

# The expert has landed

Professional services firms are, in many ways, the perfect clients for consultants. They bill by the hour, understand the model, and work with business development and marketing teams who know what good looks like. Byline.London's **James Lumley** finds out more.

by James Lumley  
Byline. London



**T**here is a story that circulates again and again among senior marketing and business development (BD) professionals in professional services firms about a young marketing manager – talented, clear-headed and on the ball – who finds that lots of people in the partnership don't listen to her. Because it is usually her.

So, she hires a consultant. Like the partners, he's older. Silver-haired. His suit is well cut. His accent fits. He carries himself well. And his pronoun reassures. She briefs him carefully before every meeting. He says exactly what she would have said. The partners nod, thank him, and do exactly what she recommended. He invoices. She pays and gets on with her job. Everyone is (sort of) happy.

Susanne Pugsley, currently the interim Director of Marketing and Business Development at Carpmaels & Ransford, BD consultant and founder of the Consultants Club, has been there.

### The name's Steele

"I called him my Remington Steele," she says. "I didn't have time to change the misogyny of partners. So I said: you come in, I'll tell you what to say, you'll say it and I'll pay you a set rate."

And it worked.

Have times changed? Yes, says Pugsley, but "we still use consultants in a similar way, it's just that now they don't all have to be men".

Why? Because although that story is fun, and funny, and presented as being a little dated, it is still the case that external voices can carry more weight than internal ones.

Not always because of gender or seniority. Familiarity is a common reason too, and that applies to anybody. But the fact remains that in many (but not all) situations consultants are doing something that their direct client could do themselves.

Does that mean that professional services firms should be doing everything in-house?

No. Not at all.

### Moving out of the shadows

The consultancy market in professional services marketing and BD has always

existed. What is new is its visibility, its sophistication, and the expectations placed on those operating within it.

"It's always been there," says Caitlin Roxburgh, Director of Marketing, BD and Responsible Business at The BD Consultancy, which has been supporting professional services firms for almost 20 years. "Firms don't always like to talk about it. Particularly the big ones – they often don't want people, especially competitors, to know they're asking for help. But they are."

That reticence is itself revealing, while the demand has grown regardless. Roxburgh has seen a sharp increase in requests for specialist pitching and proposals support, AI implementation, and interim cover during hiring freezes, the latter accelerated by budget uncertainty following the UK Government's Autumn Budget.

"Firms are more comfortable with a short-term solution," she says. "It's not a permanent hire, but it delivers."

Ben Scott, who runs the marketing operations team at Grant Thornton Australia, describes the same shift.

While the mother ship in London can offer support, it doesn't always prove to be practical, so the firm sought local help.

"We use specialists for specific areas: a marketing automation agency, a content agency, an SEO agency when we need it. Not one catch-all agency. That model doesn't really work any more."

So, while generalist agencies still survive, professional services firms favour a more modular approach, using a portfolio of specialists, each brought in for a defined purpose.

### Death by consultant

Almost everybody who has worked for more than a couple of years in a big FTSE 100 company has experienced the curse of the consultant. The business has got itself into a tight situation, so the board calls in the consulting big guns. A floor is cleared and filled with dark-suited 24-year-olds with laptops full of spreadsheets and PowerPoints. They hardly ever speak. You never see them in the staff canteen. Then, one day, maybe six months later, they vanish overnight. A week later, as the Christmas holidays are approaching, the redundancies come.

This almost never happens in professional services. Why?

Part of the answer is structural. Partners are acutely aware of cost.

**The consultant who imposes their methodology rather than adapting to yours is not a consultant. They are people selling a product.**



They aren't going to spend millions of their own pounds on teams of analysts who communicate through PowerPoint and Excel.

"If you're presenting to 10 partners there is a high cost per hour of having someone present to them, and if they're not cutting through straight away, it's over," says Scott.

The international consulting giants' MO – slow, process-heavy and time-consuming – doesn't appeal to an audience that bills by the hour and takes a share of profits.

But there is a deeper reason. The fee earners in professional services firms are themselves consultants.

"Wittingly or unwittingly," says Scott, "they're slightly more sophisticated users of consultants. Mainly because they're consultants themselves."

Lynda Dupont-Blackshaw, strategic marketing consultant and formerly Global CMO at Crowe Global, the international accountancy network, saw this from the inside.

In her view, the fact that professional services firms are full of quasi-consultants, but often all of the same or similar discipline, means that they are in danger of becoming echo chambers. That means that individual, senior, external voices aren't just useful, they are often necessary.

And there's also politics.

"If I have a different view from the board, my voice is reinforced if someone else comes in from outside and says the same thing. I've already said it – but they really hear it from them," she says.

That doesn't necessarily make them Remington Steeles, but because they are apolitical and independent, they provide cover. And can be trusted in a way an internal voice may not be.

### Separating the sheep from the GOATs

The problem is that the market for consultants is, to put it diplomatically, uneven.

"Being a consultant isn't for everyone," says Pugsley. She is often sought for advice by people reaching the end of their in-house career and thinking they might like to try to consult. She points out that it is a very different set of rules, and having run a large in-house team doesn't always equip you for working as a lone consultant on a project

Sarah Donnelly, co-founder of sagacious GOAT, is equally direct.

"You need to have been serially in-house, not just in-house at one company. Variety across sectors, firm size, types of professional services firm and cultures is what creates genuine consultancy value.

