14 Ways Clients May Resist Consultants' Recommendations And What To Do About It
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Do you know that what is called a "French kiss" in the England is known as an "English kiss" in France? The two countries just can't agree on the exact definition. It may have something to do with history, going all the way back to England’s invasion in 1066 by William the Bastard, or as he fancied calling himself, William the Conqueror.

The same discrepancy applies to delivering goods.

When you deliver something by truck, it’s called shipment, although there is no ship in the vicinity.

But when you deliver it by air or sea, it’s called cargo, although there is no car in sight.

The same disagreement often happens between consultants and their clients over certain points consultants recommend but clients vehemently oppose.

And while those recommendations may not necessarily include French kisses or any kind of cargo, they do include some vital points that have to be ironed out or some truly nasty problems, even lawsuits, can raise their ugly heads... and even uglier feet... not to mention some other fiendish body parts.

One of the most frustrating aspects of consulting is dealing with clients’ resistance to some of our recommendations. Often to our best recommendations.

We’ve all heard excuses, like “We’ve already done that and didn’t work”, or “Our industry doesn’t operate that way”.

Even those clients that blatantly call themselves innovators shy away from methodologies that aren’t in mainstream use in their industries.

But the reality is not about being right or wrong, but what works and what does not work. It has nothing to do with certain methods or certain industries. When clients present their problems to consultants, it is just natural for consultants to suggest some ideas for improvement.

However, just because consultants understand a concept, they may not be able to communicate it to their clients in a clear and easy-to-grasp fashion.

And when clients can’t understand those concepts, they rebel against them.

What consultants must understand is that resistance is an emotional process, and they can’t handle it with more facts, figures and logic. They must be ready to handle it with emotions.

Resistance is the natural reaction to the fact that we have just discovered some shortcomings in the client’s organisation, and the client’s conditioned (also called the ego mind) mind cuts in to defend the current situation.

Many consultants that charge hourly fees practise stretching time in order to be able to bill more. It’s an unethical practice, but it’s such a common practice among consulting firms that, no one looks at it as unethical.

The other side of the same consulting coin is that good clients are learning from every consulting intervention, and resistance is a normal part of any learning experience.
That’s why it’s important that you set learning objectives for clients at the commencement of new engagements.

It is important to understand that showing resistance is not the client’s way of questioning our competence, so don’t take it personally.

So, let’s see 14 of the most common forms of resistance.

1. **Overwhelming With Irrelevant Details**

   In this situation clients try to steamroller you with lots of, usually irrelevant, details. Every time you meet, hoping you can make some real progress, you receive even more details to the point of confusion. If you feel bored and confused with the amount of details that have been showered upon you, you can reasonably suspect resistance from the buyer.

2. **I Know That**

   These are the dumb clients who know everything and don’t get surprised by anything. If you say something negative could happen anytime, they say they would not be surprised if it happened. They are also so busy not being surprised that often get totally paralysed and are unable to take any action to prevent the problem from happening.

   The best bet is to avoid them like the plague, especially because most of them are running pretty crappy businesses.

   On the surface they have cash flow problems, high client- and employee turnover, but they are really symptoms. The real causes of all problems are them and them alone. They’ve built their businesses on the wrong foundation.

3. **More Realistic Answers**

   Clients demand more realistic answers from you. They believe that your recommendations are far too far-fetched and are not fit into their specific companies or industries. Sometimes there may be some reality in this statement, but you have been brought in to provide a new perspective, and there is a good chance that this new perspective sounds counterintuitive to your clients.

   But let’s stop for a moment...

   In the 80s came the fat-free food craze. Keep fat to almost zero, keep protein to the minimum and eat lots of carbohydrates. Yet, 30 years later the world’s population is fatter than ever.

   As it turns out, if you want to lose weight in a good way, that is, lose fat not muscle tissue, you have to eat more fat. Who would have known?

   So, you do your best to explain your recommendations to your clients from several angles. However, if your clients don’t get it, then just move on. It takes a certain level of open-mindedness to see things differently, so the best bet is not to waste your time on these people.
They are simply allergic to innovation. Or, as the late Zig Ziglar put it at a seminar, they are so narrow-minded that they could look through a keyhole with both eyes at the same time.

4. **Blunt Attack**

Sometimes clients are so resistant that they verbally attack consultants.

The typical response is to respond in kind, but I think that is the wrong response. It means we have taken the attack personally, and we are likely to react - not respond - to the stimulus. These clients are in need of psychological treatment for low self esteem and self-worth, and most of us are not qualified to provide that kind of help.

