

# DIARY OF A CONSULTANT



In last month's entry, David and Jeff acknowledged and thanked the people who have supported them in their new venture. This month, David reflects on some of the low points.

By David Zahn

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*Maybe it's my advancing age,* but the dull headache and lethargy after a night of revelry take a toll on my body the likes of which I don't want to repeat anytime soon. Feeling like I'm in slow motion this morning, I mumble something unintelligible to my kids and wife, who hands me a list of errands, carpool arrangements, and reminders of things that *must* be done before the end of the day (and it's already 11). I seek solace in a quiet, temporarily kid-free place: the bathroom. Dragging a razor across my face

seems too treacherous, so I forego shaving and settle for a warm shower and replay the year.

The movie in my head reels out the times of doubt, despair, and disappointment. As I shampoo the remaining few hairs on my head (a loss well in advance of the startup), I rehash my encounter with the almost-client, a division of a large international firm that I hooked up with at a trade show in Chicago. After a series of lunch meetings, phone conversations, and proposals back and forth, I secured what I thought was going to be a long-term contract. Instead, the parent com-

pany in Europe changed its “go to market” strategy to not use a direct sales-force. As a sales trainer, that wasn’t good news to me.

My key contact soon left that firm and, at last word, decided that business, commerce, and capitalism are evil and she didn’t want to be tainted. As I think of all that, I realize I’m shampooing so hard that my nails are digging into my scalp. I stop thinking about the almost-client long enough to rinse off, but my spirit continues to spiral downward.

I pick up the soap and recall that at the same trade show, I also struck up a cordial relationship with members of the sponsoring association. Over the next few weeks, I pitched the idea of presenting a session on industry-wide training at next year’s show.

After several agendas were sent and edited back and forth and follow-up discussions ensued, I thought we had a deal. Then, the l-o-n-g stall. Next, I learned that the person who was my main contact was no longer responsible for making the decision. By the time I reached the new person, the session slots had been filled. The new person told me “there should be an opportunity in the future for your services, and we’ll certainly contact you.” I took comfort in the fact that the email at least spelled my name correctly.

As I continue my shower, I remember a client with whom I’d worked several years prior to Jeff and me starting our own firm. I’d given the client stellar service and even stepped up when another consultant dropped the ball, for which the client expressed heartfelt thanks for doing a “better job than we had a right to expect.” From then on, I made a point to see and talk with that client often though we’re on different coasts. I also sent ideas or articles about the client, a competitor, or the industry. I even flew out the day after my father’s funeral to deliver a training session.

I’d been told numerous times by the client that “if you ever go into your own business, give us a call; we’d definitely go with you.” After Jeff and I started Clow Zahn Associates, I let the client know I was on my own and had a lot of ideas for enhancing its salesforce’s competencies.

Yep. I was told it decided to use the consultant who’d dropped the ball and from whom I picked it up. Apparently, he apologized or made amends (or cut a whopper of a deal). To have the rug pulled out from me was a huge disappointment. Maybe it’s my ego, but I felt I deserved better and couldn’t make sense of the client’s decision, other than dollars and cents. The company didn’t even offer me a chance to bid on the project.

their training budgets, and they’re uncomfortable admitting that. To me, it just seems easier to respond to an email or call and say, “Thanks, but not at this time.” Otherwise, we continue to call and the recipient is perhaps put off by our persistence. But my instinct is that if people don’t reply, it’s because they didn’t get the message.

Dealing with people who aren’t especially professional is part of the price of admission, but it’s draining. And the worst can be accounts-payable folks when you’re trying to get paid. When we do get through, we sometimes hear some rather creative excuses:

- “The money was wired yesterday.” (We hadn’t established a wiring payment method with the client.)

Jeff is fond of quoting President Reagan: “Trust, but verify.” Some colleagues don’t seem to approach business the same way.

Still in the shower, I also think back on the many times Jeff or I have called contacts (not cold calls but people we know or have worked with) and haven’t received a call or email back. I know people are busy and that my phone call isn’t the most pressing thing, but you shouldn’t have to call someone five times and not get an answer. Sometimes, we were following up at their request! In some cases, we were asked to hold dates for future training and were never contacted again.

Professionalism, which Jeff and I expect of people in high positions, seems to be waning. Perhaps people fear we’re trying to sell them something they have no interest in or can’t afford on

- “The printer was ripping the checks so we had to stop.” (That gives new meaning to “cutting a check.”)
- “I was wondering why the check hadn’t been sent.” (No comment.)

I’m led to believe that some corporate managers think the accounts-payable function is the best place to manage cash flow.

As I finally finish my shower, the biggest disappointment cascades down me like the soapy water. I’ve always viewed myself and Jeff as highly ethical. We worked that way when we were at our previous firm, and we managed people who worked that way for us. Jeff is fond of quoting President Reagan: “Trust, but verify.” Sadly, some former

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I believe in a meritocracy: Good will out, and the market will side with those who are above board. But feeding my family rides on my getting business, while competing with other consultants with families to feed. A potential client often has to make a tough choice with little more to go on than faith that the consultant knows what he or she is doing.

My dilemma is how far to go in denuding the charlatans without seeming to sling mud. In the sales training business, many consultants are former salespeople who say, "Do like I did and you'll be OK." They may be good salespeople, but they aren't trained in instructional design and have no training background. It's sometimes a battle to take the high ground and yet remain an advocate for clients to ensure that they get the appropriate services. After all, Jeff had a stellar sales career and has training background, and I have instructional design experience.

As I get ready for the day and my to-do list, my headache abates, my eyes start to focus, and my lethargy lifts. The thought of shaving doesn't seem too dangerous now. Maybe as I scrape away the stubble I can symbolically scrape away the past disappointments. After all's said and done, I'm doing what I dreamed of and with Jeff, whom I admire, respect, and trust.

I start humming a Dolly Parton song: *I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden... there's got be a little rain sometime.*

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