them to communicate with you, but communication needs to flow in the other direction as well. If in doubt, err on the side of over-communication.

When the project is complete, ensure that you ask all the questions needed to maintain the progress that has been made. A successful consulting project should not fall apart when the consultant leaves.

Like most business investments, actively managing the situation will ensure you get the value from consultants you hire. For more tips you can download a free report published by the Institute of Management Consultants posted on the resources page of our web site:
<http://www.altmandedicateddirect.com/resources.html>.

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