I think when you get attacked that way, the best bet is to fire problematic clients and return part of their money. Yes, you lose some money, but you keep your sanity, and that may be a pretty good exchange.

5. **Confused Clients**

Every time we seek help, we are in confusion of some shape or form.

That’s normal. We simply can’t know everything. Also, every time we’re confused, we’re about to learn something new.

So are clients. But many clients may not have the patience to wait until the confusion passes and they learn that new thing.

Normally clients’ confusion is just a lack of clarity, but when you catch yourself explaining the same concepts three times from three different perspectives, and the client is still confused, you can conclude that as a form of resistance for your ideas.

You can read clients when they are truly confused but eager to learn or when they are not confused at all but resistant.

Yes, you can keep banging your head against the brick wall of resistance, but it’s pointless. Just move on quietly.

Or if your buyer is not the same as the person you work with, then contact your buyer and express your concerns.

There is a good chance the buyer will take care of the problem and replaces that resisting person.

6. **Silent Clients**

This is when clients let you do your part of the show but refuse to join for collaboration. It’s important to understand that silent clients are some of the most troublesome ones.

Their silence is non-compliance. Keep asking them for voicing their opinions with more than just a yes or no. Make them speak. If they refuse, it may be a good idea to leave.

Working with them is just like driving a car and looking at the road only once every half an hour.
These people won’t give you feedback on your work until everything has gone fubar, and then they blame you for everything and demand their money back.

Silent people are some of the most vicious fighters. They guide you into dark alleys and then unleash their attack dogs on you. You may be able to escape alive, but will carry lots of scars or even may bleed to death.

Yes, there are chatty people and silent people, but every successful engagement requires a certain amount of interaction.

7. Wanting More Information

These clients want to know even the most infinitesimal details about the project before commencement. They want you to develop everything and have ready-made answers for any and every situation.

At one point you will get fed up with all the questions and start spurring your clients for some kind of action. If they revert to more detail-gathering then you know that is a form of resistance.

From here on you have two options: 1) Provide more detail and hope and pray that one day clients have enough information to start doing something, 2) pack up and leave, knowing that is “project” will escalate into an endless pre-project information-gathering process, and you will never see money from it.

There is no real desire to improve the current situation, only to pile more and more data on the buyer’s desk.

8. Overanalysing

Once a French diplomat said to an English diplomat that it may work in practice but will it work in theory?

Analysers are the same. In spite of driving a car on a daily basis, some of them may ask you to prove the existence of the wheel and the internal combustion engine. For them there is no common sense and facts, only more analysis.

They must analyse the living daylights out of everything. With these people you can fight, but have no chance to win. They will ask you to write a detailed analysis on the very dialect you use to say good morning... in triplicates and three languages.

What you can do is to attempt to bring the conversation to actions steps. If you succeed, carry on, but if the client goes back to theories and more analysis, then run away... very far and very fast.

9. Moral Defence

This is a great form of defence for some clients.

They find some other people who stand in the way of progress and “those people” must be convinced about the validity of your proposed project.
They keep referring to people who are not in the room and who are “impossible to reach” either because they are so busy or they simply don’t interact with lowlifes like consultants.

At this point I think it’s often worth investing a bit of time and effort hacking a path to “those people” because in many cases they are willing to interact with consultants.

But what happens is that flunkies do their best to protect them from the outside world because this protection can boost the flunkies’ puffed-up self-importance.

Imagine you need some dental work to be done, but instead if the dentist, it’s the dental nurse who does all the procedures. The dentist interacts only with the nurse, telling her what to do and how to do it.

Now, how comfortable would you feel when the dental nurse is fiddling in your mouth, while getting the instructions from a real dentist on a mobile phone?

Try to cut through the wall of flunkies, and get to “those people” as soon as you can.

If you can’t, then walk away. Don’t try to do business with flunkies, minions, ghosts, goblins and gremlins. It can be tiring, and you may not even get paid, because “those people” are not satisfied with the work.

10. Compliance

This is the hardest part. Compliant managers are always the most dangerous ones. You may have a hard time to see this puppy for managers agree with you all along the way. Everything you say or suggest, they nod their heads in agreement.

And then in come the time for taking action. And then compliant managers go into rebellion mode. They kick up a fuss about everything under the sun, including the consultant’s shoe size, hairstyle and eye colour.

Every single consultant has something that some clients don’t fully agree with. If it doesn’t come on the surface early enough, it will surface later and it can be rather ugly.

What can you do?

If you have higher forums, like the buyer, to take your problem to, then do that. If you’re dealing with the higher level manager, then you’d better move on.

These people are very hard to work with because you never know where you stand.

