

# Chapter

## Thirteen Guerrilla Marketing Secrets

*Professional service marketing is certainly among the “safest” I’ve ever seen. Because it appears to take no risks, it’s actually quite risky.*

—SETH GODIN<sup>1</sup>

Every profession has its secrets: Chefs have carefully guarded recipes, lawyers have surprise witnesses, and carpenters know all the angles. Guerrillas also have insider information.

Okay, maybe the details guerrilla marketers know are not exactly *secrets*, but they might as well be for all the attention they get. While some of the following thirteen guerrilla secrets may strike you as intuitive, too many consultants consistently overlook them. These rules lay the essential groundwork for the guerrilla approach to marketing.

### ■ SECRET 1: SELL YOURSELF FIRST

Before you agree to put yourself on an operating table, a surgeon must first earn your trust. You’ll find out as much as possible about that surgeon through your network of friends, family, coworkers, other doctors, and patients. It makes sense to research the surgeon’s credentials and experience. Even when those qualifications are impeccable, if the surgeon doesn’t inspire your confidence, you’ll probably keep searching for someone who does.

The role of a consultant is not unlike that of a surgeon. In buying your services, clients may feel they are putting the fate of their businesses, their finances, and their careers in your hands. So your first job is to earn their confidence.

You may have reams of relevant case studies, glowing testimonials, and a blue-chip business card. But they won't make an iota of difference if the client doesn't believe that you will deliver what you promise. If the client doesn't trust you, your firm will probably be eliminated from the running.

Personal selling is not a grab bag of manipulative tricks to get clients to like you, but rather a strategy of engaging the client in a substantive discussion of the issues impacting the client's business. For guerrillas, personal selling is not selling at all, in the traditional sense. Instead, it is a give-and-take with the client characterized by:

- ▶ intense listening;
- ▶ insightful questioning; and
- ▶ presentation of creative ideas.

If the client perceives that you understand the macro issues and nuances of the discussion, you will advance to the next step. If not, the client will politely show you the door.

Of course, have the stacks of case studies and testimonials tucked away in your briefcase, just in case the client asks for them. They provide excellent backup. The key to selling yourself is to focus first on clients and their issues, not on yourself or your firm.

## ■ SECRET 2: DON'T TORCH THE TOUCH POINTS

Customer service gurus refer to the points of contact between a business and its customers as *touch points*. Every instance when clients or prospects come into contact with you or your firm is a touch point. It is amazing how many consultants understand this concept but take touch points like the telephone and voice mail for granted.

Although it does happen, clients rarely pluck your name and telephone number from the Yellow Pages. Chances are they were referred to you, have checked out your Web site, read an article or two about you, and called their industry contacts. Because of your marketing efforts, the client has a positive impression of your firm. You can easily torch that impression.

It may not seem like a big deal, but think about how you feel when you call a business and a digitized voice says your call is

important, but everyone is too busy to talk. That is not the way to show clients they matter to you. Likewise, the generic recording, “Leave me a message and I’ll call you back as soon as I can,” may work fine for callers to your home, but clients deserve more.

If possible, have a live person answer your telephone. A friendly voice and helpful manner can nudge relationships in the right direction. It doesn’t hurt to remember the client’s name and use it during the conversation.

Most clients understand when you can’t respond immediately. But they might be annoyed to hear that you are in a meeting, went skiing, or are at home. Unless the details are relevant, skip them, take the message, and indicate when the caller can expect a response.

Voice mail is a fact of life, and we all have to use it. Personalize your voice mail by recording a daily message. For example, “Hi, this is Ron. It’s Tuesday, November Second. Sorry, I missed your call. I will be checking messages regularly throughout the day, so please leave me one and I will get back to you today. Thanks.” Then, make good on that promise.

Your telephone and voice mail system are marketing tools. Recognize that and make the most of a client’s first—and every—contact with you.

### ■ SECRET 3: SOLVE THE REAL PROBLEM

No doubt you have heard the old saying that if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. The challenge for consultants is to figure out what really needs hammering.

