Why Even Hot Prospects Give Consultants A Cold Shoulder When They Behave Like Salespeople

Commando Consulting

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http://www.di-squad.com
If there is one clear indication that traditional prospecting and sales practices are on their way to extinction, it’s the fact that even the Mormon Church has recently changed its approach and stopped going door-to-door to find new disciples.

According to the Huffington Post, Mormon missionaries have started changing their approaches from door-knocking to social media.

The prediction is that in a few years Mormon missionaries will be busy typing messages to Facebook platforms on their iPods in order to find new disciples.

Then what is the logic that many boutique consulting firms and solo consultants still try to attract new clients by behaving like salespeople?

Although they desperately want to shed the salesperson image, when push comes to shove, old habits are far too hard to kick, and many consultants fall back into the typical used car salesman “Give me an offer and I’ll give you a deal” mode.

But not everyone.

It largely depends on what type of salesperson the consultant is.

The Five Types Of Consultants

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In my experience, consultants, as salespeople, fall into five categories.

Consultants are supposed to represent both their firms’ interests and their clients’ interests.

Representing firms’ interests is all about consultants’ helping their firms to be profitable.

Representing clients’ interests is all about accomplishing the planned objectives and achieve projected goals, thus helping clients to improve their businesses.

In an ideal firm, serving clients’ long-term interest makes the firm successful.

But sometimes firm leaders give in to the quick buck, and both clients and the firm suffer in the long-term.

So, in these two dimensions, we have five categories of consultants.

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1 Article by Brady McCombs, posted on 26 June 2013.
1. **The Pusher:** Commerce for him is warfare. For these salespeople, making the sale is the equivalent of overpowering the enemy’s army and invading and annexing enemy territory. Every new client is a trophy on the wall. And after the war (business development process), the objective is to ram as much stuff down the client’s throat as humanly possible. It’s common practice to make clients dependable on consultants, so, every client is client for life.

2. **The Neutral:** This is the typical consultant who shows features and benefits to their clients and leaves the decisions to them. For Neutrals, anything else, even diagnosis, is manipulation, and they consider it beneath them.

3. **The Expert:** He is the same as the Neutral, but instead of business features and benefits, he’s obsessed with technical features and benefits. What they have in common is that they are technical geniuses and business illiterates. They love talking about their services how it’s used in the frontlines not how boardroom dwellers garner value from them.

They feel like clowns in boardrooms. For this reason, buyers extensively haggle with them, and often take them for a ride, which this poor bastard doesn’t even realise.

4. **The Advisor:** His work is based on thorough diagnostics. After the diagnostics, he outlines the course of action for remedy, but let’s buyers make their own decisions. Persuading and convincing buyers are beneath them.

6. **The Missionary:** He is totally on the buyer’s side and doesn’t feel fiscally responsible for his employer’s success. The recognition that his paycheque comes from paying clients is totally over his head and doesn’t care about it. He wants to be paid, but doesn’t care where the money comes from. Buyers usually take them for fools and love haggling with them.

Having clarified the five types, I think, it’s a tad easier to clarify the behaviours that can create both the respected authority and the resented vendor perceptions.

Consultants who act like salespeople can trigger the “fungible vendor” trigger in buyers, and buyers go on some serious defensive. As a by-product, this process also creates distress.

According to Tom Pisello of Alinean, based on how they conduct sales meetings, buyers categorise salespeople – in this case, consultants – into five groups.

27% of buyers indicated that salespeople only wanted to talk about their products/services in a **transactional** way without addressing buyers’ issues and requirements.

41% of buyers said salespeople listened to them in search of certain **buzzwords**, and upon hearing them, they launched into canned sales pitches. Less than 32% of these salespeople seemed to care about adding value to the conversation.

20% of salespeople focused on **true solutions** approach and actually tried to understand their buyers’ issues and help them to resolve them.

6% of salespeople took a true **consultative** approach and tried to understand buyers’ issues. These salespeople focused on truly helping buyers even if they didn’t sell anything.

6% of salespeople took a truly **outcome-focused** approach, genuinely interested in partnering with buyers to make sure their projects are successful.
All in all, only 10% of all sales interactions are regarded as client-focused and produced success. Is it surprising then that buyers have become extra-cautious even with those consultants who vehemently deny that they’re salespeople? So, let’s see some of that mistakes that consultants make and create “salesy” perceptions of themselves.

