

Are You Ready to Hire a Consultant for Your Business?

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by Syndicated Columnist Cathy Harris

At some point in business, it becomes necessary to seek out an expert for advice and counsel. When the going gets tough, consultants provides the expertise you need.

Only you can really determine whether you need a consultant's help. Don't get caught in the trap of thinking you can do it all by yourself. Bringing a product from the idea state to the marketplace is a complicated difficult process. Stop for a minute and make a list of the issues you are tackling. Do you need another employee but don't know the best places to look for one? Are you interested in manufacturing your product overseas but haven't a clue how to get started? If you have other areas that need your attention and you can't afford to make too many mistakes with your capital, then you're the perfect candidate for a consultant.

Consultants are primarily hired to give you advice and counsel. They don't make guarantees that their input will be effective. You're the ultimate judge of their value; therefore it is extremely important for you to thoroughly check potential consultants' references.

Consultants can be extremely helpful especially to inventors. The right consultant can offer advice on how to build a working prototype, assist in finding manufacturers and help develop a marketing strategy. He or she can introduce you to important contacts.

The key is to find a consultant that will meet your needs without wasting your time and money.

The best way to look for a consultant is to ask friends, family and colleagues. Getting referrals is always a good way to start because someone else has done much of the legwork and you will receive the benefits of what they've learned.

When beginning your research, don't be turned off by those who consult part time. This can be good sign that they are active in their area of expertise and can give you up-to-date information.

The Yellow Pages, surprisingly, is a good source. The "Consultant" category is broken down by type (such as management consultants and business consultants), so you should be able to find one that matches your needs.

Trade journals are also helpful. Consultants tend to advertise in journals the majority of their potential clients read.

Make sure you interview consultants before hiring one. If they mention companies that have hired them, take notes.

At the end of the interview with a potential consultant, ask for the phone numbers of the people and companies they mentioned. Again, they should freely provide that information, their resume and a list of other clients and references. If they don't, don't hire them.

Also ask them to tell you about a difficult client they worked with. Every consultant should have at least one not-so-great experience. Listen carefully. Their story will give you great insight into how they work. If they claim every job they've had was great, how can you be sure they'll tell you the truth about your issues? If they are overly negative, you should wonder whether they're really concerned about doing a good job.

Also make sure before hiring a consultant, that the following are true: 1) They have no conflict of interest; 2) They are willing to provide documentation of training received and share other background information; 3) They present a written contract detailing the types of services to be performed and the fees for those services; 4) They will provide you with a written report upon completions of the project. Finally, make sure you talk to more than one consultant and evaluate the services provided and fees charged, as well as analyze your needs before making a final decision.

When working with a consultant, you should always have an agreement in writing. The agreement should include how the payment will be made and the scope of the work being requested. It's also very important that the agreement assigns all intellectual property rights to you. Otherwise, the consultant could claim ownership of the idea and leave you without recourse.

In the end, using a consultant has few downsides. They'll offer expertise you don't possess, but when it comes to playing the game, they're only a coach on the sidelines. You are ultimately the one who must act.

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