

Expanding your markets as a consultant

I've been a consulting engineer for 23 years, over half my career. After almost 20 years in the corporate environment (including one layoff and one firing), I made my "escape" the day the market crashed in 1987. It has been a blast ever since!

As consulting engineers, my business partner and I are in a niche. We specialize in "Electromagnetic Interference and Compatibility" or EMI/EMC. For you non-technical folks, if you've seen the movie Ghost Busters, that is what we do in the electrical engineering world -- we chase electronic ghosts. And yes, we've even been electronically slimed.

Like the original Ghost Busters, our challenge starting out was to become the "Who ya gonna call" consultants. But how? The market for consultants can be cruel and inefficient. While many professionals disdain marketing, we immediately realized we needed to do three things if we were going to succeed -- market, market, and market some more.

Here are several things we tried in the first few years. Some worked better than others, but they all produced business. And some even led to bigger and better things later on.

Started a trade show -- We needed a splash to let the local engineering community know we were in business, so we decided to host a "trade show". When we checked on hotel meeting rooms, we were quoted \$300 for the evening. But get this -- the room was free if we ordered \$300 worth of food. Do you know how much shrimp and other goodies you could get for \$300 in 1987? A lot.

But it gets even better. We invited four local equipment vendors plus a local test lab to join us. Now it only cost \$50 each, plus we leveraged our contacts. We printed some flyers for vendor handouts, and did a mailing to our local professional organization. Viola! About 200 people showed up for our glorified cocktail party. By the way -- we did not provide alcohol. No moral issue, just keeping the costs under control. Also, no liability if someone imbibed too much.

We now had a great source of local leads, plus several vendors who would recommend us. Did the show continue? Yes, the next year we joined forces with the local test lab, and turned it into a regional trade show that is still going on today.

Wrote magazine articles -- Since we started BI (Before Internet), blogs and other social media were not even a gleam in anyone's eye. But specialty journals were everywhere, and many are still around today (both electronic and print). By the way, don't dismiss print media, particularly if your potential clients are over 45. Many of us still enjoy holding a magazine, newsletter, or book in our hands.

Our secret here was to approach the second tier magazines, not the top tier magazines or the technical journals. In the latter case it might take a year or more to appear in print, but for the second tier, you can often be in print in 90 days or less. Furthermore, the editors for these smaller publications are often hungry for good editorial material. We always made sure we delivered on time, as magazines have deadlines.

Several years later we were able to graduate to the higher tiers. In one case, a series of articles eventually turned into a book published by our professional organization. In another case, what was initially proposed as a series became a magazine supplement that went out, free, to over 130,000 engineers. When that hit the streets, we instantly became a national firm. The supplement became a reprint, and later went

into a second reprint. A couple of years ago, we got the rights back, and now sell an updated version as a book on our web site.

Supported our professional organization -- These organizations offer a ready made network of friendly potential clients. But it is not enough to just attend meetings -- you need to get involved. When the position was vacated, we offered to edit the regional newsletter. It was a bit of work, so the organization leaders were delighted to have someone volunteer for the job.

In addition to editing the newsletter, one of us needed to attend the monthly sectional board meetings. What a great way to network. When our local power utility had a serious EMI problem, one of the board members immediately recommended us. And why not? To her, we were already a known and trusted consulting firm.

Started our own newsletter - After about three years, we realized we needed a way to keep in touch with our existing clients in a proactive way. So we started a newsletter for our "friends, clients, and colleagues." It was a four page letter that we published quarterly. What was interesting was that every time it hit the streets, the phone would ring, and we would average a new job or two.

We still print the letter, but are down to twice a year. We eventually went electronic, but gave people the option to receive it by snail mail. The current split is about 50/50, so once again, print media is not dead. Our private list has grown over the years to several thousand -- not too bad for a narrow niche. We posted all the back issues on our web site -- instant mini-white papers!

Developed collateral -- Often overlooked today, we spent some time and money on a coordinated package of business cards, letterhead/envelopes, mail labels, and a threefold capabilities brochure. Some of this has been moved to our web site (letterhead and brochure), so we can maintain a unified professional appearance. For example, electronic proposals and invoices are prepared on letterhead, and sent as pdf attachments to emails.

We've had some fun with this too. One of my favorites is our bright red "EMI-GURU" button, reflecting a trademarked brand we established for our web site (www.emiguru.com) and a toll free voice mail box (888-EMI-GURU.) As I recall, beer may have been involved with the button. On a lark, we took some to our next annual professional symposium. We knew we had a winner when we had our competitors wearing them. After all, every engineer wants to be a guru.

These are just a few of the marketing methods we've tried over the years. I chose these as ones that worked for us in our early days. We still use most of them, and have augmented them with more complex (and more costly) methods such as multi-day seminars, presentations, trade shows, and more. We are still at it -- we have not yet found a "magic bullet" for marketing consulting practices. I hope this has stimulated some thinking about your marketing.

Peace and good hunting... Daryl

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