



TAXI! WHAT CONSULTANTS CAN LEARN FROM CAB DRIVERS

Most consultants are like cab drivers. Cab drivers run the meter. They throw the luggage in the trunk (that's a \$1.00 bag charge). They may or may not be personable. If you have extra passengers, that's \$1.50 each on top of the mileage. No smoking. And the radio is tuned to their favorite station – not yours.

Most consultants charge by the hour or the day. The meter is running. When you need a special report or their attendance at an onsite meeting, there's your bag charge. They may or may not be personable to anyone other than the executive who hired them. If you need additional work or facilitation or expertise, there's a fee "on top of the mileage." And most times, you're locked into their "radio station" – tuned to their methodologies, their licensed tools, their processes – not yours.

What if you came across a dramatically different kind of cab driver? Let's call him Ike.

1. Ike has his own business card with his personal cell phone number, a rocket logo and a humorous tagline, such as "Strap in. Hang on. Here we go!" One of his cab's notable features is the Hot Wheels steering wheel cover. Your initial impression might be that he is direct and, most importantly, fast.
2. In addition, Ike is a great listener. This would be in contrast to some "real character" cab drivers, who are great talkers.
3. Ike takes credit cards and proudly displays the Visa and American Express decals inside his cab. A credit card transaction costs him between 2 and 4% of every sale. (The cab company does NOT subsidize this fee – it's up to each individual driver to decide whether to accept credit cards or not.) But it also makes him easy to do business with – and, coincidentally, increases the likelihood of getting a nice tip.
4. Ike is proactive and offers suggestions. For example, when a passenger asks Ike for a good restaurant recommendation, he has a few of his favorite places in mind and a restaurant guide available right in the front seat of the cab. Ike will offer to take his passenger to the restaurant, and also to come back at an appointed time to save the hassle of tracking down another cab. He is never late. Does Ike profit from this? Sure. Does Ike's passenger? Sure. Will some cab drivers refuse to come back at a set time for fear of losing a juicier fare or a longer ride that may or may not come along? You bet.
5. When picking up or dropping off from the airport, Ike always finds out a little bit about his passenger. Is this his first time in town? How long is his visit? If Ike discovers that his passenger has come for business and hasn't any time to see the sights or experience the city, he offers to take the passenger on a 10-minute sightseeing tour of downtown. Pointing out the highlights, sharing a little history, and telling a few stories, Ike has his passenger back on his way with a real flavor of the city that he loves. Is this a gimmick to add 10 minutes to the meter? With some cabbies, it might be. But Ike's passion and knowledge and eagerness to share it with his passengers cannot be faked. Would a friend do the same for you on your way out of town? Absolutely.

Let's turn our focus to the lessons for consulting. Feel free to compare these consulting tips with the corresponding lessons from the taxi business above.

1. Successful consultants stand apart – both in form and in substance. Sales trainer, consultant, and author Jeffrey Gitomer uses a half-dollar sized coin with his image and contact information (and some clever slogans like "In Sales We Trust") engraved on it as his business card. People not only remember it, they keep it and they show it to their friends. Your initial impression might be that he is successful, funny, creative, and different than every other "me-too" sales trainer wearing a nice suit and carrying sharp white business cards (yawn).
2. Successful consultants are not good listeners. They're DEEP listeners. "Good" listeners use surface tricks and techniques like "active listening" and "matching and mirroring." Deep listeners listen with no agenda. Your listening focus should be on empathy – literally "feeling WITH" the client – and understanding the issues behind the issues. This isn't a trick you learn in "consulting school." This comes from your heart and your genuine interest in helping the client improve their situation. Deep listening will help you understand the real value that the client seeks from you.
3. Successful consultants are easy to do business with. One of the world's finest consultants, Alan Weiss, says in his book *Million Dollar Consulting*, "you have to spend money to make money." Part of that money should be spent on things that will make you easy to do business with. Some of these things are almost trivial – being able to accept credit cards, having an 800 number, etc. And some of these things will be a major investment of time, effort, thought, and energy. Like designing a resource-rich web presence or moving to value-based fee-setting so people get you and your expertise without concern over when you punch in and out on the time clock.
4. Successful consultants are proactive and offer suggestions. Flexibility is a great source of strength. So is forward movement. When consulting with large organizations, it is easy to fall into their trap of "analysis paralysis." Especially with all the hype around "getting close to the customer." The danger for consultants in getting too close to the customer is that you'll get mired in the same quicksand you've been brought in to rescue them from! Keep moving, and always offer options. It could be as simple as "Plan A or B or C," but giving choices always enhances collaboration and provides a sense of shared responsibility for outcomes. And it's harder to say "No" when asked "Chocolate or Vanilla or Strawberry?" Ideally, your clients will say "Wow, they ALL sound delicious." Then you are in a position to make a recommendation based on your deep listening (See #2!).
5. Successful consultants work from passion, knowledge, and eagerness to help. The irony of this is that the more easy and effortless the work for the consultant, the greater the value it has for the client. For the consultant, the intersection of joy and business is called profit. Marketer, speaker, and author Seth Godin believes that in any business relationship, the sooner you ask for money, the less you will get. This has interesting implications for the consulting business, where knowledge and expertise (and to a certain extent, even conversation) has monetary value.

I happen to believe in the concept of value-first selling. In other words, you should give clients valuable information and point them to resources they need, even before you're hired. You should work to make prospects think, "Wow, this guy is a goldmine. Imagine what we'd get if we actually HIRED him."

Now a lot of sales and consulting experts call this "spilling the candy in the lobby" and they advise strongly against it. And I would advise against it too – if you're only carrying one bowl of candy. But without bragging, I can safely say that among great consultants (people who work at the intersection of passion and knowledge and eagerness to help), we're a veritable candy store and are not likely to run out anytime soon by sharing our gifts with clients that are hungry for what we have to offer.

Would you help a friend with your knowledge and expertise? Sure you would. Perhaps clients are simply friends that pay you money? Think about it.

Beep, beep. "Hop in!"