

Special Episode: What to Do When the Coronavirus Impacts Your Consulting Business—with Deb Zahn

Hey folks. This is Deb from Craft of Consulting. I want to do this special podcast to talk to you about how the novel coronavirus may be impacting your consulting business and what you can do about it. So many of you probably already experienced this. I know I have, where I've had in person trainings and meetings and travel that's been canceled by clients. And that was work that I planned for and I expected to do and it's been canceled by clients.

I've also had some clients not initially cancel meetings that really, according to expert advice, they should cancel. In which case, I had to negotiate with my clients to make sure that we were erroring to the side of safety and canceling those meetings, canceling those sessions and coming up with a plan B.

And the plan B is where you really need to get creative because you're likely going to have to change the way that you deliver services unless you're already used to doing it remotely. And really get creative about how you can still deliver value. Still do important work for them, but to do it in a way that actually errors to the side of safety.

So, for example, next week I was supposed to be in a 4-hour session where myself and another consultant were going to do this really interactive session with a number of folks in the room, that has since been canceled. We actually talked with the clients, and we concurred that it should be canceled. But it was going to be really interactive. So it was meant to be in person. It's now changing to a 2-hour video call. And we also know that we can't be sure that everybody's going to have access to the video. So some people may be on the phone and some people may be on video. That's not ideal. But our job as consultants is to get creative and get smart about how we can still achieve the outcome we need to achieve or get as far as we can close to that with delivering it in a different way than we've done it before, so that it still adds value to the clients. It still adds value to the folks that are in the room, but it's just going to be done in a different way. And we have to do that quickly because it's still scheduled for next week.

Now if things just get flat out canceled, what I would suggest you do is to get something else on the books. So I wouldn't do it a week from now or 2 weeks from now because we're probably still going to be well in this crisis and probably not even at peak yet. So you might look a few months down the road, get something on the books that helps you assure that you're still going to have that business, helps the client be assured that that work is still going to get done, but it's going to be done in a reasonable timeframe.

Keep in mind that we could get a few months down the road, and we're either in the same situation or it's gotten a little bit worse because then we're peaking in terms of the coronavirus. So that might have to change again. But at least get it on the books so you can be assured and you can still count on that revenue and count on being able to add that value to your client.

You also want to look for other ways that you can add value to your clients. And I want to emphasize to do that within your area of expertise. So if you're not a public health person, don't try to be. You don't need to deliver information about what the coronavirus is and isn't to your clients.

Within your area of expertise, look for ways that you can actually help them in the midst of this crisis. So if you can be an extra hand for them because they're feeling overwhelmed, if you can help them make good, proactive decisions about what they're doing. This is a fantastic time to show them that you are in

this with them and you want to make sure that they're going to be OK and get through this and ultimately thrive.

If nothing else, check in with your clients. Even if you haven't talked to them in a while, or check in with your former clients, see if they're OK, see if they need anything. Let them know that you're here for them even if they just need an ear to talk to.

Now, if you do find that you have downtime, which I think most consultants are going to experience. I have already started to experience some of that because some things just flat out got canceled. So what I would suggest is to use that time for business development activities, particularly for activities that maybe you haven't had time to do because you've been so busy as a consultant.

So at minimum, set up some video calls with your clients, with your past clients, with prospective clients. It's a perfect time to check in with people and talk to them about how they're doing, what's going on with them. See, once we get past this, what are some of the things that you're thinking about? Anything that you can do to keep in contact.

Now, if they're overwhelmed and busy and they're like, "I just can't right now," leave them be because the relationship is always the most important thing. But it's a great time to reach out.

The other thing you can do is you can start to develop some business development tools that maybe you haven't had a chance to do. I would suggest case studies, which are a great opportunity to put in paper exactly what you've been able to do for other clients and how you've been able to help them and what results you've helped them achieve. This is a great time to develop things like that. If there's some new tool that you've been wanting to develop that you could use as part of your consulting business, now is a great time to do that.

You can also create articles and videos that you can post on LinkedIn and other social media channels that keep your name out there and keep the value that you provide out in the world. And now you've got time to actually do that and maybe even do it more than you've been doing it before.

So that's my advice from a business perspective of what you should look at in terms of doing for your consulting clients. But I also want to talk to you...because I actually do have a background in public health. So I'm not going to talk to you about the Coronavirus. Listen to the experts. Those are the best folks to listen to. But I would urge you as a consultant to air on the side of safety always. Even if you're feeling fine or you're not at high risk, you don't want to infect folks around you.

And I say that in part because I have a husband who is in the high-risk category. And so we're on lockdown. We're not leaving the house because he's at great risk. And if I get it—and I might not have symptoms—I could give it to him. So pay attention to your safety and the safety of the folks around you.

And for your clients and yourself, I absolutely encourage folks to stay calm. But calm doesn't mean inactive. Be proactive. Be proactive for your clients, proactive for yourself and your own safety and well-being. And we'll get through this. It's going to be tough. It's going to be tough on your clients, but ultimately we're going to get through this, and it's going to be fine. But we need to take appropriate steps. So that's what I would say both as a business person and as a public health person.

So thanks so much. I hope this was helpful. And take care of yourself. Bye bye.