

Episode 58: Creating the Conditions for Success Before Engaging Clients—with Deb Zahn

Hey folks. I want to welcome you to this episode of the Craft of Consulting podcast. This is Deb Zahn, your host, and today it's just me. That's because there's a topic I want to talk to you about that I think is really critically important, particularly for any professionals who are looking to becoming consultants, or maybe you were thinking about it and now, because of the economy, you're suddenly in a situation where you have to be a consultant, you have to make it work. But regardless of what stage you're at, I want to talk about something that is critical to what you need to do as soon as you, and even before you take the leap into consulting, because it's really what makes a difference between succeeding and not succeeding or building a business fast or glacially, and that is preparation. That is, did you prepare before you jumped in and started engaging with clients?

Now that might seem like a no brainer. Well, of course preparation is important, but I'll tell you that I have seen so many consultants skip really critical preparation steps. And then what happens is they end up spending a lot of time floundering and trying things that aren't quite working and sort of just flapping around and not really succeeding or straight up failing. Things they're doing just aren't working and they're not getting any traction in terms of being able to get business. And I say that not just because I've seen other consultants who have gone through that, but because that's what happened to me when I first started consulting. I sat down at my desk and I organized things on my desk, and I had thought of some things ahead of time in terms of what I would do for business development and how I would get clients. But I didn't do some of the important things that needed to happen at the beginning in order to be successful and be successful faster. I'm going to talk a little bit about that later.

So here's what I would say, is at the beginning when you're developing your consulting business, if I had to estimate, I would say preparation should be at least half of what you're doing. In some cases, that's going to be more, but at least half, and then the actual selling. So if you do all your preparation, by the time you get to the actual selling and that's going to be more like you know, 15 or 20%. And then doing a really excellent job is going to be the rest of it. So you want to make sure that everything you do afterwards is going to give the client a great experience. Now as your business matures over time and your reputation in your field gets stronger and you're known for really doing that excellent work, then that last piece that isn't preparation, is about doing an excellent job in giving your client a good experience. That should increase, because your business should increasingly depend more on getting repeat business and getting referred business, which is most of the business I get now. But in the beginning, it's really largely about what you do when you're in the preparation stage.

So I'm going to dig into that a little bit more, and I'm going to talk about the importance of it and what it is and how to do it. And because, if you've listened to any of my other podcasts, you know that I am an avid gardener, and because it's spring where I live, I can't resist using a garden analogy. I was out there for many hours this weekend and it occurred to me that it's exactly the same thing. So that's how I want to talk about it. Now, for folks who aren't gardeners, don't worry, it'll make perfect sense. But if you aren't a gardener or you haven't had a lot of success at gardening, it's because most folks don't know that gardening success is all about preparation. Before you ever plant a seed, you have to make good, deliberate choices, you have to create the right foundation and you have to implement systems. If you do those things, it increases the likelihood that your garden is going to thrive and you're going to get the yield that you want to get. And for me, it's vegetables. So I want to make sure that I'm doing the right thing so that if I'm planting my corn, I'm going to get a lot of sweet corn in August and that'll make me

happy. But I got to make sure that the right things are in place to do that. And it is exactly the same way with consulting. And I want to walk us through sort of step by step what I'm talking about.

So the first is, as I said, is making those good, deliberate choices before you do anything. You don't want to go back and have to change what you've done after you've engaged some clients and it didn't go well because you want to make sure every engagement you have likely will lead to you getting business or enhancing your reputation.

In gardening, you have to decide what you're going to plant. You got to think about where you're going to do it. You really have to understand your conditions. So what's your soil like? How much sun is there going to be? What can you do with the time that you have, or what you can actually do physically if you're like me and you're over 50. So all of those things will change your decisions based on an understanding of what the conditions are where you're going to grow things. And then there are a whole slew of choices you need to make before you ever put a shovel in the ground, including are you going to put a shovel in the ground for folks like me, who don't till, you have to decide how you're going to do a whole bunch of things.

For example, where I live, the soil is all clay and rock. First of all, really hard to dig in because you hit boulders all the time and you can't really grow veggies in it. So I built raised beds. I had to do that in order to get a high yield. But if I didn't pay attention and just tried to plant things in the soil I have, it wouldn't have worked and I wouldn't have gotten what I wanted. And there was a whole host of others, like dozens and dozens, decisions, that I had to make ahead of time.

As you can imagine, in consulting, there are also a whole bunch of decisions you want to make before you try and go out and get business. So the obvious ones are you need to make choices about what your market is going to be, and if you're going to pick a niche within that market, what that's going to be. And that has to be based on an understanding of what you know how to do, where your knowledge and expertise is and what the market conditions are. And then based within that, you can say, "OK, when I start consulting, here's the market I'm going to focus on, and if there's a niche within it that I want to specifically focus on, at least at the beginning, I've made those decisions ahead of time." If you don't do that, then when you go out and you try and do marketing or engaging clients, it's going to be a scattershot approach, and that's much less likely to be successful, because it's going to be really hard for clients to understand who you are and what you do.

