A consultant brings specialized expertise to define and influence change—Part 2 BY BEVERLY INGLESBY

See the Winter 2015 issue of *Protocol* to read Part 1 about utilizing consultants

PROTOCOL *INVITED A DIVERSE GROUP OF INDUSTRY CONSULTANTS—from management and product to engineering and design consultants—to respond to questions about their work serving the entertainment technology industry. The response was so strong, this is part two of a two-part article—the first half ran in the Winter 2015 issue. (Answers have been edited for brevity and clarity.)*

What do you perceive are the essential skills to be a consultant in the entertainment technology industry?

Julian Boden: Firstly, being a good communicator, listener, and a diplomat is absolutely essential both for liaising with clients and reassuring end users throughout the consultancy process. Secondly, to be passionate about engineering excellence and providing solutions that are both well thought out and deliver what the customer expects in the needed timeframe. Thirdly, understanding the marketplace and keeping in touch with the new technology that continually changes the industry landscape.

Dan Bonitsky: Transitional leadership and team management talents are expected. Primarily, consultants are called upon to affect a change for the client or the client's organization. Change is usually uncomfortable and your ability to lead them through the discomfort and sometimes confusing process of change defines the potential for the project's success. Until the client is fully prepared to "own" the change, they're looking to you to keep it moving.

For me, being a responsible consultant is also about being a professional coach. Once I get a client through the major state of change, I'm still there, switching my role from consultant to coach, to support them while they move past the disruptions towards establishing the new way of working.

Peter Scheu: Having lots of "hands on" tech experience in theatrical productions. But also critical is experience in the design, manufacture, and installation of production systems and equipment. That way, you can help solve a project's challenges while understanding the issues coming from all sides of the table.

Tom Stimson: For a business consultant, the most important skill is listening. The real work is listening closely to what is going on inside an organization. Sometimes the story doesn't match the facts and it's up to you to sort out the puzzle.

There are lots of other practical things we need to know like accounting and marketing, but the one thing I didn't expect was how to interview employees. In one year I probably interview 200 to 300 folks to learn about how their companies work.

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Mike Wood: I don't think there is any difference between a consultant in our industry and any other. Firstly, it allows them to explore new avenues of technology or business without heavy initial investment in infrastructure. A consultant may help them dip a toe in the water before deciding to invest. To my mind, a successful consultancy is one that ends up with the consultant no longer being needed because the company has grown the relevant expertise in house. Secondly, a consultant can bring an outside perspective into a company, one that can be brutally honest, and can do so without any fear of repercussions from saying the wrong thing. It can be difficult for an employee to speak up to their boss as they might be afraid of how criticism would be received.

Consultants

Julian Boden has spent the last 30 years in the broadcast and entertainment industry. Since 2012, he has been working as a project consultant with the JJ & K Boden Partnership from his base in Leicestershire, UK. Previously, Julian was Managing Director of Dales Broadcast, before going to Satellite Information Systems in 2009 as Head of Engineering. He has extensive knowledge of cameras, studios, editing systems, and outside broadcast production vehicles. Julian can be reached at julian@dalesbroadcast.co.uk.

Dan Bonitsky is a principal partner at Source Ventures LLC, providing consulting and coaching to companies within the entertainment industry on business management, customer relations, and sales management. With over 30 years in the business of lighting, technology, and production, Dan provides his clients with a broad perspective towards reaching solutions and achieving success. He can be reached at dbonitsky@Source-Ventures.com.

Bill Conner, FASTC, is principal of Bill Conner Associates LLC, providing facility planning and systems design for the performing arts. Bill is currently working on the Alley Theatre, the Marine Corp University, and the Mississippi Grammy Museum. Since 1989, he has served as the ASTC codes officer and participates in the development of the national model codes as the senior member of the Assembly Occupancies committee for the *Life Safety Code*. He is a member of the ANSI A117.1 committee, the standard for accessibility. You can reach Bill at bill@bcaworld.com.

James Eade, BEng(Hons) CEng MIET AMIMechE, is a Chartered Engineer specializing in electrical systems design, management, and testing. He was the formative technical editor of *Lighting&Sound International* and the PLASA Awards chair for many years and is now heavily involved in standards work and allied consultancy. James is located in East Sussex, UK. Visit www.eade.uk.com for more information.

Paul Rabinovitz has been involved in the entertainment technology field his entire adult life. Beginning in 1980 with Teatronics, Inc. to the present, he has been connected to all aspects of live and recorded events. Paul was Vice President of Strong Entertainment Lighting from 2003 – 2012. In late 2012, he launched his firm PMRi LLC specializing in product, marketing, and relationship building. Paul can be reached at paul@pmri.biz.