**Overuse Of The Telephone For Prospecting**

Careful with that telephone!

Just because both you and your buyer have one, it doesn’t mean you should use the telephone as often as you do.

At the beginning of the buying cycle, buyers are very very cautious because they know there is a high chance of being jumped by overzealous salespeople. Therefore they stay away from live interaction.

At this point, consultant initiated phone calls would frighten buyers off straight into the welcoming arms of the competition.

Let’s say you have the same message to communicate both over the phone and in a snail mail letter.

While there is a good chance that buyers solemn the phone on you, many of them will read your letter and act on its call to action statement.

Why?

When b people work on something and concentrate and the phone rings, they automatically get agitated.

So, what state do you think they are in when communicating with the very source of that agitation? Let’s make a fair assumption that they’re pretty pissed off.

So, what business do you want to discuss with someone in such a state?

Instead, design a good marketing programme and then have prospects contact you, but not on the phone.

And one more thing. Don’t ask them to call you for a free quote or free consulting. Ask them to contact you to request some sort of valuable free content that is relevant to them.

And be very specific with your offer. Don’t ask them to contact you for a free white paper, “Growing Your Business.”

Ask them to request your very specific free white paper, “5 Ways Boutique Consulting Firms Can Sex Up Their Linkedin Profiles.”

It focuses on a very specific technique for a very specific market.

And one you have kick-arse, client-centred marketing materials, then distribute them but make sure not to ask buyers to contact you or your people for live conversations. They are not ready for that yet.
Wielding Your Business Card Without Being Asked

Have you noticed that whatever business function you go to, you go home with a pocketful of business cards? And when you look at the cars, you don’t even remember their owners. Salespeople open their introductions, after shaking hands, by giving you their business cards. The other way to differentiate salespeople from consultants is that consultants are much more reserved, while salespeople tend to be “loud”. By loud I mean they love talking a lot.

By contrast, consultants listen and observe more.

So, what about business cards? Offer them if and only if people specifically ask you for them. The other part of the business card story is that you should put something valuable on the flip side of your card.

And that valuable thing should be some valuable content people can request.

If you do business development for coffin carvers, then it’s quite likely that it’s coffin carvers who ask for your card.

So, on the flip side of your card you can offer a white paper, audio or video, entitled, “10 Reasons Why Most Coffin Carvers End Up With Over-Demanding And Under-Paying Clients From Hell And What To Do About It.”

So, whoever asks for your card, she is likely to go to your website and request this report too. And then you have one more name in your database.

Pushing For In-Person Meetings

“There are worse things in life than death. Have you ever spent an evening with an insurance salesman?” ~ Woody Allen

And I reckon we could replace “insurance salesman” with any kind of salesman.

Conventional wisdom says that we should push for appointments and once we’re in front of buyers, they can’t escape from our claws.

The problem is that pushing for the appointment instantly positions you as a salesperson, and real economic buyers are likely to relegate you to purchasing or a lower level manager in your subject matter area.

The problem is that now you’re wasting personal time on activities which can’t result in buying decisions, simply because the people you meet are not authorised to initiate projects.

And no matter how much time you spend in their company, it won’t change.

At the beginning of a client-buyer relationship, buyers are interested in what you have to offer but are not yet committed to deciding whether or not they want it.

So, from first enquiry to the conditional commitment of doing business with you if you can fulfil their buying criteria, communicate with buyers in writing, so they can “digest” your information in your absence.
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This approach puts buyers at ease and provides better time management for you. Also, your buyer-to-client conversion success rate goes up quite significantly, because you can bail out when you realise that the buyer is just dragging you along, and there is no chance to get hired. You can put together a Project Information Kit (PIK) with various educational and diagnostic documents, so by digesting this information, buyers can sell themselves on you. And you PIK doesn’t have to have traditional sales documents. Ask deep questions in your content, and let those questions establish your credibility. So, by the time you meet buyers, the sale is almost certain.

Yes, there are some people out there who try to manipulate your process, but if you don’t like the way they behave and treat you, then just dump them.

Talking About Your Fees Too Soon

I’m not 100% certain what causes it, but some consultants start their presentations with their fees, while some other consultants are terrified of talking about their fees. I believe the key is to cite your fees at the right time.

