

# Working With a Marketing Consultant

by John Melchinger—The Marketing Coach™

## Why Seek Outside Advice?

Obtaining outside marketing advice is an important consideration for many. Few know how and suffer for it. Here are some ideas that might steer you straight if you are considering hiring a marketing consultant. My first rule (and tagline) is: ***You don't have to be sick to get better.*** Most of my clients already make over \$200,000 first year commissions and/or fees before they seek my advice, so they don't need to reach subsistence levels of production; they're already there. They want to focus on improving in the future from where they are now. The independent advisors I've met who have explored obtaining advice tend to have some common reasons for seeking it.

- ***They feel plateaued.*** They're working hard but can't launch far enough into the air to really fly the way they feel they should. They know they can do better, but they aren't sure how.
- ***They lack focus.*** After writing lives year after year they have a good cash flow, but not necessarily a good clientele. Service work is now a burden and unprofitable. They sell, but they don't ask for referrals because they fear their clients will lead them where they don't want to go-to more of the type client they don't really like all that much.
- ***They feel good but want a little coaching*** to get back into a groove that will make them feel better with.
- ***They want to pace themselves in a balanced life,*** attending not only to their career selling, but also to family, community, and themselves.
- ***They want to make a five to ten year sprint to retirement*** to top off a great career.
- ***Some are in trouble,*** having fallen down on the job for all kinds of reasons and can't get up on their own. Sometimes these people will not listen to-or cannot hear-the counsel of people closest to them, so they want outside, objective advice. Examples: I won a few great new clients when one fell swoop change in the tax law blew away tax qualified minimum deposit as an insurance funding method. Another relatively common cause for trouble selling is when split-dollar sales to corporations dry up because the client company is sold, taking all control and influence away from the advisor who counted profits from these sales for many years. In other cases insurance companies made major changes, moved to new product types and left some producers bewildered and alone in the wake of their marketing dust. The list goes on.



## What Do You Ask For?

Over the years I've identified a hierarchy of purposes for which you may engage a marketing consultant. You may choose your own objectives, but remember: *what you first ask for is not always what you need or will eventually get.* You must work with your marketing

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consultant, engaging in a process together, not simply hire the consultant and wait for the right answer to come out of the genie's box.

Marketing consulting includes a broad array of services and activities, usually arranged and promoted according to the consultant's expertise. The term marketing, however, is about as well defined as love. There is product development, product promotion, public relations, advertising, client retention, client acquisition, association marketing, direct mail, mass mail, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. You can observe as many differences within these categories as between them. With so many choices, what's an advisor to do?

My preference is to ***begin by clarifying goals and agreeing on the process of deciding how to reach them.*** This way, we start out collaborating (working together) rather than negotiating (trying to get it together). In one candid hour or so on the telephone I can obtain enough information to create a handful of meaningful initial objectives, steps to be taken in a consulting process to reach them, and the costs that will be incurred to (a) write a consultant-client letter of agreement or (b) mutually decide to end the conversation with this call.

Sometimes I recommend that the inquiring advisor take a few steps on his/her own before engaging me. This may be to do something as important as a relationship analysis of existing clients to identify marketing opportunities or simply to learn how to ask for introductions and referrals (I supply the scripts). This advice is often given gratis because if the advisor returns for more help, s/he will be better equipped to participate in a productive consultation. If the advisor does not come back for more, then an engagement probably would not have worked out anyway.

The consulting objectives I try to elicit at the outset of a possible relationship with a advisor include:

1. **Providing information.** Does the inquiring advisor simply want information about markets or marketing? If so, I identify resources other than myself where this information can be obtained. This is not the type of marketing service I perform unless it is part of a larger consulting engagement. I always ask, "What is your ultimate objective? What will you do with the information when you have it? Do you have the ability to translate the data into information or to put the information into effective use?" The large number of inquirers I speak with who cannot answer these fundamental questions no longer amazes me.
2. **Solving certain problems.** Some advisors know what they want, and they ask for it. They can help answer the questions, "What's the real problem?" and "How far are you willing to go to solve it?" Most producers who engage in this conversation with me also tend to accept modifications to their original thinking and appreciate redefining their marketing issues.

