
... The Last Word

Consulting in the 90's

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The times they *are* a changin'. That phrase is true of few enterprises more than the fire engine paced change in the computer industry. As this industry changes, so do its' consultants. The entire field of computer consulting only got big when computers went mainstream in the early 80s. Before then it was mostly major corporations and hobbyists that had computers. We are now approaching the end of the century and look to see a computer on almost every desk. And for all of that computing power there is a veritable army of support personnel setting it up and training end users on how to use it - at least in the business sector and for specialized tasks.

As the home and home office markets heat up with a resulting flow of computer information, even more people are gaining confidence in their abilities to configure, repair and add computer components to new and existing systems. This challenges consultants in at least two ways:

1. Everyone has a brother-in-law who is a "Computer Expert." You know the type. He's the office guru because he knows how to change the toner in the laser printer, subscribes to PC Magazine and bought a 486 at the swap meet for his house. Suddenly everybody is calling him for free advice and he is more than happy to get wrist deep in their WIN.INI files. Well folks, if you think working with professionals is expensive, try working with amateurs. I get a lot of calls from people who've either messed up their own configuration or, more often, had a "friend" come in and "fix" it for them.

The real problem begin when these so-called "experts" get laid off or get ambitious and decide to have some business cards printed up that read "Computer Consultant." Now they're out in the marketplace alongside the professionals disguised as a professional consultant....and they may not be easy to spot at first. They'll have their Paper Direct business cards and brochures. They'll toss out buzzwords like "Information Super Highway" and "Scuzzy." *AND* they'll offer their services at ridiculously low rates and are often pleased to get much below prevailing local rates. But you can quickly separate the pretenders when the work begins.

I've heard reports of "experts" who left a system unbootable because the

AUTOEXEC.BAT and *CONFIG.SYS* files were in WordPerfect format. I've seen "experts" who deleted key .EXE files trying to free up hard drive space. I've also seen hard drives mounted backwards in the case, laser printers plugged into UPSs and systems with three copies of Windows installed.

Where and how does this hurt ? Perception. It can sometimes take a little while for a professional to spot a pretender, especially if we haven't had a chance to see his work. Imagine how difficult it is for a lay-person to spot one! Let's assume as a lay-person you've just paid a "Computer Consultant" \$500 to set up your system. Nothing works well or at all and that computer is a constant headache. The fellow rarely returns calls and when he does, seems befuddled and has no answers. Yet another person hands you a card that reads "Computer Consultant" and offers to take a look at your systems...for \$75/hour! Wouldn't you be a bit wary of being taken by yet another pretender... and this time for a lot more money?

Many prospective clients have been swindled by not one, but two, three, four or even a longer succession of these impostors. They've paid a lot of money for minor success and as a result are justifiably wary and more cynical when we tell them what we can do for them and for how much. They've heard our song before...and they can't tell if it's live or Memorex.

Making yourself visible:

How can we show and then prove to the public that we're the "real deal"? It's not easy and it requires a lot of determination and time. First of all you must establish yourself as a legitimate expert and viable businessperson. Join the Chamber of Commerce and a local community organization like Kiwanis. Get involved and establish yourself as a stable and hard working member of the community with a telephone which is regularly answered and where phone calls are always returned. Establish yourself with your local bank. Write articles on your subject of expertise and actively seek speaking engagements on your subject. Offer seminars and classes. Offer to teach part-time at a local school or be a volunteer at a "Career Day" at the local high school.

Encourage your clients and colleagues to refer business to you and, most importantly, be honest and straightforward in your dealings with clients, prospects and vendors. They will remember this and you will get a reputation as someone who can be trusted.

What They Say....

2. As "Plug-and-Play" becomes a reality, the PR spin, is that systems will become easier to setup and maintain. The implication is that there no longer

exists a need for a consultant to setup a system if the end user can simply twist three thumb screws, plug in a card, close the case and voila - it's finished. Even the brother-in-law, the computer *expert* can't go too far wrong with this. *They* are saying that as applications become more intuitive, the need for training will be reduced. *They*, also say, that as hardware prices continue to fall, having a system that is robust and new becomes more realistic for all commercial users. Further, if a system fails...replace it. The parts are cheap and "*Plug-and-Play*."

The above is the party line that Microsoft, IBM and other big vendors would have us believe. Until just recently I feared that they were not far from reality. However, the more I see of the new operating systems, new hardware and new applications the more confident I am that we are not an extinct species just yet -- *or for some time to come !*

Custom programming is still very much alive. What about the new "intuitive" programs? How many times have you been called because the end user forgot to turn on their monitor and assumed their system crashed? No matter how simple developers try to make their programs, there will always be a need for end-user training....primarily because it *IS* very foreign terrain for most users.

As for Plug-and-Play, many of the upgrades we now do *could* be done by end-users. The fact is that many end-users *don't want* to do their own upgrades. Just as I don't want to wash my own car, they prefer to pay somebody else to do it for them...and if PCMCIA is any example, there will be plenty of compatibility and configuration problems to go around. There is lots of information but very little confidence!

The more robust systems are just great and mean there are more things the end-users can do. I have a client who told me that he thought that buying a computer would save him time...now he spends just as much time as before, if not *more*! The difference is that he's accomplishing ten times as much. The new systems will take end-users to a level of productivity they never dreamed was possible ...and good, experienced, honest consultants will be their guides.

I rest my case!

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