"That brings an understanding of how things work in a range of different environments and, therefore, what will land. That's particularly important today as we see consolidation across professional services and differing ownership structures," she says.

Variety across sectors, firm sizes and cultures is what creates genuine consultancy value. The person who spent two decades at one firm may know that firm profoundly. They do not necessarily know anything else.

And the market is beginning to notice the difference.

Dupont-Blackshaw developed a framework at Crowe for evaluating consultants. Credible, specific experience was the first requirement. Not a list of impressive employers, but demonstrated ability to solve the actual problem. The second was the capacity to communicate in business terms, not marketing terms.

**The relationship, when it works, looks less like procurement and more like a trusted colleague who happens to invoice you.**

"If they can't go into a boardroom and speak at CXO level – not just CMO level – they lose their value very quickly," she says.

The third, and hardest to fake, was agility. "Every business has a different approach, vision, culture. If you're always in that one tunnel, it comes out," she says.

Donnelly agrees. "The consultant who imposes their methodology rather than adapting to yours is not listening to you and is making assumptions. They are not a consultant. They are people selling a product."

Finally, there is simple chemistry. Dupont-Blackshaw is happy to fly long-haul to meet a consultant in person to find out if she truly believed they would add value and not suck profit.

### Little, but fierce

Dan Gray, Donnelly's co-founder at sagacious GOAT, states the structural advantage of the small consultancy simply.

"It's about accountability. When you bring in a big consultancy, you get the A-team for the pitch. You inevitably don't end up working with those people. When you work with a smaller consultancy, the people in the room are the people who support you. The ones you bought into and trusted."

Small consultancies also tend to operate in networks, referring work to trusted peers.

"I wouldn't ever go for a client listening project," says Pugsley, "but I know three very good consultants I'd give that work to. And they'd always send sector strategy to me." This cooperative ecosystem means that a client engaging a small consultancy often gains access to a wider, better-calibrated range of skills than any

# It takes two

You have shortlisted three consultants. You have prepared your questions. What you may not have considered is that they are preparing theirs.

**T**hat's because good consultants turn down work. Frequently.

This is not a negotiating posture. It is how serious practitioners protect their reputation, their time, and their ability to deliver. Lynda Dupont-Blackshaw recently declined a brief she could have taken because she was not the right person for it. Sarah Donnelly and Dan Gray of sagacious GOAT have walked away from clients who were not a fit – including one who simply needed junior level support and another where the chemistry, in their assessment, simply wasn't there.

It needs to be a mutual partnership, after all.

## Freedom

But it isn't only about protection. Gray is direct about why he and his co-founder left in-house roles to set up on their own. "We wanted to choose who we work with. That is part of the choice and the trade-off you make. It's a sense of agency you don't have when you're in-house."

Which means the best consultants aren't just assessing your brief. They are asking whether they will enjoy working with you.

What are they looking for? Mostly, clarity. Does the prospective client know what they want? Have they defined the project, or are they hoping a consultant will define it for them? Have they worked out how to measure success?

As Dupont-Blackshaw puts it: "A lot of businesses don't know what they really need. A good consultant can help a client solve that problem, but will also take a view on whether it's worth the effort."

**A lot of businesses don't know what they really need. A good consultant can help a client solve that problem. But will also take a view on whether it's worth it.**

## One way, or another

There is also a distinction worth understanding between a consultant and a freelancer. A consultant brings independent expertise, cross-client perspective and the standing to push back. A freelancer is, in essence, a flexible employee: skilled and valuable, but working within a client framework rather than alongside it. Neither is inferior. But they are different. Confusing them is one of the most common mistakes firms make when buying external support.

So, if a consultant declines your brief, or starts asking questions that make you uncomfortable, pay attention. They may be signalling something about your readiness that you haven't yet acknowledged.

And if you have been working effectively with a consultant for a few years and the relationship just keeps rolling – chances are they actually really enjoy working with you.

If only every working relationship was that harmonious.

single larger agency could provide.

What firms gain above all, as Donnelly puts it, is someone in the trenches. "Every marketing team in professional services is resource-constrained. They rarely have the time to blue-sky a strategy and so need someone who has the time to do that thinking for them.

"At the same time, the lack of resource means they also need someone who can come in and turbo charge what they're already doing to get quick results that can be evidenced to the business. That's where smaller consultants come in. To do that with them and for them."

The relationship, when it works, looks less like procurement and more like a trusted colleague who happens to invoice you. One of Donnelly's clients eventually just called the team "the Goats" and forgot they were not staff.

That embedded relationship – two or three days a week, over months or years – is the model that works. It is not glamorous, but it is effective and it speaks the language of the people it serves. In professional services, that has always been the point.

## GSD

The good news for professional services firms is that they are, almost uniquely, well equipped to get this right. They bill by the hour. They sell expertise. They know what a good brief looks like and what a bad one costs. When they sit across the table from a consultant, they are, in a very real sense, looking in a mirror.

The question is whether they like what they see. A consultant who has worked across a dozen firms, sectors and cultures, who is still learning because they are still working, who will tell you something you don't want to hear and invoice you for the privilege? That person is worth finding.

The one who spent 30 years at a single firm and has decided to share their wisdom with the world as a final lap before retirement? Not so much.

Even so, one thing is universal. Whether they are Steeles or GOATs, a good consultant has always been someone who, quite simply, gets shit done. ■

**James Lumley**, freelance journalist, corporate writer, trainer and coach. [www.byline.london](http://www.byline.london)