

Becoming an Arts and Culture Management Consultant: Know Yourself and Your Industry

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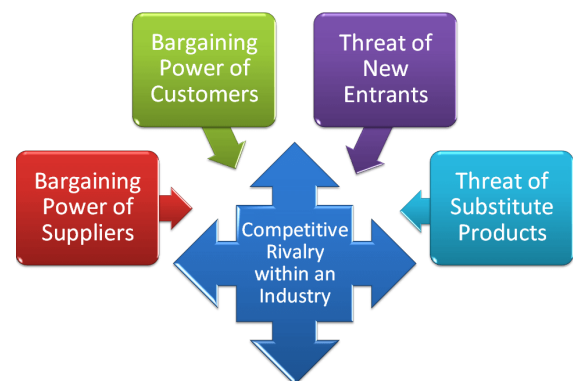
Professionals in the nonprofit, university, government, and corporate sectors may find times when they consider becoming a consultant in the arts and culture industry. Organizational transitions, quality of life issues, and a desire to find a broader way to contribute to the arts and culture community, or one specific discipline, can all be factors. As prospective consultants consider entering the field of arts and culture management consulting, there are many complex questions to be weighed carefully. Is commitment to and experience in the field enough to build a successful and sustainable consulting practice? Are capabilities, connections, and capacity enough to enter the consulting market? Will the industry accept, value, and pay for the services offered when they may have been previously provided for free? As any entrepreneur can attest, the key to success is acquiring marketplace demand information for a product or service and performing a competitive analysis to measure the likelihood of successful market entry.

This issue of *Arts Insights*, the second of a two-part series, focuses on the benefits and hurdles of becoming a successful and impactful arts and culture management consultant. This article examines the industry, the importance of a professional brand, and specific challenges that professionals may face when considering consulting as a career, whether on their own or as part of a firm.

The Five Forces and the Four Ps

An analysis of the arts and culture management consulting industry shows a very competitive market filled with a variety of solo consultants, boutique specialist and full-service firms, and large generalist firms. Some have specific functional expertise (such as executive search, fundraising, marketing, strategic planning), cultural discipline specialization, or presence in numerous locations. From a broader perspective, all of these competitors are impacted by one another as well as the power of suppliers, customers, and the threat of new entrants and substitutes.

The competitive forces model developed by noted author and Harvard Business School professor Michael E. Porter can help potential consultants visualize the factors they should consider before entering this industry. It is important to have an idea of external resources needed to be an effective consultant (outside suppliers), potential cultural organizations with whom they will work (customers), alternate sources of paid staff or volunteers available to those organizations (substitutes), others who also want to become consultants (new entrants), and competitive services (industry rivalry). There are no specific certifications to become a consultant in the arts and culture sector, so the barriers to entry are low and the competition is generally friendly but fierce.



With this in mind, it is also important to perform a standard evaluation of the Four Ps (product, price, placement, and promotion) of the intended consulting service. This helps frame how effectively a new consultant can enter the marketplace as well as the implications of what many consider to be the Fifth P—people, which is a key pivot point for all aspects of service delivery. A prospective consultant may have clarity about the service they want to offer but not the price. Will it be packaged as a single offering or with a continuum of other services? How will it be promoted through personal and professional networks? All of these factors need careful consideration before starting a consulting career.

Professional Branding – Internal Assessment and the Three Cs

It is wise to consider the internal capabilities, connections, and capacity (the Three Cs) that are required to become a consultant. Potential consultants must market their own skills, experience, and educational competencies successfully to the field. A tremendous challenge for both new and existing consultants is understanding the field's perceptions of consultants and their brand. Early career professionals may have baseline interest in arts and cultural organizations and a solid education but few demonstrable results or references when trying to secure clients. Midcareer professionals may have a reasonably established presence but may not be known outside their specific discipline, functional area of expertise, or geographic location. Late career professionals may have extensive experience working in numerous cities but may be branded as someone who works with only large institutions or is only knowledgeable within one cultural discipline.

Professional consultants build their reputations on past success stories and demonstrable results, either as an employee or with other clients. Once that professional brand has been established, in a cultural discipline or functional area of expertise, it must be leveraged and presented to the field in a way that will be readily accepted. Effective networks for all professionals, regardless of experience, are a central component to achieving a successful consultancy brand. Consider the connections needed to become an effective consultant. Would those connections be willing to engage you as a consultant or refer you to another organization within their community? Consultants must convert past experiences into results that meet the organizational, project, timing, and financial goals of the clients.

Perhaps the most important factor to consider is the uncertain nature of the consulting field. As the economy changes, so does the demand for consulting services even if the need for expertise still exists. Steady income, guaranteed benefits, personal assistants, and predictable routines are not always possible. A professional career in consulting should not be viewed as a temporary venture between jobs but rather as a new career that requires entrepreneurial thinking, unique approaches, and continuous learning. A consultant must be versatile, flexible, and able to multitask with a variety of clients in a responsive way. Every day involves looking for new connections and projects while simultaneously serving current clients at the highest professional level.

