

Innovation in Consulting

Every now and then, someone comes up with something that changes the way the world works. In the 15th century, Gutenberg used movable type to launch a revolution in printing. By the end of the 19th century, "horseless carriages" were all the rage. And in 1972, there was nothing cooler than Pong. But it's these inventions' youngest brother, the Internet, which has completely changed the face of consulting.

No matter what the industry, Luddites who don't embrace the Internet are missing out on a host of cost and time-saving advantages. It's especially important that consulting professionals take their services to the Web, where a number of innovations have made it easier to reach new clients.

Networks rule

Clients like to use the Internet to find consulting firms because it's faster and more convenient than traditional methods of securing consultants. Locating and interviewing firms and viewing presentations takes a lot of time--and time is money.

Since so many clients now use these inventive e-procurement solutions to save time and money, you become more visible to them when you establish a presence on the Web--and thus increase the chances that clients will come to you. But simply developing a private Web site isn't so original anymore. You're competing against thousands of companies that use keywords such as "consulting," "management consulting," so you can't be certain you'll come up very high in search results.

What is innovative is the advent of Internet-based consulting networks, which designate significant portions of their budget to banner advertising and other marketing efforts in an effort to drive thousands of clients to their sites. Joining such a network of qualified consulting firms significantly increases the chances that clients will find you online. And when more clients find you, more clients hire you.

Consulting professionals sometimes make the mistake of thinking that these online networks are valuable only to IT consultants. That's simply incorrect. In fact, clients like to search networks of consultants rather than visit private sites because the networks offer something individual sites don't: a breadth of consultants who offer services in a variety of practice areas, all in one place.

And if you can't do the whole project yourself, you can work in concert with another member of the network. Industry studies have shown that the incidence of collaboration is increasing and that online B2B networks make it easier for consultants to specify project requirements, identify and evaluate qualified firms, and select the best partners.

Coming around again

Networks and their range of consultants are important for another reason: repeat customers. There's nothing novel about a firm's satisfied customers coming back and using that firm's services again. But things have been a little different since the advent of online consulting networks; it's no longer a one-consultant-one-customer issue. If a client chooses a network-affiliated consultant for a management project and is satisfied with its results, it's likely he'll return to the site to find a consultant for his next project--whether it's a management project or not. If you belong to the network, you just might be that other consultant who's getting businesses because one of his colleagues did a good job.

However, if you expect clients who visit the network site to do all the work, you're likely to be disappointed. In many instances, network sites will snare the client, but you'll have to snare the job

In the case of SourceOne, most clients post their jobs online, specifying their project requirements and budget. Consulting firms then respond to projects for which they are qualified, and the clients evaluate and competitively select the best consultant for the job. It's up to you to convince clients that you're that consultant.