The other thing that you have to figure out is what your pricing model is going to be and what your price is. That's our really critical decision, and what you never want to do is wait until you're in front of a client. They ask you for a proposal or they straight up ask you in a meeting, which I've had happen to me before, "What do you charge?" And if you haven't made those decisions before, 9 times out of 10, you're probably going to say a number or say a pricing model that isn't something that is right for you. You're going to more than likely underprice yourself or you're going to say a number that is completely out of whack with what's appropriate for that market. And you might pick a pricing model that you have to live with that you don't want to. So they might assume right off the bat, "Oh yeah, you're a consultant. Consultants all charge hourly." And in reality, you're going to have more freedom and flexibility in your consulting business and make a better living and deliver more value to clients if you have a value-based pricing model where you get paid based on the value of what you're providing, not based on how many hours you actually put in.

Those are all decisions to make ahead of time before you ever engage clients. And that last one is really important because once you start to lock into charging in a certain way, clients will start to expect that, other clients that they might send to you are going to expect that, and it's going to be a lot harder to switch it out afterwards. That's why it's important to do it before you try and enter your market.

So the next thing is you have to create a foundation for success. So this is where you're trying to create the conditions that are going to increase your yield. So in gardening, that's obvious. So I have to have really good soil, so if there's an adage in gardening that if you have a buck, spend 90 cents on improving your soil, because that's the foundation for everything you do. If you have crappy soil, it doesn't matter how good your seeds are, you're not going to get the yield that you want. And it needs to match what it is you're going to plant. You got to have your water source, you got to have a shed and things set up so that it's really easy for you to focus on making sure that you get the highest yield.

No different in consulting. And there's a number of things that are absolutely essential for your foundation.

So the first is your value proposition. Now, a value proposition is not what you know how to do, or what you like to do, and it's not really actually about you. It's about what results you can help clients achieve. So this is really what value you can ultimately bring to clients. And the more specific you are when you're developing what your value proposition is, the more you can learn to quantify that value and the more compelling it's going to be once you enter your market. You're going to know exactly who to reach out to and to not use that scattershot approach that I talked about earlier, because you know, in a very precise way, who you can add value to and in what specific way.

That piece is one of the most important things all consultants need to do at the beginning. And I've seen that probably skipped more than anything else. And my little secret is I skipped it at the beginning because I didn't know I should do that. I knew that I had been in a job and I had done good things and people liked working with me and they knew I helped achieve results. But I didn't really put it down on a piece of paper in a way that I could develop compelling descriptions when I was actually in front of clients.

And that's the other piece. You got to know what you're going to say before you get in front of a client. Well, you know now, because we're all in the midst of this pandemic, it's going to be a Zoom call, probably. Other times it's going to be in person, but you don't want the first time you describe your value, or the first time that you describe how you've been able to help others achieve results is when you're in front of the client. You want to nail down those descriptions before you ever walk in there, including things that probably seem pedestrian, like how do you introduce yourself. And well, you know who you are. So why, why wouldn't you be able to easily introduce yourself? Well, again, that's a piece that I have seen and I have butchered myself. I've seen that be a big problem, where you just start babbling, going on and on and the client's looking at you like, "Oh, for God's sake, tell me something that's actually about me." And so you need to be able to nail down those descriptions and practice them in such a way that before you ever get in front of a client. Make sure that you're sure that that's how you want to present yourself and it's going to yield high results for you.

You need to do things like figure out what you want your brand to be. You want to have some type of a clear, compelling consulting brand that is going to help you build not just the business you want, but the

reputation that is going to help feed your business over time. And what I mean by brand, I don't mean all the pretty stuff, although you have to do that too and I'll talk about that in a moment. But the brand is what you want people to think and feel about you, and what you want them to experience when they interact with you and your consulting business.

The answers to those questions about what you want people to think and feel and what you want them to experience should guide your decisions about how you're going to enter and operate in the market. And I would never, ever suggest that you leave that to chance because, as I said, ultimately you want your business to be based on repeat business and referral business. So you want to be in charge, actually, of what people are saying about you in the market. If you think about that ahead of time and then you align all of the ways that you operate, all of the ways that you do marketing, all sorts of decisions about how you are present in that market, if you align that with what your brand is, and your brand is a really deliberate strategy, you're going to have much better signal strength when you're out in the market trying to get business. And it won't be confusing and it won't be scattershot. It'll be very clear, very deliberate and very compelling.

