



Working with Consultants: *The Ten Biggest Mistakes*

By Phil Cooke

Today, “outsourcing” is all the rage in corporate America. The theory behind the practice is worth thinking about: *If there is some aspect of your business that you don’t do well, then outsource it to someone who does.* For instance, a corporation that builds computers, might not be so strong at strategic planning, or a company that manufactures sports equipment, probably doesn’t understand marketing and public relations. So they find consultants with experience and success in those areas to give them advice, training, and expertise.

Could churches, ministries, and other Christian organizations benefit from the concept?

Absolutely.

Although our mandate for reaching the lost couldn’t be simpler, the various ways available to accomplish that mandate couldn’t be more complex. Today, churches and ministries routinely use new technology, the media, marketing strategies, leadership training, and other tools to make their outreaches, educational programs, and ministries more effective.

That’s why thousands of churches and Para church ministries around the world use consultants – or “experts” in particular fields to help them understand and implement their outreaches more effectively. Consultants are available in areas such as Christian education, computer technology, media, strategic planning, leadership, marketing and advertising, and more, and they can make a real difference in raising the level of competence for your staff members, employees, and leaders.

Wireless Age contacted Phil Cooke, a television producer and Christian media consultant for some of the largest and most effective media ministries in the country to give us some frank advice about using consultants. Phil told us that he’s seen so many churches and ministries, as well as Christian media organizations use consultants in the wrong ways, he decided to create a list that he calls “*The 10 Biggest Mistakes.*”

Perhaps this will change your thinking about consultants, and give you some innovative ideas about how they can positively impact your organization and mission.

Mistake #1 - Assume You Don’t Need One.

I sat next to a corporate management consultant on a flight recently and he made an interesting statement: *“Today, corporate America understands the power of using consultants, and I’m busier than ever. The single most important role a consultant can play is to provide a fresh perspective, and companies are willing to pay me a lot of money to do just that.”* Leadership expert John Maxwell calls it “fresh eyes.” Everyone needs someone from the outside to bring a new perspective, valuable experience, and cutting edge thinking to their situation. If you’re not using outside sources, especially in areas like the media, TV and radio production, strategic planning, advertising and marketing, and direct mail, then you’re missing an incredible resource of new ideas, principles, and techniques. If the most successful companies in America use consultants, perhaps you should consider them as well.

Mistake #2 – Don’t Check Their Track Record.

Use consultants, but make sure you’ve hired the right one. Ask for a client list and check them out ahead of time. The best consultants have a great track record, and you can tell from past clients if they have what it takes to impact your church or ministry. Whatever you do, don’t just take the consultant’s word for it – there are plenty of over-rated ones out there. View their demo reel, client list, portfolio, spreadsheets, or other information that documents past successes, and more importantly, call their former clients and ask about their experiences. I recently had a great compliment paid to me from one of the fastest growing media ministries, when their top administrator called me and said, *“We’ve spent six months looking at everything on Christian television, and every single time we found something we liked, our research team discovered you either produced it, or were connected with it in some way. That’s why we want you to help us.”*

That ministry had done their homework.

Mistake #3 - Never Give them Access to the Top Person in the Organization.

I know a ministry who recently brought in a direct mail consultant, but never gave him access to the ministry leader. In spite of the fact that the consultant was helping write and edit letters, magazine articles, and other materials that needed to express the ministry leader’s vision and calling, he never had an opportunity to actually meet and talk with him. Anyone responsible for expressing the pastor or ministry leader’s vision through television, radio, print, or the internet, desperately needs “face time” with the boss. If the pastor, ministry or corporate leader is too busy or “too important” to make time for the people who act as his or her gatekeepers to millions of potential partners, viewers, and listeners – then his or her priorities are way out of whack.

Mistake #4 - Always have your Middle Managers Evaluate and Criticize the Consultant’s Recommendations.

If your in-house management team could have solved the problem, you wouldn’t have needed to bring in a consultant in the first place. Over and over, I see Christian organizations hire outside experts to help re-shape different aspects of ministry outreaches, but they are constantly being micro-managed, evaluated, or critiqued by less-

experienced in-house managers. Leave the consultant alone long enough to produce results! Certainly don't let him take over the ministry, or work without guidelines or supervision. But please don't dilute his or her work by allowing your managers to meddle with it. After all, if the in-house people are such experts, why are you in the fix you're in now?

Mistake #5 - Nickel and Dime Your Consultants.

Don't hire a consultant and then financially tie his or her hands. Of course you don't have an unlimited bank account, but sit down with your consultant ahead of time, create an appropriate budget, and then let them work inside that framework. Don't nickel and dime them – especially if they're getting results. The most successful consultants can be expensive – but they know what they're doing and are worth every penny. In fact, beware of consultants who sell themselves too cheaply. Let the good ones have the tools and resources they need to make your company or ministry successful.

Mistake #6 - Be Afraid They'll Take Over.

Most consultants work with numerous clients, travel a great deal, set their own hours, and run their own business – what a great life! Why in the world would they want to take over your ministry? One of the most baffling concerns many ministries have is that consultants want to just come in and take over the ministry. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. The best consultants specialize in areas like media, TV or radio production, fundraising, employee training, strategic planning, information technology, etc. They aren't the least bit interested in dealing with personnel issues, correspondence, shipping, or other general ministry areas. Their greatest joy is to be wildly successful in the area they were hired to fix – not hijack your organization.

Mistake #7 – Don't Take Them Seriously

I've never understood churches and ministries that hire consultants and then don't listen to them. I think this must come from insecurity, inexperience, or in a few cases - a raging ego. The best consultants are people that can transform your ministry and take you to the next level. They often come to you after working with some of the most successful churches, ministries, and organizations in America. Not listening to that type of expertise is like a football team never listening to a winning coach. Don't want to listen? Then don't hire them to begin with.

Mistake #8 – If They Make a Mistake, Get Rid of Them.

I actually like consultants to make mistakes. It means they are trying new things, over-reaching, and pushing the limits. Give your consultant room to present ideas you might not like, or don't think would work. Give them a little latitude, and they'll pay you back in spades with creative work, innovative ideas, and most of all – results. When they do make a mistake or present an idea or project you don't like – don't just dismiss them. Sit down and discuss it at length – what you liked and didn't like, and let them defend

their thinking. Very often, the motives and reasons are sound, and have been used successfully elsewhere. Listen, and it might just change your opinion – and your future.

Mistake #9 - Don't Recommend Them to Others.

A regular joke in the world of consulting is that every client wants to think they're the only client the consultant has. But remember – the more clients your consultant works with, the wider range of experience, data, and ideas he brings to your table. Don't hog a good consultant – after all, we're all on the same team. Help your church and ministry friends by sharing good consultants and expanding their client base. Although good consultants keep their information from other organizations highly confidential, their experiences from other ministries will only help you.

Mistake #10 - Only Use Them for Short Term Projects.

In the secular world, client-consultant relationships work for years, and even decades. In television production for instance, it might take years to build or re-shape your television outreach – especially at a national level. Training a crew, buying the right equipment, selecting the best TV stations and networks, building a fundraising program, developing a long term media strategy, branding your program, advertising and promotion, graphic design, exploring international media opportunities and more, take time. Sometimes a consultant can come in and fix something right away, but that's the exception, rather than the rule. Look for a consultant that can provide a long term plan for helping you achieve your goals, and make sure he has the staff, resources, and tools for staying with you for the long haul, and taking your church or ministry to the far reaches of success and effectiveness.

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