Peter Scheu, ASTC, has been the President and Principal Consultant at Scheu Consulting Services since he opened the firm in 2001. He has served on a number of PLASA Technical Standards working and task groups concentrating on theatrical rigging, fire safety curtains, and orchestra lifts, as well as serving as a Subject Matter Expert for the ETCP. Formerly a Project Manager and System Designer at J. R. Clancy, Peter has 35 years of experience in theatrical and systems design, production, manufacturing, and project management. He can be reached at peter@scheuconsulting.com.

Tom Stimson MBA, CTS, is a 30-year veteran of the audiovisual industry, an expert on project-based selling, and a thought leader for innovative business processes. He began his career in theatre, founded an event staffing company, moved into audiovisual for corporate events, then on to management consulting in 2006. As a consultant, Tom has worked with over 150 companies and organizations on business strategy, process, marketing, and sales. He can be reached at tom@trstimson.com.

Mike Wood runs Mike Wood Consulting LLC, which provides consulting support to companies within the entertainment industry on product design, technology strategy, R&D, standards, and Intellectual Property. A 35-year veteran of the entertainment technology industry, Mike is the Immediate Past Chair of the PLASA Governing Body and Co-Chair of the Technical Standards Council. Mike can be reached at mike@mikewoodconsulting.com.

How do you find new clients? Where do you network and/or advertise to promote your services?

Bonitsky: Most of my work comes to me through direct referrals. I also make it a point to attend trade shows and I promote my Tradeshow Preparation programs through direct mail and my website.

Bill Conner: Word of mouth mostly. I seem to have a small number of fantastic, loyal clients for whom I work with time and time again. And I write—for *Protocol*—and hopefully someone will notice.

Both writing and speaking raise your credibility.

Paul Rabinovitz: The overwhelming way I find and connect with new clients is via my personal network of contacts from over 35 years in the industry. While I maintain a website and am active on social media, it is the personal touch that has led to most of my business. I also think it is of great benefit that I have been an active member of the PLASA community. That visibility and contact is worth more than any advertising campaign I could ever imagine.

Stimson: I studied methods for marketing myself and spoke with a lot of other consultants. From them, I learned a lot of what works and what doesn't. I primarily apply three techniques:

1. Get published. Get your ideas and your name out there. At one time, I had monthly columns in three different trade magazines. And I have had a monthly email newsletter since 2006. That's a lot of articles!

2. Get in front of audiences. Find speaking and teaching engagements. They rarely lead directly to new clients, but every year I sign a new customer that first heard me speak ten years ago. Both writing and speaking raise your credibility.

3. Visit companies that might be potential clients and meet a lot of owners. Bring them something of value: market intelligence, best practices, or insight into a common industry problem. I have never advertised, but every year more and more people know who I am.

Wood: I know it sounds trite to say it in this publication, but truly I find 90% of my clients through PLASA (or ESTA in the past). I was very fortunate with the timing of starting my consultancy that I had just finished 12 years on the ESTA/PLASA board, and was the current ESTA President. That gave me a real leg-up with the number of contacts I'd made, and my visibility within the industry.

Are most of your contracts for short-term tasks, or long-term goals? Please define short-term and long-term time frames as it pertains to your consultancy.

Bonitsky: It varies depending on the client's needs and scope of my involvement. I've been on single, goal-oriented projects that took as little as three weeks and have others that are on-going now

for over four years. The multi-year projects tend to be more on a retained/as needed basis. This affords the business owner access to my services whenever they have a need and a confidential *sounding board* to discuss concerns, opportunities, and ideas. Being a business owner can be lonely; I provide them a safe place so they not only can have someone listen to their thoughts, but can get immediate feedback to help them to make decisions.

Conner: Most of our work by any measure is for the design and construction of a facility, and the duration is anywhere from two to ten years, start of planning to completion of construction.

James Eade: It depends on the project. I'm working on a design for a large project abroad at the moment which is a long term engagement (i.e. around a year). In another example, I'm spending two days on-site with a national broadcaster helping their electricians get to grips with generator earthing, protective bonding, and showing them when it is and isn't required for a TV drama.

Scheu: Most of our contracts are "long term" in that they are cradle-to-grave services that start with the mere concept of a venue all the way to the final project completion. That can take a few years. But we do get some "fast turnaround" contracts where a client has come to us with some remedial or safety related work that needs to be done quickly.