You know that this fee question is coming at one point, so you might as well be prepared for it.

If you have hourly rates, you’d better start doing something about it right now. It’s unethical to your clients and is financial limiting to you. You’re basically giving your life away piecemeal, which is not a good idea.

If you have fixed fees, then develop a few comeback statements to the fee question in such a way that your statements end in a question back to the prospect.

Think of the Zeigarnik effect\(^2\), which states that people remember uncompleted or interrupted tasks better than completed tasks. The question at the end of your statement postpones completion, so, being a still open topic, your prospect continues the interaction with you.

Prospect: “So, what do you charge?”

Consultant: “My fees are based on my contribution to your projected results that this project is expected to achieve, with a minimum 10:1 return on your investment. Together we can evaluate the value of the project and its impact on your business, and then we can decide whether or not we want to do it at all. If we decide to go ahead, we can talk about fees in the right context. Does this sound fair to you?”

The ending question keeps the conversation flowing.

Prospect: “But I’m sure you have a ballpark figure?”

Consultant: “Yes. It’s anywhere between $5,000 and $5 million. Where do you want to go from here?”

Citing a fee would be the same as answering a restaurant guest’s question, “How much does food cost here?”

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Which food? Stewed pig’s trotters with tap water or Russian caviar with vintage Dom Perignon? If the prospect insists on knowing the fee...

**Prospect:** “But I really need to know it to make a decision.”

**Consultant:** “I understand that. And I too have to make a decision 1) whether or not I want to work with you and 2) whether or not I want your project.

Would you mind engaging in a conversation to establish some key parameters of the project’s objectives, metrics and value, so then I can give you some implementation and investment options?”

The consultant’s response always ends on a question. The ball is always back into the buyer’s court, so the buyer can either continue or discontinue.

And if your prospects insist on knowing your fees but don’t want to engage in a conversation about the project, you’re likely talking to a price-shopper. For this buyer, price is the most important factor, and you’d better walk away. Working with a price shopper is really crappy.

### Offering To Submit Proposals Prematurely

Many consulting firms make the mistake of submitting proposals before they fully understand what buyers require.

It’s basically the same mistake as premature fee-citing.

And this is where the problem lies.

Many consultants try to use their proposals for...

- Selling your recommendations
- Building the relationship
- Serving as a document for comparison
- Itemising their costs
- Positioning your approaches so vaguely as to be non-measurable and unenforceable
- And a few more problems outlined in detail in *Mastering the Proposal Process: A Practical Guide for Consultants Who Are Tired of Wasting Their Time and Efforts on Writing Proposals over 50% of Which Get Rejected*[^3]

As a result, their proposals get convoluted, like vendors’ quotes, and buyers send them either to legal or purchasing (or both), and that causes unnecessary delays.

Make sure you have a good buyer interviewing process in place with your standard question about goals, objectives, metrics and value.

A few words about goals and objectives. In projects, we have both goals and objectives. Most consultants use them interchangeably, but they are quite different.

Projected goals are measurable quantitative effects with time limits. Goals are ends (effects) all by themselves. They are out of consultants’ control. They are general business goals not technical (your subject matter) goals.

For instance, the buyer’s problem is high talent attrition, and she wants to reduce it. Your solution may be a better compensation plan. Talent attrition is a boardroom issue. A compensation plan is an HR issue.

Projected objectives are the systemic or human causes that have to be in place in order to achieve the desired goals. They are the means to ends (goals). They are the building blocks for the goals we want to achieve. They are in our control. The projected objectives may change during the collaboration phase. Objectives can be both business- and technical objectives.

To gain better understanding of the difference, let’s see an example...

You’re in the middle of packing just before moving to your new home, when all of a sudden there is a knock on the door. You open it and the FedEx driver hands you a small packet. You sign for it and then continue packing.

Six months later, in your new place, you bump into the small packet again. You open it and read the letter. The letter is from the lottery company, asking you to come in and pick up your winnings of $20 million. Then you read that the money must be picked up within 30 days of delivery.

You’re five months too late.

You scream up a storm, curse the heavens for a few minutes and sit down to fight your sudden dizziness. Yes, you’ve just lost $20 million.

In this equation the letter is the value or objective and the $20 million is the result or goal.