11. Problems with Methodologies

In this scenario clients expect you to have a one-size-fits-all answer, and if you don’t have it - as you should never have one - they tend to kick up a fuss. Now they think they have to waste their precious time to work out a customised methodology with you to solve their problems and can also question the value of your help.

However, your help and value may not necessarily lie in telling them to dig a ditch, but showing them how to dig a ditch with a specific excavator in 10 minutes, instead of digging one with a
shovel in 10 days.
They know the solution (dig a ditch), but assessing the situation, and circumstances, you offered a better method. However, before doing your assessment and interviews, you didn’t know that the machine would be better than the shovel.
Due to very uneven terrain, in many cemeteries shovels are used to dig graves. A few moons ago, I worked as a gravedigger in one of those cemeteries, and we couldn’t use excavators; only shovels.
The methodology must be derived from the overall objectives and available resources.
If several people in your client’s company can write sales copy really well, but they all stutter, then, then there is no point in setting up a call centre for telemarketing.
If the company’s goal is to increase sales by 25%, then you can develop effective methods based on existing resources.

12. A Vanishing Problem

This is a “deep shit” problem, when some time into the project the client decides that you offer a solution to the wrong problem, and the situation was actually better before you showed up.
The other side of this problem is that when you are about to tell the client to take action to solve a problem, the client starts bragging about drastic improvement in the previously “problematic” area.
Have you noticed as you’re waiting in the dentist’s waiting room, your toothache is gradually disappearing?
This is the same.
What happens very often is that as companies get closer and closer to facing the biggest impact of their problems, they also bury their heads deeper and deeper into the sand and fail to acknowledge the problem.
Not the symptom, but the underlying causes. Low sales is not a problem, but when, for instance, the president buys a “company” Ferrari for his son and blows the money from the profit sharing pool, all people in the company will take notice and subconsciously sabotage their own performance.
But at this point it is still too easy to call in another sales trainer for another sales training programme. Facing the real issue would take some guts, and far too many companies don’t have spine, guts and balls to face the facts.
If the company’s X-ray shows advanced cancer, it is idiotic to admire the headshots of the senior executives on the cover pages of leading business publications.
Challenge clients to look at the X-ray.

13. Timing
In this situation the carrot is being dangled in front of you, but due to some mysterious “timing” issues, clients are not ready to start the project. Hence you don’t get paid.

If you mention that you require some down payment to hold the date, they tell you not to worry because when the timing is right, the project will start.

These clients actually try to impress you with how busy they are and have no time left for putting a new item of busyness on their plates.

You can also experience this kind of resistance in the form of interruptions at meetings, being hard or impossible to reach, not returning phone calls and email messages. In some cases clients use busyness to impress consultants about their importance, “Look, I’m so nipple-piercingly important that I don’t even have one spare minute”.

If this is the case, you can legitimately question the client’s readiness for the project, and you had better just to pull out. If this is how these clients operate now, this is exactly, or even worse, how they will operate once you start the project, and that is a call for disaster.

14. Pushing the Solution

This is when the client’s company is in such deep yoghurt that they demand solutions yesterday.

And what makes the situation even worse is that they have already diagnosed the situation, and now are looking for someone to implement the solution that the board of directors has worked out in-house.

Executives think they are really good at solving the types of problems that they’ve never seen before and their companies have never faced before.

But all of a sudden, they are experts at solving them.

So, they call in consultants, contract labourers really, to implement the ill-defined solution.

And when someone good gets hired, s he sees the problem and points it out to the board.

Then the directors get furious and fire her.

And this way, the company goes through several consultants.

It is vital to hold back on the solution at this point. It is important that you let them see and realise what they have behaved themselves into, and then proceed to solve the problem.

Summary

As you can see some of these resistances can be dealt with quite effectively, but some are not worth wasting time and effort on. The idea is not to fight with prospects and try to overcome their resistance, but rather finding better prospects for a start.

And since every client starts out as a sales lead, you may consider going back to your lead generations process, and see how the inappropriate buyers end up in your system.

Take some time and go through your list of new prospects. What are they like? How do they
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behave during the buying cycle?
Do you like the behaviours that you’ve seen so far?
If the resistance is minor, you can develop some comeback statements.
For example, to handle the "Pushing the Solution" issue, you can say, "Joe, prognosis without diagnosis is malpractice, and I don't think you would do a great service to your business by hiring one of those charlatans who gives you a solution without fully understanding the problem."
And if after this, Joe is still pushing the solution, then you can nonchalantly don your hat and buzz off.
Sure, there are some shores set aside for shipwreck, but you don’t have to be on the same shore collecting driftwood from wrecked ships.

With victory on high...

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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 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.

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.
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

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.