A problem may be no more involving than identifying the best new marketing opportunities or extracting one's self ethically from a market or block of clients that is no longer profitable. An advisor may wish to create a brochure, a new image or adjusted image for promotion in a new market; to learn how to ask for introductions to specific types of prospects in targeted market segments; to develop a resume and personal promotion package. The range of predetermined problems to solve is quite broad.

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Clients should understand the need to explore a problem before setting out to solve it. Their definition of the real problem may have to change. Solving the wrong problem or devising a solution that will not be implemented satisfies no one.

3. **Diagnosing for problems that need solving.** Often advisors know they have a problem to solve but can't define it, so they seek help identifying the real marketing issues they need to tackle. This may require relationship analysis on their own, then reviewed by me, or by my coaching them all the way through the process. Regardless, the client should participate in the diagnostic process to aid accuracy and acceptance of the problems as defined and to develop the appropriate sense of urgency to move towards solutions. Clients who participate in the diagnosis are more likely to acknowledge ownership of their problems and agree with the consultant's redefinition of the problems to solve.
4. **Writing marketing plans that solve problems by achieving certain objectives.** Here the advisor should ask for a written version of the consultant's clear definition of the objectives, definition of target market segments, the messages to deliver to those segments, the most suitable mix of marketing activities and media to develop the segment, a calendar for those activities, and a tracking methodology to maintain accountability for the plan's completion. The plan translates objectives into actions.

In my experience, participation by the advisor in the formulation of suitable recommendations avoids rejection and helps assure commitment to completing the plan. Dialogue between the consultant and the client fosters understanding and agreement as they arrive at their decisions together.

The word *consult means to deliberate together, to confer*, and the consulting process should not allow the client and the consultant to dissociate. In my most successful consulting relationships there is no real distinction between my roles and the roles my clients take. We collaborate. We will both eventually join in the editorial process to craft good communication vehicles. The result: My formal recommendations do not surprise my clients because the clients help devise the plan and I am equally concerned with their effective implementation.

5. **Developing pieces called for in the marketing plan.** Most marketing pieces are communication devices and require some long-term thinking and short-term word crafting. Not everyone who can sell well has the ability or desire to create marketing pieces. Compliance may require careful writing and maybe even coaching on how to obtain approvals. If outside resources such as copy writers are needed, the consultant should make recommendations, just as an advisor might recommend an attorney, accountant, or banker should the client need one. In general, writers will charge less than the marketing consultant, but there are writers who do some consulting and consultants who do some writing, just as there are public speakers who do some consulting and consultants who do some public speaking. Sorting this out, and the costs to do it, can be troublesome. Find out who you are dealing with and how s/he charges (and compare it to what's generally available) before deciding to extend your consulting engagement into new objectives.
6. **Developing accountability for working the plan.** About one third of my new clients want some sort of accountability for making their new marketing plan work. This means they want to be accountable to someone, and I am often that person. In this role, the marketing consultant serves as coach and supervisor to the advisor's activities and conscience.

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In my consulting practice, a single page form works well for recording activities and results for the current week and year-to-date, reporting actual activities done, and actual results obtained compared to the pre-established goals for each. Within a few months each client stops reporting, either because s/he has developed the desired good habits and activity patterns and no longer needs to report in, or has not met goals and does not want to record this fact. Not everyone who begins a marketing plan will complete it, but those who set up accountabilities and track them tend to succeed faster and better than those who do not.

One client of mine—who began his marketing efforts by doubling his production—kept a weekly tally of his activities and results. He now claims he's "too busy selling to keep records." He could easily double his production again and more easily stay on track (he frequently loses focus and his footing), but for some reason cannot keep to his new habits even though he's proved they work well for him. When deeply rooted emotions drive business decisions and manage personal habits, no amount of consulting can pierce through that barrier.

You can do better than this by keeping your marketing consultant informed about what you are doing and why, thinking through ideas briefly in telephone conversations that help clarify your thinking. If you reach the point that you cannot see yourself because of the fog on your own mirror, ask someone who knows you well for a spot check. In marketing, this should be your chosen consultant/coach.