FedEx has delivered the value, but you’ve failed to turn it into result.

Would you sue FedEx for your loss? I don’t think so.

So, what you guarantee is clients’ capabilities of achieving certain goals, but not the dead-certain achievement of those goals.

And this is what you have to make your clients understand.

Knowing that upon receiving proposals, many buyers go straight to the fees without reading the rest. It means they read your fees out of context.

To avoid that, first submit a proposal without fees. Write up all the sections, including the three options for your offer, logistics, etc., and establish your fees for each option. Then submit this proposal, but without the fees, and ask your buyer to read it and to let you know what to change. After the proposal is accepted as is, you can add the fees. By then, buyers have read the proposal a few times, and she’s familiar with it.

This process takes a bit of time, but you’ll have almost 100% success rate.

Asking Leading Questions
Sales gurus of the 80s and 90s, most of whom haven’t sold anything since then, but only teach their obsolete methods, love talking about asking leading questions and in doing so, pushing prospects into a corner.

Questions like...

“You’d like to solve this problem as soon as possible, wouldn’t you?”

“If we could save you money, would you want to move forward today?”

Leading questions are the type of questions that can only be answered with “Yes”. And buyers are far too sophisticated for that kind of idiocy.

Just think of this section from one of the late Zig Ziglar’s best-selling sales books...

“Yes, my friend, you heard right. In just 30 seconds, by asking three simple questions, you can turn an innocent conversation into a steel-jawed trap that nails your prospect to the wall, so he has nowhere to go and nothing to do but sign your contract.”

And if you read the whole book, you’ll find it’s as full of manipulation as the famous Swiss Emmental cheese is full of holes.

Yes, Zig’s approach was great for the 60s and 70s when he was selling pots and pans door-to-door, but in 2013, selling complex, high-ticket products/services, you can’t pull that kind of traditional salesmanship on prospects because they kick you out of their offices before you could say Buke Willinujit4.

Besides, while Zig got away with building entrapment, in consulting what you need to build with your prospects is trust not entrapment.

Oh, if you read Daniel Pink’s book, To Sell Is Human, you find out that even the highly accomplished Guinness World Records winner, Joe Girrad was a con artist. He lied and cheated just to close the sale. And the funny thing is that the sales profession in general celebrates his accomplishment.

His book, How to Sell Anything to Anybody, sold 2 million copies and thousands of people have attended his sales seminars.

Can you imagine that Joe stopped selling cars in 1977, and since then he’s need teaching people how to sell anything to anyone? Amazing.

Joe knew how to ask leading questions that, in Zig’s words, nailed prospects to the wall with no chance and hope for escape from vacuuming their chequebooks empty.

Oh, and I’d like to mention here that Mack Hanan wrote Consultative Selling: The Hanan Formula for High-Margin Sales at High Levels in 1971, but no one took him seriously because the world was too busy grovelling at the gurus’ feet.

Instead of leading questions, I suggest that you ask diagnostic questions. Start at a very high

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4 A fictional character in Douglas Adams’ Starship Titanic. By marriage, he’s the half-cousin of Buke Hammadorf’, another member of Captain Bolfass’ Attack Group.
level, and then gradually come down. And don’t worry about talking about nuts and bolts type questions before you’re engaged.

When I get enquiries from prospects, I email them four questions.

1. “How did you find me?”
2. The R question5: “If we were meeting here three years from today, looking back over those three years, what has to have happened during that period for you to feel happy with your progress?”
3. The A-Z question6: “As you look at your entire business development process, starting with generating a high-quality sales lead, turning it into a new prospect, and moving that prospect through all the interactions, and finally ending up with a very profitable sale and a delighted and successful client with a high probability for repeat and referral business, if you had to pick one part of this process that concerns you the most, with all the success you’ve had in your business, what would you put in the top of your list of concerns?”
4. How will your personal life improve as a result of the successful completion of this initiative?

Except #1, these are “big picture” questions, so prospects start thinking about their businesses and their lives at a higher level. Discussing these questions is like a discussion between friends.

You may say that it slows down the sales process, but that’s exactly what I want. I want prospects to lead the way.

My objective is not to make the sale, but to discover whether or not we have a mutually beneficial basis for working together. But that’s me. I’m an introvert, so every rejection is quite a bit personal for me. So I don’t even play the rejection game. I don’t even go into situations that can end in rejection.

