

## **FM Consultants Possess Abundant Knowledge, Perspective, Competence, and Flexibility.**

### **Why Aren't New Clients Crowding Our Inboxes?**

#### **Anecdotes**

1. In a brief interval of greeting at World Workplace a few years back, FM Consultant and longtime IFMA member Michel Theriault noted that FMs give three reasons for not seeking a consultant: (1) Not in the budget, (2) My manager would not allow it, (3) I should do it myself.
2. Another colleague, Stephen Brown, builds relationships with potential clients over months or years, proposing ways to forward their projects and defang issues in their planning, learning, and operations.
3. Alan Wozniak, whose evolved overhauls of existing high capacity HVAC systems demonstrate preferable outcomes, encounters surprising resistance from new clients despite the strong economics and reliability of the proven approach that his company takes.

Why should involvement with an FM consultant not be a winning strategy at once, given decisive financial analysis and due diligence? Some industries routinely use consultants. Is there a hidden negative weighing against the strong positives that FM consultants bring to a new client? If so, what is it and what is the evidence?

#### **Positives Always**

The song Accentuate the Positive<sup>1</sup> appeared in the U.S. during World War II. The first verse goes “You've got to accentuate the positive. Eliminate the negative. Latch on to the affirmative. Don't mess with Mister In-Between.” FMCC has long acted positively with and for the membership to develop networking, knowledge, and resources. Over the past several years, FMCC website and App<sup>2</sup> updates, projects, programs, events, publications, and communication throughout the IFMA community have paid off. Membership is up over 25%. Member volunteers relish the work. More projects and features are in the making. Do these translate into consulting engagements? We do not know specifically, but marketing and promoting FM consulting remains a primary aim of the Board.

#### **Hidden Negatives**

Returning to the anecdotes at the start, what could be the source of client reluctance in the presence of favorable financial projections and due diligence predicting profitable outcomes and acceptable levels of risk?

Think of a small, strategic, innovative, consulting company, individual consultant, or a specialized outside consulting business unit. This describes the work circumstances of a substantial number of FMCC members. In the podcast *Work 2.0: The Obstacles You Don't See*, Shankar Vedantam<sup>3</sup> interviews Loran Nordgren, whose research and writings<sup>4</sup> concentrate on why ideas encounter resistance. “Most of us think the best way to win people over is to push

harder. But organizational psychologist Loran Nordgren says a more effective approach is to focus on the invisible obstacles to new ideas.” Can FM consultants work with this orientation?

We know the qualities that make a capable FM. They are what we bring to FM consulting and improve over time. We have a good measure of control over what we offer to clients to ensure satisfaction in our business relationships. Less obvious and only somewhat in our control are the contextual, emotional, and broad circumstances of clients, factors that can cause us to miss business that would bring value to ourselves and the client. Client frictions can be a drag on innovation and change. Counterintuitively, offering the client more, better, with less expense, can be ineffectual. Why, and what can help?

**Something missed** The friction experienced often is not due to the quality and suitability of our proposal for services or the cost, but something incidental and obscure. Nordgren cites an example where a single contextual factor not noticed by the provider stopped the show before it could get underway. A regional maker of custom home furniture experienced disappointing sales despite improvements in the product, lowered prices, extensive marketing, and helpful ways to design and order. Interested customers were plentiful. They would begin the ordering process enthusiastically, then not reappear. By persistence and luck, the manufacturer found that, for couches especially, removing the old in preparation for the new could be highly inconvenient, expensive, or even unavailable to customers. Adding removal at the time of delivery turned sales around.

**Communication** Did a proposal of yours miss something that matters? Our industry is slimming and strengthening communications in procurement, but there is plenty of room remaining for improvement. The work the Center for Procurement Excellence (CPE) that appears in IFMA discussions and webinars can be worth following by consultants for its emphasis on opportunities to build understanding in advance of an RFP.<sup>5</sup>

**Inertia, Emotion, Reaction** For consulting clients, inertia, emotion, and reactive behavior can be significant sources of friction. These could fall under the familiar business term “culture” if they were more obvious, but how can a consultant discover potentially obscure inertia, emotion, and reaction<sup>6</sup>.