In his 1966 *Harvard Business Review* article, “How to Buy/Sell Professional Services,” Warren J. Wittreich says, “. . . often a client who wishes to purchase a professional service senses that he has a problem, but is uncertain as to what the *specific* nature of his problem really is. *The responsibility of the service firm is to identify that problem and define it in meaningful terms.*”<sup>2</sup>

A client may see a puzzle but not know how the pieces fit together. Maybe the client is focused on the wrong problem, or doesn’t have a problem at all. Whatever the client’s perspective, challenge the client’s thinking—and your own—to be sure you are solving the right problem before you try to sell. Too many consulting projects solve symptoms without curing the underlying ailment.

Although guerrilla clients are somewhat cynical about jumping on the latest and greatest technology or management fad, they may be tempted to buy solutions just to avoid being left behind by the

competition. And consultants, especially those who have close relationships with vendors, are often too eager to push their products on clients.

Your responsibility is to sell only those solutions that are in the client's long-term best interests. In the end, this approach will also prove to be in your best interests.

## ■ SECRET 4: OFFER A GUARANTEE

Most consultants get convulsive at the thought of offering clients any kind of guarantee. Consultants are notoriously conservative because they fear that uncontrollable elements such as client executive turnover, a client's surprise merger with another company, or even bad weather might derail their best-laid plans for a project. The possibility of financial ruin causes even the most confident consultants to avoid guarantees.

The guerrilla understands this dynamic and uses it to competitive advantage by offering an up-front guarantee of client satisfaction. When all other things are equal, a guarantee will send consulting work your way. A guarantee also motivates consultants and clients to nail down objectives and responsibilities at the outset of a project so that everyone understands what must occur for the client to be satisfied and the consultant to be paid.

A guarantee should be a two-way street. If a consultant is willing to waive fees or provide other considerations if the client is dissatisfied, the client should be willing to increase the fee if the consultant's work exceeds expectations. For a guarantee to work optimally, both client and consultant must have a stake in the game.

Precedents exist for consulting guarantees. In the 1990s, one firm, eager to be the first to tackle client perceptions of runaway consulting

### GUERRILLA TACTIC: GUARANTEED TO WORK

Consider this: Among the top criteria that clients use to choose service providers is their guarantee to deliver as promised. In consulting, there is an *implied* guarantee that certain results will be attained. On many projects, clients hold back part of the consultant's fee until the project is completed successfully. So in effect, clients create a guarantee that they will get what they pay for.

fees, guaranteed to complete projects on a fixed schedule and for a fixed fee. The firm subsequently became the favored consultant for many projects, improved its competitive position overnight, and forced others to address the issues of risk and results.

Let's face it—no one can control all the variables in a project, so consulting is a risky business, with or without on-the-record promises. An up-front guarantee cuts through empty marketing claims and acknowledges your willingness to share some of the risk. This willingness makes you the client's partner; it turns the project into a true collaboration with joint risk.

A guarantee can put you at the top of the client's list for consulting projects and, in reality, doesn't significantly increase your financial risk. And, as a bonus, you are entitled to ask for additional fees if the results exceed expectations.

## ■ SECRET 5: FIRE 20 PERCENT OF YOUR CLIENTS

In the early 1900s, Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian economist, concluded that 20 percent of the people controlled 80 percent of the wealth. Since then, his now-famous 80:20 rule has been applied to everything from advertising and time management to identifying product defects.

In consulting, one application of Pareto's Principle is that 20 percent of your clients will generate 80 percent of your headaches. It stands to reason that you'll boost the vibrancy of your practice by pruning that disruptive 20 percent of your clients every 18 months or so. Few things damage the long-term health of a consulting practice more than client saboteurs—and there are more than a few out there.

In a "consultant-hostile" environment, higher consultant turnover may occur as team members quit to escape dealing with a difficult client. Your profitability can plummet as you integrate new team members into the project, and you'll spend endless hours reworking material the client thought was excellent earlier in the day.

Sometimes, the client-consultant relationship just doesn't work. Guerrillas are always on alert to spot troublesome clients and let them go.

It may sound crazy to fire your clients, but it is one of the best strategic actions you can take. Clients define the culture of your practice, and serving tiresome clients erodes that culture and poisons the environment. Problem clients create more work and needless stress. They kill your profits and your productivity, and that negativity can seep into your personal life.

**GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: SHOULD YOU FIRE A CLIENT?  
TELLTALE SIGNS INCLUDE**

- It takes days or weeks to get on your client's calendar.
- Your client wants to approve or attend all your meetings with decision makers.
- You have stopped developing new skills.
- Invoices are nitpicked to death or payments are consistently late.
- The client fails to review critical documents in a timely manner.
- Your profit margin is eroding with no end in sight.
- Your work no longer seems to have a substantive impact on the client's business.

It takes courage to walk away from a paying client, no matter what the circumstances. But don't worry; if you excel at what you do, more profitable clients will replace that lost business.

## ■ SECRET 6: BE A GOOD GUEST

We have all had houseguests from hell. Perhaps they overstayed their welcome, were loud, ate the last of the cookies, broke your favorite chair, or were just ungrateful. You probably couldn't wait for them to leave.

Consultants are frequently houseguests of their clients. They usually need workspace, administrative assistance, access to the client's building and, of course, gallons of coffee. Like any guest, they can be a joy to have around or they can be like the mother-in-law who commandeered the bathroom and refused to go home.

One client recalled that a consultant approached her in the parking lot early one morning and asked, "How can you stand to come to work every day in a company as screwed up as this?" The oblivious consultant had no idea he was addressing the company's CEO. Such tactless comments will wipe out any goodwill you have earned with the client, so watch what you say.

You will forge stronger client relationships by being a gracious guest than by exceeding client expectations on a project. Clients will

**GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: TEN TRAITS OF A MODEL CLIENT GUEST**

1. Mesh smoothly and quickly with the client's staff.
2. When arguments erupt, bring the discussion back to civility.
3. Avoid springing bad news on the client about project delays or budget overruns.
4. When a project succeeds, make the client's staff look good, not the consultant's.
5. Treat every meeting with the client as if it were the first meeting.
6. Always be accessible when the client needs you, even if it is inconvenient for you.
7. Always thank clients—for the use of their facilities, their cooperation, and especially for their business.
8. When at a client's site, focus exclusively on that client's work. Few things aggravate clients more than consultants who conduct other client business while in their "house."
9. Don't appear *too* eager to get that next assignment from a client.
10. Don't overstay your welcome. Do a great job and go home.

dump arrogant consultants, no matter how well they perform. They will stick with firms that do the job *and* are easy to live with. Being a good guest requires more than just washing out your own coffee cup, but that's not a bad start.

## ■ SECRET 7: DELIVER STUNNING RESULTS— YOUR MOST POTENT MARKETING WEAPON

When you buy a dishwasher, you want your purchase to reflect an informed decision. Once again, you tap your network for information. You consult knowledgeable friends, relatives, and colleagues; read promotional material; look at some Web sites; and talk to salespeople. Armed with the facts, you pick the dishwasher you like best.

Once that dishwasher is home and hooked up, you have the right to expect perfect, maintenance-free performance. If it doesn't live up to your expectations, you won't say good things about your experience. And, you probably won't buy the same model again. People are

much more likely to tell others about bad purchasing experiences than good ones, so everyone in your network will likely hear about it if the dishwasher leaks and ruins your oak floor.

A common criticism of consultants is that they oversell their capabilities and underdeliver results. Your marketing program may get you an audience and your analytical and selling skills may land the project. But delivering consistently stunning results is the only way to keep clients coming back for more and praising you to others.

To build a successful consulting practice, you must deliver the goods with competence, speed, and minimal disruption to your client's operation. You must master every aspect of the consulting process, including how to plan a project, manage communications within a client's organization, and influence clients to accept your recommendations.

The premium fees that have evolved in professional services have produced sky-high expectations. Clients hire consultants to solve problems they can't solve for themselves and to come up with ideas that hadn't occurred to them. And they want their money's worth.

Clients scrutinize everything you do, from communicating effectively with staff at all levels of their organizations to defining, executing, and wrapping up projects. They observe how you work under the stress of deadlines, how you recover from stumbles and whether you admit mistakes. With every move you make, the client is watching you.

If your work is substandard, clients will bash you at every opportunity, blame you for their failures, and never forget. By contrast, when your performance is excellent, it speaks louder than any other marketing tool, and your clients will provide you with glowing references. As industrialist Henry J. Kaiser said, "When your work speaks for itself, don't interrupt."

