



Promote, promote, promote: Life as an MR consultant

| By Michael Lieberman

A friend of mine just left his corporate job to launch a solo career. With two kids in college and a mortgage to cover, that's a scary move. Giving up that paycheck hurts.

What words of wisdom could I offer Jeff over a hot Starbucks beverage? That the best part of being independent is that you are *independent*.

At some point in our lives, work transmutes from making a living to being a lifestyle choice. This is particularly true of my late Baby Boomer peers like Jeff who are rounding 50 and entering into the zone of treacherous employability. In the corporate world, we are at serious risk. Our salaries are expensive for the company, particularly in comparison to the myriad Millennials attempting to enter the job market. Technology has transformed so rapidly that most senior management don't have a clue as to whether their skill sets have become obsolete or not. Losing a long-held corporate job when one has passed his or her 50th birthday is as pleasant as being denied tenure at a university after seven years of academically menial labor.

How else is self-employment a good thing?

Forget tsunami or Sahara. The nature of marketing research (and many industries) is that there is too much to do or nothing at all. A company employee shows up and looks busy, even if she is doing nothing. I call this boredom stress. Consultants, when they have no work, write articles, tweet and lunch but are not required to show up at the office under the watchful eye of a supervisor.

Zero downsizing. An economic slowdown, a tough winter or just bad luck can result in a long slow period. An employee may begin to wonder, "Will I be laid off?" A consultant may worry as well – Where is the business? How do I pay my bills? – but he cannot be fired.

Ousting office politics. Of course, consulting entails some political aspects: understanding the decision dynamic of, say, a corporate end-client or how to finesse clients to manage timing or expectations. However, when one works alone or all of his moving parts are off-site, there isn't much backbiting. No one is gunning for my job. There are no fights over territory. No gossip at the water cooler.

Low overhead. I do not work alone. I employ a report writer, Webmaster and an Excel programmer to help make my conjoint simulators look great. I have strategic partners with whom I contribute to large, full-service projects. I pay them when there is work. When there are no projects, I do not pay them. When things are slow, my overhead is low.

What works for me

The following are a summation of what I found works after 15 years on my own.

Be clear: Consulting, in a far less glamorous (and probably lucrative) way, is like fame. Famous people are famous for something. Brad Pitt is a famous actor. Justin Bieber is a famous singer (and infamous as the world's most obnoxious super-brat).

McDonald's is famous for hamburgers.

Consultants must market a specific skill but they certainly can possess others. Like McDonald's, which is famous for hamburgers but also serves french fries and ice cream, a consultant can do more than one thing. I am a statistician but I am often asked to edit questionnaires or devise compelling graphics.

A consultant must be able to articulate what she does in one or two sentences. For example, my after-conference reception speech (where food and alcohol have been served) is: "I am a statistical consultant and researcher who can do all analyses currently used in the marketing research industry and I am able to deliver the results in clear English. We answer the marketing questions."

I do not mention at the beginning that I write novels as a hobby. But given the chance I throw it in with my tag line, "Because if one can write a novel, one can write a memo."

Be excellent: A client once told me that she prefers to use consultants because they give 110 percent. The consultants I know do treat their clients' work as their own.

- If my work isn't excellent, it isn't good enough.
- Commit to learning something new from each study. Whether a new skill, like social network analysis or a project that involved regression – which I have done thousands of times in my career – the process of incremental education makes me a better consultant.
- It is my priority to make my clients look great.

The dark side of paradise

There is a saying in Jerusalem, the city where I live. "The sand is always yellower on the other side of the fence." I have described

the prerogatives of consultancy. Now for the catches.

Consulting isn't easy, and the parts that are difficult do not become easier. Consultants never secure tenure and our paychecks are never steady.

Tough beginnings: All beginnings are hard. It is easier to rise in lifestyle as your income increases than deflate when your income shrinks, but if one is coming from a reasonably well-paying position, the first year or two of independence could produce a relatively lower income.

Self-promotion: We have all heard the academic commonplace, "Publish or perish." We have a parallel saying in consulting: "Self-promote or wither." Your relationship with current clients is in constant flux – whether you know it or not. I've had good, reliable clients gobbled up by the monsters of our industry. A key contact may move on to another company and his replacement may bring in her own numbers guy. Clients are human; some may simply close their shops. Or retire. One might check into rehab. Some, unfortunately, die.

So, there are three things a consultant must do: Promote, promote, promote.

Personally, I write articles, attend conferences and speak as often as possible. I send out friendly monthly mailings through Constant Contact. I visit clients and give lunch-and-learn presentations to their staff. There are always new people to meet, new frontiers to explore and new techniques to learn. Even when things are great, consultants are not sure where their next dollar may be coming from. So, promote, promote, promote. 🍷

Editor's note: Michael Lieberman is founder and president of Multivariate Solutions, a New York consulting firm. He can be reached at michael@mvsolution.com.