

What Does The Perfect Consultancy Service Look Like?

Karthik Suresh

ABSTRACT

Many organisations think in terms of process — this is the way we do things. What if we turned that around and thought in terms of this is the way the customer needs things doing. How would that change our approach and the way we provided a service?

1. Introduction

I was looking through my notebook when I came across an image that I had drawn while reading John Seddon's work with the words "Don't codify method" written underneath. This got me thinking that we spend so much of our time trying to manage the world around us by doing exactly that — by codifying method. We have process flows, standard operating practice or even an articulated philosophy or method that we expect followers to follow exactly as prescribed.

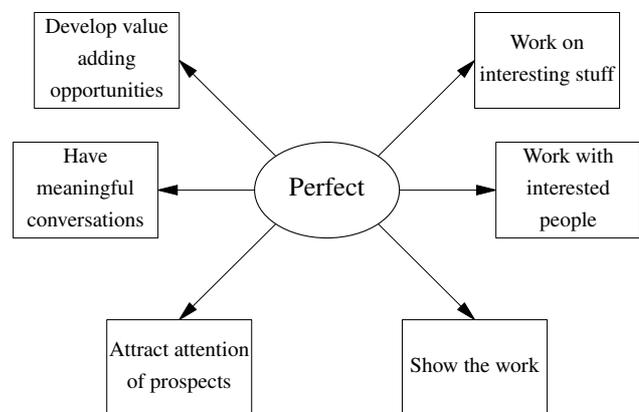
That may work for some people. It does seem to work for many people but I don't think I am one of them. For example one of the selling points made during a seminar I attended was that there was "no reinvention — this is a proven system that works." We are promised that if we do everything exactly as laid out then things will work for us. If it doesn't work that means we haven't followed the system properly.

Now, as Peter Checkland explained, exploring this leads to an unprovable argument. If someone uses a method and it works then one can reasonably ask "How do you know it wouldn't have worked better using some other method?" If it doesn't work, one can also reasonably ask "How do you know that wasn't due to your incompetence at using the method." The value of a method, then, is not actually in whether it works or not but whether it works for you or not.

If there isn't a proven method that you can use without thinking then where should you start?

2. Start by imagining perfection for you

As I don't know you, it makes sense to start with what perfect looks like for me for a consulting service business as set out in the model below.



Perfect, for me, involves working on interesting stuff — stuff that is challenging and stretching, and that results in something useful and beneficial. It's also important for me to work with interested people. That means that the people on the project team are there because they want to be, not because they have to be. Whether it's working with a voluntary group, a hackathon team or an organisational team the attitude and approach people bring to the team is often far more important than their skills and training. You can train someone interested to do the work and you don't mind spending the time to do that. If it's a different situation you have to "manage" them and, in this vision of perfect, that situation wouldn't exist in the first place.

It would be ideal to have time to reflect on the work being done, to draw out what we've learned about doing the work and in the words of Austin Kleon "Show your work". Clearly not the actual work done for clients for various reasons around confidentiality but the process itself, the offcuts and insights, the peek behind the curtains that

shows you what is going on. The thing that Ryan Buell calls “operational transparency.” There is a difference, in my view, between showing and selling. Selling is when I show you something all shiny and finished and try to convince you that this is the right thing for you. Showing is taking the covers off and displaying the real thing, or at least as much as you can safely show. Now, of course, you may object and argue that the best kind of selling is actually showing and being true and you would be right. The point is more about a desire to avoid the standard model of sales — the shiny suits, the hundreds of calls, the pressure and targets and that whole kind of Pavlovian atmosphere.

Because, in a perfect world, when you show your work you will attract the attention of prospects. You clearly have to get to them in some way in the first place but ideally you would be able to slow down, get referrals and reach out in ways that work for you. After all, you can't work with people if they don't know about you but it's also obvious that people are going to take time to take an interest in what you do and you have to be prepared for the time it takes.

When you have their attention, however, you can have meaningful conversations. Conversations where you can get build the “richest possible picture” of their situation and needs. When you do that you will be in a position to develop value adding opportunities that turn into work packages that you can work on — hopefully ones that are interesting as well. And we come full circle.

This vision of the perfect consultancy service is unique to me and shared by people who think like me. Your vision may vary but the point is that you must start with what is perfect for you and then you can move to the next thing you need to consider for your business.

3. Customer pull

The perfect consultancy service would build things that customers need. Things that customers know they need and are willing to pay for. It's often the case, however, that customers haven't thought through and developed a clear idea of what they need and that is a good thing. If they did know then it would be a simple matter of getting that at the lowest price — it would be a commodity. The value you add as a consultant is helping your client explore a complex situation and understand what they need and how you can

help them get it.

This idea of customer pull is actually quite hard to get right. It takes a mindset that can see what a prospect needs and show them what they can get and timing is all important here. If you wait until everything is clear before you start work then you will probably never get started because you haven't dealt with the risks and objections that will inevitably arise. If, on the other hand, you start building too early you might put the customer off because it's the wrong thing for them. The trick is staying one page ahead and building things that the customer can see at around the same time they realise it's what they need — which is why it's probably important to stick to consulting in areas where you have some expertise.

4. Improve flow

After all this delivering the perfect service starts to get easier. Once you understand what the customer needs and you figure out what they're willing to pay for you can set up a work flow that delivers it as well as possible. If you are lucky you might be able to use something you've done before but in many cases you really should try and build something that works in the way your customer needs it to work.

At the same time you don't want them prescribing your work either. It goes back to the point about not codifying method but developing a method for the particular situation you are facing, perhaps informed by a methodology that does not change as much. The difference is between methodology as a description of what should happen while method is a description of how you will do it in this particular situation. When you get it right you'll know, because the customer will be happy.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this three part approach: getting clear on perfect; focusing on customer pull; and improving flow, is the key to getting your consultancy service working well. Working well for you and for your customer.

About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select

and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

Please feel free to connect on LinkedIn or read more at www.karthik-suresh.com