Performance—the results you deliver—is a recurrent theme in the following pages. Doing merely acceptable work is not good enough for guerrillas.

## ■ SECRET 8: CLIENTS BUY—THEY ARE NOT "SOLD"

Despite softened sales tactics, shopping for a new car is still a challenge. The legendary hard sell still prevails. Today's salespeople may not say it aloud, but you can sense them thinking, "What will it take for me to put you in this vehicle today?" So you go into a dealership prepared for battle and determined to resist being sold until you are absolutely ready to buy.

**GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: HOW CLIENTS FIND YOU**

When looking for consultants, clients rely on seven strategies in the following order:

1. Referrals from colleagues and other in their networks
2. Past experience
3. Internal research staff recommendations
4. Advice from industry analysts
5. Web-based research
6. Business and trade press reports
7. Trade shows and conferences

Like most car buyers, guerrilla clients resent hard-sell tactics. In fact, three out of four buyers of services now hire consultants as a result of their own research instead of from consultants' solicitations.<sup>3</sup>

Clients no longer hire consultants solely because of a firm's brand name, advertisements, or direct solicitations, such as cold calls and direct mail. Instead, they turn to their networks of colleagues and the Internet. And they usually know quite a bit about you before they contact you—particularly about your qualifications to help them.<sup>4</sup>

Clients use initial discussions to see how well you listen and grasp their situation, not to learn how big your practice is or how many clients you have served in their industry. Exploratory client interactions are test-drives. Don't waste your time trying to figure out how to sell to clients, but be prepared to show how you can help them. Since many clients think consultants are trying to sell to them all the time, disarm and surprise them. Don't sell, but show them the benefits you have to offer.

**GUERRILLA TIP: SHOW THEM THE GOODS**

Clients gravitate to consultants who effectively demonstrate their capabilities and show the value they can add to the client's business. They ignore consultants who merely assert their qualifications with ambiguous marketing statements, glossy brochures, or Web sites. The assertion-based approach cannot compete with a value-based sales process.

## ■ SECRET 9: TOSS YOUR BROCHURES OUT THE WINDOW

Thomas A. Stewart, author of *Intellectual Capital: The New Wealth of Organizations*, calls information and knowledge the “thermonuclear competitive weapons of our time.”<sup>5</sup> Stewart found that for many organizations, intangible assets such as workers’ knowledge and experience, patents, and customer information are far more important to success than tangible assets such as buildings and machinery.

Consulting is the ultimate information and knowledge enterprise. Consultancies are rich with proprietary research, methodologies, cumulative experience, brainpower, and databases. They are well stocked with detailed case studies, presentation materials, and proposals. These intellectual assets, collective knowledge, and wisdom are the consultant’s primary tools for creating results.

The question is—do your marketing materials (for example, your brochures) communicate the power that your intellectual assets can give clients? If not, you might as well toss them out the window.

For guerrillas, the boilerplate approach to brochures, Web sites, and service descriptions is dead. Instead, guerrillas tap into the repository of the firm’s intellectual assets to produce highly tailored materials that are responsive to the unique needs of each client and provide the basis for a substantive dialogue on the relevant issues.

Communicating the precise benefits of your intellectual assets in the sales process gives clients what they want. They want thought leaders—not run-of-the-mill consultants—to take on their toughest challenges. To answer that call, guerrillas show clients the collective wisdom of their consulting practices.

## ■ SECRET 10: PUT CLIENTS SECOND

It is axiomatic that the consultant puts the client’s needs first, right? Consultants’ promotional material, Web sites, and mission statements certainly proclaim that clients are the highest priority. But the guerrilla way to achieve consistently profitable results is to put *consultants* first and clients second.

Whether your practice has two consultants or two hundred, their talents and skills are more critical to your long-term success than your roster of clients. It is, after all, great consultants who drive the profitability of your practice.

Consultants must be responsive to their clients' needs, even to the point of working long, crazy hours. Realistically, though, good consultants are tougher to replace than clients.

If you lose a client, it may produce an immediate financial impact. If you lose a great consultant, you lose a lot more than money. You lose a portion of your ability to sell and deliver projects, you lose your investment in training, and you lose the client relationships that the consultant built. And don't forget the high cost of recruiting and breaking in a new consultant.

