

A consultant brings specialized expertise to define and influence change—Part 1

BY BEVERLY INGLESBY

A consultant can examine a problem/opportunity with a fresh perspective, objectivity, and provide a deeper level of expertise to move your business forward.

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

How and why did you choose to become a consultant?

Dan Bonitsky: Following the sale of VLPS, I took some time to sort out what the next big career move would be. I began to get nibbles from a variety of companies in lighting, but to me, none of them, would give me the level of challenges on a consistent basis that I was used to. However, it dawned on me that collectively, the immediate challenges that each of these offers provided might be just the ticket. Why limit myself to just one company? So, I re-positioned myself as a consultant and began knocking on doors.

Bill Conner: George Izenour's classes at Yale inspired me.

James Eade: I'd been freelance for a long time and gradually the work became less tools and more pen. I didn't set out to be a consultant; the nature of the work has taken me down that path.

Paul Rabinovitz: After nearly 20 years at Strong I suddenly found myself out of work and looking hard at my career choices not wanting to relocate from Omaha. I called some consultant industry friends and they all encouraged me to strike off into that direction.

Tom Stimson: The moment came when I attended a lecture by a former private-equity investor about rebuilding companies. I loved the idea of leading a restructuring. I quickly realized that I did not have the right credentials to become someone's makeover CEO, but that led me to management consulting instead. What attracted me to this career was the chance to apply so many different skills to a lot of different companies.

For your consulting business, is it better to fit a niche, or be a generalist? Why?

Julian Boden: This is a difficult question because different clients and different projects inevitably take you into different niche settings, so maintaining a role as a generalist is quite difficult. My expertise is in studio builds, broadcast projects, outside broadcast, and specialist production vehicles, so that tends to be my niche area of operation.

Bonitsky: There's a distinction between fitting a niche and niche marketing. Niche marketing makes me immediately visible to prospects with specific needs that match my strongest abilities and interests.

Eade: Most clients are specialists in their own fields and know what they do very well. Generally, they just need a bit of help or guidance on specific things outside of their usual remit, hence the consultant's role is usually around a specific area of management or technology.

Stimson: LOL! The answer is **yes!** You have to be a little niche-y and a little bit of a generalist at the same time. My niche is rental production companies, but my skills are very applicable to almost any business. I am also a generalist in that I work on everything from overall business strategy, financials, planning, and process. There's very little I won't help with.

Mike Wood: Both are important. For my clients, I need to have a broad knowledge of the industry, how it has developed, how R&D works, and where it doesn't, and where and how technology is going. This general business understanding can be equally applicable to any discipline. However, I also like to feel that I can provide much more specific assistance when dealing with lighting. Ten years ago, you might have thought that LEDs were a niche, but now I rarely work with clients on any other technology.

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, ASTC, 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 ETCF. 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 important is your online presence for attracting new clients? Describe what has been most effective for you (blog, website, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, contributing articles/writing white papers, webinars, speeches/presentations, networking events, etc.)?

Boden: Social media doesn't play a large role for me in attracting new clients and I don't even have a Twitter account. However, I do rate LinkedIn highly as it plays an important part in maintaining up to date contacts and keeping track of people as they inevitably move around the industry.

Conner: We don't use the Internet as well as we probably should. Keeping an ear to the ground, and the writing of articles, is about the extent to which BCA tries to attract new clients.

Rabinovitz: As a "boomer" rather than a Gen X, it is interesting that I got my last client via Twitter, of all places. I am not very active on Twitter but had "followed" a company on their Twitter feed. They checked me out, reached out via Twitter, and now we have a successful long-term relationship. So the short answer is that if you are going to be a consultant in the sales and marketing area you had better have an online presence.

Peter Scheu: It's fairly important for us to have a basic Web presence. It's quick, easy, and effective to send a potential client to our website where they can see examples of our projects and see our experience. We don't do any social networking (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and may not in the future.

Stimson: My view of online marketing and messaging has changed in recent years. I think you can do it badly and hurt yourself, but even if you are great at it I think the value is minimal. The one thing online with the greatest impact has been testimonial videos of my clients talking about our projects and what it is like to work with me (apparently they feel people should be forewarned). I regularly hear that the impact from these videos has convinced folks to seek me out.

Wood: Keeping yourself visible is key. You want your name to come easily to mind when a potential client is seeking help with a project. For me, that has been through writing articles and product reviews in industry magazines (including this one), and my weekly newsletter on recent patent publications. You also need a way for a client to easily check online what experience you have, and the type of projects you've been successful with. An online library of my writings over the years helps enormously in establishing my credentials.

How do you remain timely and relevant in our fast-changing industry? Please provide a specific example.

Boden: Our industry is very hardware orientated, so it's vital to keep in step with key suppliers. At the moment, UHD and 4K are the buzzwords for the industry. I look at what people like Sony, Canon, and others are doing with camera development particularly around 35mm sensors. On the editing and production side, Avid's toolkit continues to develop particularly with the latest release

of Media Composer v8 which provides more third-party links for the professional editor. The increased convergence of high definition video and IP is another important trend and one that is fundamentally changing hardware infrastructures. Change in our industry is here to stay—it is both continually exciting and challenging. Staying relevant means you need to stay close to the action and talk to both users and suppliers.

Bonitsky: By nature, I'm a curious person. I'm always on the prowl for new things, ideas, and inspirations. Plus, I have a rich network of friends and colleagues that I can tap in to when I'm researching something. Keeping up with the trade journals, and *Protocol*, is important, as well.

