

Hiring a Consultant

by Kim Klein

Reprinted with permission from the Grassroots Fundraising Journal

There are times in the life of almost every group when a fundraising consultant can be helpful. These times are characterized by one or more of the following situations:

- You need someone with skill and knowledge who cares about the issues your organization is concerned with, but is far enough removed to have perspective on how your organization can improve its overall fundraising or some particular aspect of it.
- You need help deciding on a course of action related to fundraising.
- You need someone to carry out a time-limited fundraising task.
- You need someone one day each week or month to help design a work plan, provide guidance and be available to answer questions for your bright, energetic but inexperienced fundraising staff.
- You are between staff and need someone temporarily to run the development function of your organization.

Consulting is characterized by being time-limited. You can hire a consultant for a few hours a week, a few days a month, or contract for a number of months. A consultant does not usually get involved in carrying out day-to-day fundraising operations. She or he is generally employed to give advice and guidance.

Consultants must know what your organization can learn from their teaching, guiding and advice giving, and what it can only learn from experience. They must know what they can do for an organization, and what an organization can only do for itself.

Fundraising consultants can:

- Train and motivate people in all aspects of fundraising.
- Create fundraising plans and help implement and evaluate those plans.
- Research prospective donors and write proposals if needed.
- Set up a database for keeping track of donor information.
- Conduct feasibility studies.
- Conduct direct mail campaigns.
- Help board members understand their responsibilities, and help organizations recruit and train good board members.
- Study and recommend structural changes in an organization to improve functioning and fundraising efficiency.
- Help hire fundraising staff.
- Set up any other fundraising strategy that an organization has decided to use.
- Manage mailing lists and donor information. This can include sending out pledge reminders, thank-you notes and renewal letters. (Generally, it is not cost-effective for small organizations to pay a consultant to do these tasks).

Fundraising consultants cannot:

- Actually solicit money from individuals, unless they go as part of a team with someone from the organization.
- Use their personal contacts to raise money. Consultants often know a great deal about wealthy givers in the community and, with discretion, can share that knowledge in prospect research. However, consultants do not go from job to job with their own list of prospects. Most of the time consultants do not actually raise money. If a consultant offers to do all your fundraising for you, run the other way. This is not an effective solution because, at best, it postpones the necessity of getting the board, staff and volunteers involved in fundraising.
- Guarantee their work.

Paying Consultants

There are no standards or guidelines for how much to pay a consultant. Most consultants charge by the day or the hour, but some charge by the job. Consultants also charge for all their expenses: hotels, meals, telephone, photocopying and travel are the most common.

Establish clearly just what you are paying for. For example, you pay for the consultant's time. But when does that time start – when the consultant arrives at the job or when they leave home to travel to the job? Find out if the consultant charges for phone calls, and at what rate.

If you are hiring a person for several days or months of work, build in evaluation points. This benefits the consultant also, who may need to re-estimate the time involved, or may have run into some unforeseen obstacles. It is important to have a written statement spelling out your understanding of the consultant's role, fees and expenses, which you both sign. For the same reasons listed in the last issue's column on hiring a development director, do not pay the consultant on a contingency or commission basis.

How to Choose a Consultant

Once you have decided that your particular situation may be helped by a consultant, what do you look for in that person?

Track Record. Ask how much fundraising he or she has done, and with what success. Has the person worked with organizations similar to yours both in purpose and strategy, and in similar locales? If questions of gender, sexual orientation, race, class, or disability are very important in your organization, ask the consultant what experience they have working on these issues as well, or with diverse groups of people.

References. If you don't know the person by reputation, ask for the last three groups she or he has worked with. Then call those groups and ask about the consultant. Was the person helpful? Did the consultant listen well and really understand the situation? Would this group hire this consultant again?

Compatibility. If you envision a relationship with the consultant involving more than a one- or two-day training, you may wish to meet the person to see if you like the person and would feel good taking his or her advice. Sometimes an excellent fundraising consultant is not the right person for your group because the personalities will not mesh. If the organization dislikes the consultant, both the person's advice and your money are wasted.

Confidence. Ask what the consultant will do for you, or what he or she recommends. Avoid asking for long written plans. Elaborate "work plans" or proposals are often standardized; each one is essentially the same as the next, with the name of your organization substituted for the name of the previous organization. You can ask for a resume, but by the time of this meeting, you are not looking so much for proof of fundraising knowledge as for ability to put that knowledge across.

Belief. Finally, the consultant must be able to articulate the mission of your organization and believe that your group should exist. Out of conviction as well as needing a job, he or she needs to care about what you stand for and want to help you. This is particularly important if your group is controversial or has a "troublemaker" image. Avoid consultants who advise you to "tone down" your message or broaden your goals "to make everyone feel included."

Kim Klein is publisher and editor of Grassroots Fundraising Journal. This article is excerpted from Fundraising for Social Change, Third Edition. For copies of the journal or book, contact www.GrassrootsFundraising.com.