[Consultants] aren't hampered by office politics, they can talk to anyone in an organization . . . to help clarify a problem.

Most consultants are brought in because an organization lacks the time or people to accomplish something—and the business needs a solution. What process do you follow to arrive at recommended solutions?

Boden: Employing a consultant helps companies to define their goals and objectives much more effectively and usually at a higher management level. The process always starts with listening to the customer and then researching their particular needs and aspirations in order to define the parameters of the work and the level of budget available. Having researched the problem, the next step is to research solutions, then work with the client to find a solution that both fulfills the needs of the organisation and matches the success criteria. Having picked a solution and key equipment suppliers, the next step is usually to develop an overall project plan and involve all stakeholders in signing it off.

Conner: Basically, I draw, review, and then draw some more. In

between I talk to people. I go to bed thinking about the issues and possible solutions. And, I worry a lot about cost. Then, I draw it again.

Eade: In my experience, it's not always a lack of time or people, it's usually a lack of skill that consultants are used for. Not having the knowledge to do something better / faster / safer / cheaper / more efficiently is usually the reason the consultant is required.

Rabinovitz: Each engagement is unique. My clients tend to be smaller companies that are typically entrepreneurially driven so getting a sense of what the founder and leader wants to accomplish is hugely important. The more specific these goals can be the better for all. I try to get these written down and shared before we even start to work together.

For sales and marketing work, I try to start with what I consider to be the basics. I work to be sure that we have a solid shared vision of who our customers are, what pains our products remove for those customers, and what gains those customer can expect to receive when doing business with us. I push for all of us to understand the value proposition that we bring to our customers and be able to express all of this in a simple "sales story" that we develop, write, and share. The sales story becomes the foundation for all of our marketing and sales efforts.

Stimson: My most valuable tool is interviewing employees to discover what processes are in play. Once we uncover the problem (assuming it was hiding), I formulate a solution that takes into account how the company currently operates. For certain kinds of problems, the solution might have a standardized formula or project plan to get to the resolution, but these are often just a starting point. Most action plans are customized with a few template solutions woven in where we can.

Wood: It's not always that the organization lacks the people or time, more often you can help by allowing a focus on the problem that's difficult to achieve while also trying to do your daily job. The specific process is different every time, with the single common element being to ask a lot of questions. By digging in to the problem and talking to all the participants, a process and solution usually floats to the surface. Another advantage a consultant has is that they aren't hampered by office politics, they can talk to anyone in an organization (and should) to help clarify a problem. They don't have to follow organizational trees or worry too much about lines of command. This is often a huge benefit and gives me an unfair advantage!

What recommendations would you make for a company looking to utilize a consultant for the first time?

Boden: Firstly, be very clear in defining what you really want the consultant to do and what success looks like in terms of delivery. Agree up front exactly what the charges will be and how work is to be billed. Make time for face-to-face meetings rather than relying always on email! If your project is commercially sensitive, get the consultant to sign a non-disclosure agreement.

Bonitsky: First, don't wait until it's too late. I encourage prospective clients to contact me the moment that they begin to doubt they can find a solution or a path to change by themselves. A good consultant can point them in the right direction to clarify exactly what they *need* to change and layout all of the options. When I'm called in at a later stage where problems or delays in action are profoundly impacting the success of the company, it leaves fewer options to get the job done. Also, most consultants may not always be readily available. Not only might their schedules be full, but most, like me, try to avoid conflicts of interest within market segments and geographies.

Be prepared to own your timeline. If you have defined a deadline, then you need to be committed to providing the resources, attention, and follow through agreed on with your consultant. If I commit to your deadline, I expect you to do the same. Most business owners have a "need it now" expectation but usually learn the hard way that there's a huge gap between where they are at the beginning and what they'll need to get to the end. Your consultant will work to your deadline but success can only be measured by your ability and willingness to keep up.

The better you can articulate the results you want, the better result you will get.

Eade: Firstly, ascertain exactly what it is you want the outcome to be. Try and understand the problem(s) sufficiently to know what to expect and what to ask for. If you give a vague brief to someone you can expect a vague response, although a good consultant will try and spend time ascertaining the brief and will put it in writing so everyone is clear what the objective is and the expected outcomes are.

When you have a handle on what the problem is, you can make a more targeted hunt for the right person. For example, you might initially think you need an electronics designer who understands lighting protocols, when in fact you actually need a software expert who knows about ACN implementation.

Wood: Spend effort defining the problem. The better you can articulate the results you want, the better result you will get. In fact, by taking the time to fully define what you need, you may find you don't need the consultant after all! ■