Inertia - Making action easier for the client can work against inertia. This is not persuasion using the quality and price of deliverables, say, but adding to client convenience. Life and work are complicated. Make the way as easy as possible for clients to decide. Responding to an RFI with self-promotion and not informing about the state of knowledge and practice across the industry does not help or impress the potential client, who is trying to gain perspective. Direct and informative answers are due to help relieve inertia. Later, when the RFP issues, your reply to the RFI or a frank and helpful conversation at a networking event may be remembered. In

addition, you will gain a better idea of whether you wish to invest the time and effort to make a proposal.

Emotion - Frictions arising from emotion may be traceable to a cause calling for attention before work can proceed. Nordgren cites an example of military recruiters experiencing interested, well qualified, prospects who would become reluctant without plausible explanation. It turned out that the youth could not approach discussing their intentions with parents. The recruiter volunteered to join in the conversations, lending clarity and personal experience, helping to relieve the emotion. Friendships and acquaintanceships, the networks of our client counterparts, are long recognized as worth finding out. "Who are the players?" is a frequent refrain.

Emotion and inertia can arise together in projects affecting buildings and sites of historical significance or community tradition, giving rise to opposing factions. Anyone with an influential role in projects involving public or institutional properties that evoke emotions tied to buildings or sites should be sensitive to the feelings and influences of everyone concerned. Be prepared to speak with clarity about the project and its purposes, and with empathy toward all parties. People remember how interactions and events make them feel. A clear, open, and genuine demeanor can lighten emotions so that issues may be resolved.

Reaction - Powerful, influential, seemingly irrational, and challenging to resolve can characterize reactions, but at the same time reactions are often identifiable, accessible, and straightforward to approach. Don't push. Data and analysis may only firm the reaction. Attempting to persuade, even accompanied by strong evidence, may be seen as threat. Self-persuasion by the client must eventually prevail. Resolution can begin with a common point of alignment, a shared basis for talking. No progress will ensue until the consultant, preferably alongside the client counterpart, sponsor, or champion, *listens fully* to the parties reacting, then asks if they are open to conversation. But listen first, all the way through, offering no counter. Only when people commit to talk can they eventually proffer a compatible solution as their own, easing the friction.

### **Conclusion**

For a consulting organization, positive, substantive, actions and communications are always necessary, but may not be sufficient. Selecting an effective mix is a constant concern. Word of mouth, personal reference, industry research, media presence, professional and trade associations, community involvement can, combined with practical accomplishments, propel a consulting practice. But negatives - frictions slowing sales, contracting, and project progress - can arise as obstacles not seen. Hidden negatives are especially pertinent when introducing new ideas in strategic consulting, where client personnel can be uneasy due to uncertainty and loss of control. A consultant can benefit by detecting and working around inertia, remaining watchful for client emotions and how to ease their impact, and accommodating reactions

deliberately and systematically. Reactions reflect opinions and beliefs. Start with reaching basic alignment and willingness to talk. This is not the time to push, to strengthen positives, or emphasize consequences if the client does not go forward, but to rely on self persuasion toward co-ownership of the problem and the perspective project.

Back to Michel, Stephen, and Alan. They, and many other providers of consultative services, work across regions, sectors, varieties of governance, and workplace social environments. Inertia, emotion, and reaction are basic to behavior in all organizations. When present, they can constitute obstacles holding up a worthwhile project. Look for them and, when found, reduce their impact directly. If your positives are already strong, reducing friction marks the path ahead.

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<sup>1</sup> Accentuate the Positive, written by Johnny Mercer and performed by a variety of entertainers, was popular in the U.S. from its appearance in 1944 onward into the 1960s.

<sup>2</sup> FMCC App, Consultants Corner. The FMCC Consultant Directory shows up much of our membership, with photos and, in most cases, connections to LinkedIn.

<sup>3</sup> Shankar Vedantam, Executive Editor, The Hidden Brain podcast, *Work 2.0: The Obstacles You Don't See*, a conversation with Loran Nordgren, November 01, 2021, <https://hiddenbrain.org>. 55 minutes, NPR

<sup>4</sup> Nordgren, Loran, research, <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/work-2-0-the-obstacles-you-dont-see/>

<sup>5</sup> IFMA members and FMs at large have a strong resource for communicating needs between prospective clients and providers in CPE, the Center for Procurement Excellence. <https://center4procurement.org/about-cpe/>

<sup>6</sup> IFMA members can access Need a Consultant? Here's How <https://fmcc.ifma.org/resources/need-a-consultant-heres-how-to-guide/need-a-consultant-heres-how-guide/>