

By Willy Campbell

**Follow These Guidelines When Hiring a Consultant**

As a small business owner, from time to time you are likely to bump up against a problem that you can't solve yourself. That may be because you don't have the right experience or knowledge to correct it. Or it may be because you are perfectly capable of meeting the challenge but cannot justify the time it will require of you, given your many other responsibilities. Tackling that challenge until a later time may not be an option if the goal is to move the company forward. Your first decision is to decide when it's time to hire a consultant to find the solution, to remove a major distraction from your business day, and, perhaps to avoid a costly mistake? Only you can make that decision.

Much like an independent contractor, consultants come on a short-term or project basis. For an agreed-upon fee, they will agree to:

- Analyze or solve a problem
- Set up a new procedure or system
- Conduct research
- Advise on a one-time activity, such as setting up a corporation

The general advantage of using a consultant is that you pay only for the information and guidance you need. But the key is for you to define precisely what you need. If you retain the consultant with a poorly defined mission, you will end with frustration having spent time and money without obtaining your desired results. Many times an unhappy relationship with a consultant can be tracked directly to their having been asked the wrong question to answer.

An example of a situation where a consultant might make sense is when you need to create a marketing and advertising program. A consultant can develop your advertising plan and leave it to you to implement. However, the same consultant may undertake certain tasks within the plan – perhaps having to do with creating ad messages or finding the right graphic designer.

Some day-to-day activities and situations may require short-term consulting help; such as making a fix in a proprietary software program. Identifying, purchasing and implementing a comprehensive computer system, in contrast, would require a software consultant on a longer term basis.

For better cost control and a more reliable estimate, establish a completion date for the project. An open-ended consulting relationship may create dependency while becoming a financial drain. In addition, use caution when considering a more generic management consultant who may not be able or willing to specify the work he or she is prepared to do to focus on a problem area.

To begin the search for a consultant, tap into your own network for recommendations and then check references. You will want to know what problem the consultant was asked to solve, whether the work was completed on time and within budget, and whether the consultant produced a quality product.

For other perspectives on involving outside experts in your business, contact the Sandhills Chapter of SCORE “Counselors to America’s Small Business”. SCORE is a nationwide nonprofit association of expert business counselors who provide free and confidential business counseling to small business owners. The Sandhills Chapter is very active in counseling, mentoring and presenting free business seminars. It is currently expanding these activities and is seeking motivated volunteers. You can reach the Chapter via the web at [www.sandhillsscore.org](http://www.sandhillsscore.org) or at 910-692-3926.

Remember – send your business questions to me at [www.contact@sandhillsscore.org](mailto:www.contact@sandhillsscore.org) and don’t forget to provide a way to contact you. I may not be able to answer all of them in this column but every one will receive a personal answer from one of our Sandhills SCORE counselors!