What is worse, a departing consultant can create a cascade effect that causes others to leave the firm, compounding your losses. Or your ex-colleague can become your competitor, and poach your secrets, clients, and staff.

Turnover is an inevitable part of the consulting business. Minimize the brain drain and take the sting out of a very demanding business by providing a collegial and supportive work environment, offering challenging opportunities and paying consultants what they are worth. Make sure consultants know that they come first in the practice and they, in turn, will make sure clients are *their* first priority.

## ■ SECRET 11: CLIENT LOYALTY IS AN OXYMORON

The minute they begin working with a client, some consultants set their sights on selling that client additional projects. Apparently they believe that the next sale will be a snap because they have an inside track. Nothing could be further from the truth.

No matter how good you are, you can't count on client loyalty. When a group of clients was recently asked to rate loyalty to their existing consultants, 50 percent said they were indifferent; they would switch to a new consultant without hesitation.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of the strength of the relationship, clients look for increasingly great work by incumbent consultants. In effect, your own flawless delivery raises the bar for your next proposal. The guerrilla pulls out all the stops when proposing new work to an existing client by using every scrap of intelligence and every relationship in the client's organization to blow away the competition.

As an incumbent, any proposal you submit for new work must prove that the depth of your previous experience increases your value to the client. Otherwise, you can easily lose any competitive advantage.

Clients can be quick to drop an incumbent consultancy in favor of one that looks new and exciting. Never become complacent because clients certainly won't be.

## ■ SECRET 12: FLOAT TO THE TOP

The guerrilla aims to establish advisory relationships with executives who have management responsibility for the performance of a client's business: the CEO, CFO, COO, or CIO. Interaction with those at the top sheds light on their needs and gives you a chance to offer your help and to channel it in accordance with the client's main objectives or initiatives.

Your relationships with client executives serve you in other ways. They are great sources of information about the potential projects in the organization's pipeline. And they can introduce you to other decision makers inside and outside the company.

Because a client's top executives are often the ultimate decision makers in purchases of consulting services, a strong rapport can shorten the proposal process so you can get to work. Once a project is underway, the backing of a high-level ally can make a huge difference in gaining the cooperation you need from others to stay on schedule.

How do you get to the top people in your client's organization? From day one, start to create a matrix—an influence map—that lays out the routes for essential introductions. In small companies, the progression is usually straightforward; but in large companies, influence doesn't necessarily follow an obvious path. You are a guerrilla. Use your powers of observation and think through the ramifications of what you see and hear. Ask where and to whom it could lead.

Floating to the top clarifies the big picture in your own mind, which helps you serve the client better. And after a successful project, you will be comfortable asking the chief to make referrals or act as a reference. Either way, these relationships are a powerful tool for securing new business for your practice.

## ■ SECRET 13: MARKETING HAS NO ON/OFF SWITCH

Many consultants have little patience for marketing; they prefer to focus on executing projects. Marketing may appear to be a Herculean task that saps too much time and energy from the "real" work of a consulting business and generates meager return for the effort.

**GUERRILLA TACTIC: PERPETUAL MOTION MARKETING**

Do *something* every day to market your consulting practice, whether it's making contact with a former client, working on your latest blog, or identifying new speaking opportunities. Constancy is the only reliable power source for your marketing efforts.

It is easier to devote time to the in-your-face demands of your practice such as client work, recruiting, mentoring, and financial planning. To some extent, marketing also goes against the instincts of consultants, who tend to be reactive and opportunistic about pursuing sales leads.

Guerrillas understand that we are in an era of 24/7 marketing. Clients will not take notice of your practice unless you *continuously* promote it. Your business will eventually stall if you think, "We'll focus on marketing after we finish this project."

Marketing must be a daily activity with the same high priority as performing your work for clients. There is no on/off switch in a guerrilla's marketing program.

There is no magic formula for fame and fortune. A consultant must wear many hats—advisor, expert, salesperson, problem solver, coach, referee, banker, publisher, and author. As you juggle the demands of clients, bosses, and your life, toss one more hat into the air—marketer. Your steady focus on marketing, even in the face of client and project distractions, will secure your spot at the top of the heap.