And let’s stop for a moment. There is a difference between rejection and deciding not to work together. The former is a one-sided decision chucked into the face of the other party, and the latter is mutual.

**Summary**

Contrary to common belief, held by many highly schooled consultants, even consultants have to sell their expertise in order to eat and stay alive.

But they can’t practise the same kind of selling as Billie Mays7 or Vince Offer8, the “ShamWow!” guy does on TV.

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5 As per Dan Sullivan, of Strategic Coach  
6 As per Jeff Thull of The Prime Resource Group  
7 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpqiyFPdHZ4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpqiyFPdHZ4)  
8 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJEKqI1e714](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJEKqI1e714)
The problem is that if you sell like Billie or Vince, your buyers will buy your services as the guy buys professional services in this video, entitled *The Job*. He hires accountants, lawyers and other professionals as if they were union labourers.

Buyers of consulting services are not the same as they were 10 or 20 years ago. Just as consultants have become more sophisticated, so have buyers. Although, it seems that buyers have become much more sophisticated than many consultants.

And they certainly don’t want to talk to peddlers pushing their services, like Billie and Vince hawk vegetable slicers, drain cleaners and other low-priced bits and bobs.

For a handy comparison table between contract labourers (traditional salespeople) and industrial authorities (real consultants), you can also refer my booklet: *Dodo Consultants Or Today's Consultants: What Separates Glorified Contract Labourers From Real Consultants*.

Look at your sales practices, and see where it is too salesy. Salesy in a peddlerish way. Your system may be perfect, but you may find some areas that you need to tweak a bit.

Remember that the fee clients pay you and the way they treat you depends on the process of acquiring them.

### About The Author

Since 1998, using battle-tested military principles and strategies, Organisational Provocateur, Tom “Bald Dog” Varjan has been working with boutique consultancies and solo consultants, both locally and globally, to improve personal and firm-wide performance, by helping them to sell their expertise for what it’s truly worth.

For a selection of consulting resources, including his practice management black paper, “*The Dark Side Of Firm Management: Ten Deadly Management (Mal)Practices That Often Bring Consulting Firms to Incalculable Suffering or Even Agonising Death*”, you can visit Tom’s website at [http://www.di-squad.com](http://www.di-squad.com).

### Additional Knowledge Products to Build Your Consulting Firm

Here are some knowledge products on a broad range of areas as they apply to running a boutique consulting firms or solo consultancies. These products are sort of workbooks. They explain what is what, then walk you through the "how to..." part of the process. As you read the books, you do the exercises, and by the time you finish reading, all the relevant bits and bobs are in front of you.

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9 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XGJq8wrw5I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XGJq8wrw5I)
on paper applied to your own unique situation.
I hope you find them valuable.

**Consulting Retainer Engagement Toolkit:** A comprehensive home study programme on the ins and outs of setting up consulting retainer engagements in which your clients receive great value and you are compensated for the value you bring to your clients' tables by making your brainpower available to your clients. For details see [Consulting Retainer Engagement Toolkit](http://www.dilsquad.com).

**It's All About Your Value: Consultants' Guide to Setting, Raising and Safeguarding Fees:** How to price consulting engagements based on buyers' perception of the value the consultant brings to the table regardless of time, materials and other retarded but commonly used factors. This booklet covers a step-by-step process of establishing the value of your contribution and how to get paid for that value. For details see [It's All About Your Value](http://www.dilsquad.com).

**Mastering the Consulting Proposal Process:** For many consultants proposal writing is a "hope-and-pray" game. They sit down with prospects, chat for a while and then volunteer to "submit a proposal" without knowing the full specifications of the intended project. But some, usually false, buyers are just collecting free information for in-house implementation. A proposal, just like a marriage certificate, is a short document, but it is silly to offer it unless the other party has already made a commitment to go ahead. This e-book walks you through the maze of developing your proposal and presenting it to buyers. [Mastering the Proposal Process](http://www.dilsquad.com).

**Dynamic Duo Mentor Programme:** If you're a solo consultant, my Dynamic Duo Mentor Programme may be a solution for you to have access to a second opinion on both strategic and tactical issues you’re about to put into action. For details see [Dynamic Duo Mentor Programme](http://www.dilsquad.com).