Now do you need a logo, a website, business cards and all of that good stuff, sort of the visual elements of your brand? Yeah. I don't personally have a logo and I don't think I need one, but for some, it makes perfect sense that they put that together, but yeah, a business card, when we get back to a time that you can actually hand those out. Certainly a website. I would say though that this is not the time. When you're starting to enter the market, where all of this has to be perfect. You want to focus on the value you can bring, not the perfection of it or are colors on your website exactly right. There's a lot of great options to be able to get that stuff up quickly and you want to essentially spend the most time thinking about. Particularly when it's a website and the things that you have on it are what is going to demonstrate your value to anybody who goes and looks at your website, and what's going to help them understand why it is they need to work with you and how they can work with you. Everything else, I wouldn't worry about at the beginning. You can build content and do things over time.

Now, the other thing that you need to do to build a solid foundation is you need to decide what you're going to do in terms of marketing. There are some folks who are just amazing, and they have books and events and email campaigns and really robust websites and social media presence and all of those things. And all of those things can be really great. It depends. It depends on how they're deployed. It depends on a whole bunch of things in terms of doing it in a strategic way. But at the beginning, at very least, you need to be on LinkedIn, and you need to have a really strong LinkedIn presence because that's where most professionals go. And I would suggest you think about, is there some other social media presence where you think the folks that could be your potential clients or who could influence your potential clients are already going and focus on that at the beginning. But make those decisions ahead of time.

So when I was starting out, I was at a firm for many years and then I went independent. And luckily, I had already built up a really robust business over time, so it was a little different than just starting off as independent. But if I were doing it today, I would start with a website template. It can end up getting fancier later where you hire somebody who really developed something beautiful for you, and to have a social media presence on LinkedIn and maybe Facebook and more important than anything else is to do things to build up an email list so that you can market directly to the people who have decided to follow you on an ongoing basis. And the only reason that people decide to sign up to be part of your email list is because you're delivering value to them. And I would think about what kind of articles can you write

for LinkedIn, what kind of newsletters can you send out that are actually really helpful for the folks that you want to do consulting for?

Those are the things I'd focus on. But you want to develop that foundation before you step foot in your market. And I'm going to talk a little bit later about what happens if you decide to try and do everything all at the same time, but in the optimal circumstances, you build your foundation before you start going out and trying to hustle and get business.

And then the last thing is if you're independent, a really critical piece of your foundation, especially now, when there is so much market volatility, is to have some type of a financial cushion. That is going to give you the breathing room to be able to take some of the steps you're going to need to take, and to really do business development in a really deliberate way. It's harder to do if you don't have a financial cushion, and you may end up taking projects that aren't right for you and aren't going to be easy for you to do well, in which case your reputation ultimately could end up taking a hit. Having a financial cushion gives you a little more freedom to make decisions about the type of business you want to do and the timeframe it takes you to actually get that business.

So this last piece, unless you're a systems person like me, is probably not terribly sexy. I find it fascinating because I love this stuff. It is to get your systems right and to get them from the beginning. So when I'm gardening, that's why I have in every single one of my garden beds and I have many of them, I have a drip irrigation system. I have trellises set up where I need trellises. I have mulch already ready to go before I start planting so I don't have to figure it out at a later date. I've even got software that I just love to help me plan and track my garden and be able to rotate crops over time. Systems like that are really key.

Now, obviously in consulting, they are as well. And what I encourage folks to do from the very beginning is to automate everything that you can. So anything that is a repetitive task, anything that you're going to do over and over again for whatever reason is to automate it so that ultimately, you can spend most of your time working with clients and getting clients, and you can spend less time doing things that otherwise could be done electronically with minimal effort from you.

So you also, here's the other reason why I think it's so important, is you want to ensure that there is an optimal client experience. So every interaction that you have with a client gives them an experience of what it's like to work with you. And that includes when you're doing things like invoicing. So they are going to want to see that everything is timely and everything is accurate and that it's not going to cost them a whole lot of time and energy to go back and forth with you and get things right. And automation helps you do that and having the right systems in place helps you do that.

Some of these are a no brainer, but again, I've seen way too many instances where all of these things weren't set up ahead of time, and then clients were left waiting because they had to go back, a consultant had to go back and make everything up from scratch. And it wasn't a good experience for the client, or it was just really overwhelming for a consultant to suddenly have to stop and try and put everything together.

So it's things like contracts. So if you're an independent consultant, if you work at a firm, I'm sure they already have contract templates, but if you're independent, you've got to figure out what you want your

contract to say, and you need to make sure that it includes all of the terms and conditions that are going to protect you and that your clients are going to be comfortable with.

Now, often clients will want to negotiate over things that are in the contract. That's OK, but you don't want to have to create a whole new contract every time you're going to do a consulting agreement. You want to have your standard template, and in best of all circumstances, you would also have an electronic system for delivering that content, for that contract, getting their signature and then you have that easily filed. It's all done without having to exchange paper and then mail you things, or now you can't even get in front of folks to get them to sign it. So having that system set up ahead every time and automating it will just save you a lot of time, and it'll help ensure that you can respond quickly to clients.