Solo Practitioner Versus the Team Approach

After considering these factors, prospective consultants should also contemplate whether to pursue this career path alone or join others in the endeavor. There are benefits and hurdles to each approach. As with any endeavor, each person will perceive a different value proposition when determining what professional consulting structure is right for them. Therefore, it is critical to do effective research before making this decision.

Solo consultants have the benefits of ultimate flexibility and the ability to make all strategic, financial, and legal decisions freely. They often have a well-known professional brand and connections to easily secure new projects. They may be perceived as experts in a specific functional area or cultural discipline, allowing them to smoothly transition into new projects. A primary challenge is that solo consultants can feel very isolated without the camaraderie and support of professional consulting colleagues. They also have limited capacity to work on more than a handful of projects simultaneously and limited time to meet the requests made by potential clients. Additionally, solo consultants must take on the legal and financial risks of proposal preparation, contracts, billing, collections, and other administrative tasks that can take away time and energy from direct client service.

A team approach allows consultants to strategize with colleagues, cross-sell services, and relieve the isolation that solo consultants sometimes feel. Joining a firm of like-minded arts and culture management professionals has value and benefit for both the firm and its clients. The strategic advantage of a firm's existing brand and ongoing marketing efforts can be invaluable. Newsletters and conference participation by consulting firms can build the geographic reach of the consulting team and enhance the breadth and depth of services that the team can provide. Also, employee benefits, file and information sharing, and human resources are typically available in a larger firm. An additional advantage is that the experience, connections, and past client work are shared among the firm's consultants. Rather than focusing on individual achievements, a firm will highlight its collective client list and shared success stories. The best consultants understand that leveraging the brand and experience of every team member of a firm allows for greater synergies and opportunities. Team members can consistently develop relationships for projects on which they will work while simultaneously providing leads to their colleagues.

Conversely, most professional service firms have certain policies, procedures, and methodologies that must be followed to protect the brand and service quality. Not all prospective consultants seek that kind of structure in tracking time, billable hours, and business development opportunities. The team and organizational focal points are based on market analysis, competitive benchmarking, and careful approaches to minimizing risks and maximizing rewards. This creates tremendous economies of scale for consultants and clients but may seem restrictive to consultants seeking complete professional independence.

Joining a firm as an employee requires a strong sense of commitment to the field of consulting, its clients, and the team. It is not a sideline job but rather a means to make a difference in the arts and culture sector. From a client's perspective, there is substantial value in knowing that they are getting the depth and resources of an entire firm while also gaining the exclusive skills and experience of a specific individual. A firm with a commitment to an entire field can have a much broader impact on the industry than an individual consultant alone.

Conclusion

Building the brand, visibility, and presence of a firm locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally is about growing institutions, advancing arts and culture, and enhancing communities. In addition to clarity of the product and service, its placement and promotion, the people, and the price, consultants need to have certain capabilities, connections, and capacity to work in this dynamic field. Overarching is perhaps a fourth C—commitment. Arts and cultural institutions are unique and have reverberating effects in the communities they serve. Given the limited resources of the nonprofit, university, and government sectors in an erratic economic environment, working with these entities can be challenging. Every successful consultant needs a staunch commitment to help arts and culture institutions grow, the ability to provide a forum for them to advance, and the leadership experience to deliver tangible results that enable the broadest community impact for the clients that they serve.

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Bruce D. Thibodeau, President

Dr. Bruce D. Thibodeau founded ACG in 1997 and has guided hundreds of nonprofit, university, and government clients in achieving effective leadership transitions, planning cultural facilities, increasing revenues, developing dynamic institutional brands and messages, crafting strategic plans and business models, and revitalizing board governance practices. He has also conducted extensive research in a threefold exploration of stakeholders, nonprofit arts management, and cultural facility project management and has facilitated numerous community engagement processes that have increased the public dialogue and stakeholder awareness of the arts and culture sector's value and impact on communities. As both a researcher and practitioner, his expertise highlights the important roles of project champions and followers as they overcome inertia and gain momentum derived from their social connections, personal commitments, and financial capacities to support the arts and culture sector. Prior to

founding ACG, Dr. Thibodeau held various management roles at the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Hartford Symphony Orchestra, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Price Waterhouse, and Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles. He is a regular guest speaker at national and international arts, culture, and academic conferences and has several published papers. Dr. Thibodeau holds a doctorate of business administration from the Grenoble Ecole de Management (France), a master of business administration from the F.W. Olin Graduate School of Business at Babson College, and a bachelor of music from The Hartt School at the University of Hartford. He also has multiple certifications in competencies, communications, and motivations analysis from Target Training International.

Contact ACG for more information on how we can help you become an effective consultant.

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