... it's about communicating and nothing beats being around the same table.

Since the mid '90s, I've quietly hosted a small gathering for dinner each year during LDI. Usually it's a small group of designers, business owners, educators, students, technicians, performers, and the occasional industry pundit. Most years the faces vary, depending on who's in town and available. We spend an evening of good food, interesting stories, and great conversations. It not only keeps me up to date, but provides opportunities for my guests to meet and share ideas with others who may not have had the chance for an introduction.

Eade: Most of my work is related in some way to compliance with standards and legislation whether it be designing something or advising on best practice. Being actively involved in creating the standards and legislation puts me in an ideal position to help customers because I'm ahead of published changes.

I also chair or sit on various committees including the ABTT Theatre Safety Committee, I'm an observer on the Technical Standards CPWG and EPWG, and I'm involved in the IET committee for developing guidance on integrated systems. Through these contributions, one is aware of the latest developments in a wide range of areas, and accordingly, can give the most up to date advice.

Rabinovitz: One of the most satisfying aspects of being a consultant is that I have been able to pursue my passion for lifelong learning and get paid for it. I read more now than I have ever done in the past. The Internet is a goldmine of information, most of it free, and I take advantage of webinars and YouTube presentations nearly daily. Specifically I have a client, Parasol Systems, who sells a rather expensive but spectacular product. Price resistance is one of the main stumbling blocks as they try to close deals. While all of us run into this problem, it is really exaggerated when you are trying to sell custom systems that can approach a half a million dollars and your "small" inexpensive system is over \$30,000. I was able to research and read up on this specific issue and introduce techniques

to our sales process that were tried and proven in other markets.

Scheu: Keeping in contact with manufacturers' reps, attending conferences, and hearing from other consultants about their experiences with different products and systems is basic. Also, being involved in PLASA's Technical Standards program keeps us "ahead of the curve" when making recommendations or giving advice to clients on projects that may take years to come to fruition.

Wood: Participating in industry efforts such as technical standards is helpful. It serves a dual purpose, it helps me keep up with what's new on technology and the direction the industry is going, and I get to stay visible and network with the right people at the same time. Enlightened self interest is important. Otherwise, it is common sense: You need to read, read, read. I subscribe to many newsletters and RSS feeds in key technology areas, many of which are on the periphery of our business as much of the time we piggy back on developments from elsewhere. Like a professor in college, a consultant must make sure they've read the text book before the students. I try and budget my time to work on projects for three weeks a month. The other week is for generic research and administration.

What infrastructure or tools do you need to do your job?

Conner: Not much. Since establishing BCA, I've gotten along fine with just a laptop and the typical productivity and utility applications, plus AutoCAD. Now I have a desktop as well. Also, some file cabinets and lots of floor space to pile up paper. Oh yes, a credit card for travel. Airplanes are probably most essential, because it's about communication and nothing beats being around the same table.

Rabinovitz: Life in the 21st century couldn't be more suited for a consultant. A desk, a computer, a cell phone, and an Internet connection and you are set. I did have to build a workshop to do my product development work in as I tend to want to build the first article myself, but this is not a requirement.

Scheu: A very fast computer, AutoCAD, Revit, and mobile tools like a reliable cell phone and tablet. And an open mind...

Can you share any words of wisdom or advice for anyone looking to make the transition to a career as a consultant?

Boden: Consultancy doesn't suit everybody and if you are happy in a good job with a good company then it probably isn't for you. However, if you are facing redundancy or you want to be your own boss, work mainly from home, and you still have plenty of industry contacts, then perhaps it could be for you. However, it can be difficult to predict work levels and sometimes you will be very busy, other times not so.

Bonitsky:

- Build a useful referral network and be prepared to spend most of your time marketing, visiting prospects, and writing proposals;

- Get the advice of a trusted contracts attorney and business insurance broker familiar with the type of consulting that you're planning to conduct;

- Stay curious!

Conner: Keep your eyes and ears open and maybe not so much your mouth.

Eade: There is a difference between being freelance and good at a job, and being a consultant—the type of insurance you have is a good test. But crucially, you need to have enough to sell—if you are the world expert on truss pins, for example, you will probably have a limited market for your skills. So think about what it is you are good at and your "Plan B." Our industry is very small in many respects and it pays to have a couple of irons in different fires to tide you over for quieter periods.

Also, volunteer for things (like giving seminars at trade shows for example) where reasonable, it's a good way of networking and promoting your wares to an audience of potential clients.

... volunteer [like seminars and articles] ... it's a good way of networking and promoting your wares to an audience of potential clients.

Scheu: Get as much real, hands-on production, system design, and contracting experience as you can long before you get into consulting. It's like designing a Formula 1 race car... You'd better know how to drive and fix one long before you start trying to design one for someone else.

Stimson: I will give the same advice I received:

1. Follow the money. Consult on things that are valuable. Help people make money and they will return your calls.
2. Make time to sell, promote, and market even when you are busy. Nothing worse than coming up for air after a few busy months to find there is nothing, zero, zip, nada in your pipeline.
3. Selling by the hour is a dead-end proposition. Sell projects and outcomes. Work smarter and you can make more money.
4. Whatever you think is a fair price—you are worth more.

Wood: The biggest problem in a small industry like ours is being conflicted. If you are working for manufacturer A on a project involving a specific technology, then you are ethically conflicted from working for any of manufacturer A's competitors on the same topic. That means it is dangerous to specialize too narrowly.

Learn more with Part 2 in the Spring 2015 edition of Protocol. ■