

# DIARY OF A CONSULTANT



This month's entry examines the personal traits that a self-employed consultant needs to be successful.

By David Zahn

2000

December 18

*As I drove to the office today,* I realized Jeff and I are going to complete our first year in business together and no bloody battles occurred that could have pulled us apart, unless you count our debates on whether to eat at Taco Bell or Kentucky Fried Chicken. No matter what happens from this point, we made it. We took a chance to live our dream and even if it crumbles due to dot.com bankruptcies, economic downturns, or other unforeseen events, we've done what we dared.

I replay the past few months in my head, looking for insight and lessons I

can apply as we enter our second year in business, pondering the so-called intangibles. Here are some of the traits I think startup consultants need.

**Motivation.** As much as I believed I was self-directed, self-motivated, project-focused, and good at time management, having to wake up each morning and rely only on myself or Jeff to get things done brought the concept of motivation sharply into focus. It has to reside within a person or it's much too easy to be distracted—not by the Jerry Springer show or shopping, but from seemingly good pursuits such as chasing business that won't pan out, researching to no

avail on the Internet, and meeting with colleagues to discuss their travails. When 7 a.m. comes and even if I'm dead tired, it just takes the time to walk from my bed to my toothbrush to begin anticipating with excitement what the day might bring.

**Tenacity.** Jeff often kids that when I sink my teeth into something I don't let go, though he may be basing his opinion on the numerous pizzas we've shared. As Yogi Berra said, "It ain't over till it's over." I'm no match for a sage like Yogi, but I figure I might as well pursue opportunities until they're no longer plausible.

The consulting business isn't always polite, and rarely are sales made at a first meeting. At times, I think it's a war of attrition and my job is to still be standing when it's over. One of our clients joked (at least, I think he was joking) that he gave us an assignment just to stop our calls and emails.

**Resilience.** There's rejection and even rudeness at times. Some is direct: "I don't want to hire you." Some is subtle: "We're considering our options." Sometimes, people just don't return our calls or emails.

Jeff often comments that business is changing in that basic courtesies are no longer practiced. In truth, I've noticed people aren't as quick to return correspondence, but I attribute that to people being overworked rather than malicious. This business isn't about avoiding the knockdowns but about how energetically one can get back up.

**Tirelessness.** Fatigue is truly a state of mind. We fly and change time zones frequently, so our internal clocks are always cuckoo. You have to be able to get along on a few hours of sleep or at least be able to stifle yawns while delivering a session. Often, clients want to work during dinner and into the wee hours, so you can't use the excuse that you're "a morning person." You have to answer the bell at any given time.

**Financial acuity.** You're not playing with Monopoly Money; you have to make real opportunity cost determinations.

Should you spend on advertising or building new products? Invest in office space or work at the kitchen table? Hire or subcontract? There's no company to cover going over budget; it will come directly out of your own pocket.

Jeff and I had to become familiar with accounting principles. College classes on economic theory that seemed esoteric suddenly became very real discussion points.

**Marketing savvy.** The subject Jeff and I probably discuss most is marketing. We both value it, but we struggle over the exact mix of mailers, newsletters, promotional items, publicity, press releases, and so forth we should use. We agree on look-and-tone kinds of decisions for materials but not always on how many, how often, to whom,

there's a need for orderliness and discipline in scheduling and remaining on course, you must be able to adjust quickly for the unexpected.

This isn't the career or lifestyle for everyone. There's much to be said for the security of walking into an office knowing that you'll be asked only to perform tasks you've been hired and trained to do by the company. External consulting doesn't permit such assurances. Even as senior executives with budgets, Jeff and I had never created profit-and-loss statements, from which we now manage our business. I've become conversant in Excel, and Jeff now creates presentations in PowerPoint.

Some days, we just want to stay in our beds and pull the blankets over our heads.

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and when. Deciding how to best market our services to current clients takes up most of our marketing discussions.

**Project management skills.** We have no staff to manage a Website, for instance, and we can't call a staff meeting regarding a potential decision to glean insight on what effect it might have on our operational expenses.

We can't focus on one task to the exclusion of others, but we also can't use that as an excuse to diminish our efforts in any one area. We both juggle multiple projects, operational concerns, financial decisions, and marketing issues. Delegating isn't an option.

**Flexibility.** Any phone call, email, client contact, or stray thought either of us has can flip priorities for the day. Though

But there's no greater thrill than knowing at the end of the day we can say, "What we accomplished today was our doing."

I look through the mail and see a record company brochure with a picture of Garth Brooks. I start to sing "If Tomorrow Never Comes": *So, I made a promise to myself to say each day how much she means to me and avoid that circumstance where there is no second chance to tell her how I feel.* Jeff and I make sure we tell our families how much they mean to us and how their well-being drives our desire to succeed.

*To contact David for further information about his evolution or to share your thoughts with him, call 203.221.2789 or email davidzahn@clowzahn.com.*