## **What About Costs?**

Many advisors seeking marketing consultations think of costs in terms of cash flow, so hiring a consultant seems quite expensive or costly. In truth, there are two important points to make here. First, marketing consulting that solves problems solves long-term problems because marketing is strategic (long-term thinking). Cash flow, on the other hand, is tactical (short-term thinking). Capital, not cash flow, should fund your marketing needs because capital is used to finance growth into the future. If you capitalize out of cash flow and it's painful, you may have a management problem.

Second, successful marketing consulting is expensive because it involves the client's time throughout the process. Sure, my advice is expensive, but what good consultant's advice isn't? If you have a suspected heart problem but don't take the time and spend the money to complete the process of taking a stress test, allowing a medical diagnosis, and doing what the doctor's prescription calls for, who's loss is it? The doctor (who lost fees) or you (who remains unknowingly and perhaps increasingly at risk as your problems intensify before you will face them)?

## **What About Staffing?**

I used to do management consulting, but it became quite unrewarding because managers tend to be less willing to change than their producers. Now I help with an advisor's management issues only as they relate to staffing the marketing plan's implementation and assuring the best possible organization for its successful completion.

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Sometimes a marketing plan requires new management concepts and techniques as well as new attitudes and even fundamental changes in how the marketing entity defines itself and carries out its mission. The changes needed may be more necessary and difficult to instill in the leaders and managers than in their staff.

Unless the marketing consultant's recommendations take into account the entire picture of the advisor or firm, implementation may prove difficult at best, if not impossible, to implement or may create difficulties in other aspects of the business. Example: As the lines thin between marketing insurance and investments, the related problems—although not regulated in the same manner or by the same regulators—can wreak havoc on each other and cause deep frustration for the advisor trying to comply with both sets of dos and don'ts. The consultant must be able to address immediate issues while remaining sensitive to their larger contexts, in order to contribute to the overall effectiveness of the enterprise.

### Is There More?

Certainly there's more! Marketing—in this case, developing and promoting a professional service practice—is a vast topic with new ideas occurring every day. But here are the five major points I work through with my clients. My clients must. . .

1. **Agree to my functional definition of insanity**, which is doing the same thing repeatedly but expecting a better result. Clients who agree up front to the need for changing how they do certain things and how they think about certain situations and methodologies are by far the more successful coming out of a marketing consultation. I make them acknowledge this at the outset.
2. **Analyze their best business and personal relationships**. This is where 90 percent of the best target marketing opportunities make themselves known. There is a formula and coaching that makes this task less cumbersome than it otherwise can be, and it sure as fire works better than beating the bushes out in the rapidly changing (and all too general) marketplace.
3. **Employ a contact management software system**. Communicating with 500 or more prospects at least eight times each in a year (4,000 contact events), and each for their own reasons and on different dates, is virtually impossible without good contact management software that interacts well with your word processing and other software.
4. **Agree to track activities and results**. There is no reason to do marketing unless you will also measure its results and its contribution to your overall effectiveness.
5. **Accept that to double or triple production or to realize permanent change in sales results by marketing takes 30 to 48 months**. The only criterion for marketing is profitably improved sales performance, and marketing is strategic in nature, so time must be allowed to perform activities, monitor results, adjust activities as necessary, measure return on investment, and proceed from there.

These are tough requirements for habitual salespeople. Rarely do salespeople market. Rather, business-people market *and* sell. They know the differences between marketing and

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selling as well as their similarities and how they go together. They employ the strategic thinking that business leadership and management require, avoiding the tactical myopia that doing only selling can create.

### **The Bottom Line**

If you like your clients, enjoy selling, make enough money doing it, and know where your next sales are going to come from, *it ain't broke*—so don't try fixing it. Marketing isn't for everyone who sells.

If you don't like many of your clients, want to make more money selling, don't necessarily know where your next sales are coming from, feel a need to upgrade your markets, lack focus, or simply want to explore how to improve the growth pattern of your business for the long haul, then maybe you should consider engaging a marketing consultant to work with you towards objectives you can both agree on.