Timekeeping is really important, so if you're going to charge hourly, which you definitely don't have to, you want to make sure that you have an accurate way of recording your time. And there are plenty of systems that are now part of financial packages that will do that for you. But you want to make sure that you have a way of doing it that isn't just scribbling things on pieces of paper where you could lose and then you're not getting paid for all of your hours, or it's taking you time to put everything in an Excel spreadsheet, and then the client's waiting for an invoice. So get that automated ahead of time.

Often it's linked with an invoicing system, but you should have your invoicing system down and know that it works and if it's direct depositing things into your account, you've tested it and you know that it works. So again, you don't have to wait for money or delay getting an invoice to a client, in which case you're delaying getting the money in your pocket. These things usually come in a package.

You need a system for your finances so that at any given time you know how you're doing, you know what your profit and loss is. You know what your expenses are, et cetera. And having that set up ahead of time to make sure that all the work that you're putting into building your business, that you know at any given time, whether or not that's paying off for you.

There are also systems that you can use for marketing. I'm not going to go into the detail about what all of those are, but one of the ones that I think are most important would be content marketing systems. So these would be email lists, so things like where people enter their email and they go onto an automated list and you can push out content to your audience. You can segment it by the types of clients you have. You can do a bunch of fancy things, but at minimum, it gives you a way to keep in contact with and keep delivering value to the folks that are either your existing client or at least interested you enough that they want to be part of your community.

And then there's other things like customer relationship management systems and things like that, so that you can track what all of your engagements are with folks that you're reaching out to. And that's really helpful for people like me, who have a really horrible short term memory so that you can always, at any given time, know exactly where you are in your prospective client engagement, and also what you've done in previous times with other clients, which is always helpful. That's because in the best of all worlds, you would be going back and you would be doing more work for them.

So again, optimally, just as I said, this should all happen before you enter your market and before you start engaging with prospective clients. Now, the obvious question is, "Well, can't I just figure things out and get things in place as I go, as I need them?" And the answer is yeah, of course you can definitely do that. And I've seen a lot of consultants who have winged it and it worked out. It might not have been

smooth, there might've been a lot of drama, but it ultimately worked out. But I've also seen just as many who have not been able to make that approach work and have failed or floundered because they didn't have all of those things in place, and because they hadn't done the preparation ahead of time. Or they got really overwhelmed because too much was happening all at the same time.

And so this is where I'm going to tell you a little bit more about what my experience was when I first started consulting. So here's my confession is that in the same way that I was not a successful gardener the first time, or a consultant. So on the gardening side, I will tell you, my first tomato plant I tried to plant was, it was sad and it was anemic. I got like two tiny tasteless tomatoes and that's because I didn't prepare. I didn't prepare correctly. I didn't create the conditions that would give me the yield I wanted.

So when I started consulting, you think that would have taught me a lesson? Well it didn't. And I was fortunate that I worked at a great firm and much of the systems things were already in place. But I didn't know how to prepare for the things that were on me, like developing my value proposition or figuring out how I was going to describe what I can offer and who I am and how I introduce myself when I walk in a room.

I didn't know how to do any of that and I wasted, I am going to be perfectly honest with you, I wasted months. I was not getting business and I ended up doing work that I didn't like doing because I tried to skip that preparation, and because I just didn't know that it was something I was supposed to do. And it wasn't until I failed a few times and again ended up doing things that I really didn't want to be doing that I stopped. I got some advice from some consultants who had been down this path a lot longer than I had, and I took the time to get more grounded and to prepare. And that's when I did my value proposition, and that's when I figured out how I would describe myself. And that's when I started to turn it around, and I was able to go out and get business and work on projects that I most wanted to work with and work with the clients that I absolutely best suited to help.

So then the other thing is I had to learn along the way is just like gardening, consulting is a continual cycle of preparing, executing, then reassessing and then re-figuring. Figuring things out again to make them better. It's just when you're first starting, the stakes are higher, and the stakes are higher because you have to make it work.

And particularly if you're independent, you have to make it work because you're dependent on this for your livelihood. And that's why I'm really pushing you to do as much preparation as possible, and you'll be successful sooner than you would if you just try and wing it when you go out.

So take the time to prepare, create the conditions that are right for you being a high yield consultant, and it's going to work out better and it's going to work out faster. So that's what I wanted to share with you today. And I do have some other resources you can take a look at.

If you're just starting in your journey, I have a great article simply titled, "How To Become a Consultant in 7 Steps." And I go into a little more detail about how to become a consultant and how to do things like the value proposition itself.

Hopefully this was helpful, and I will be back on my next show with a fantastic guest.

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