Consultant Learns From Building

Idea In Short

Treat every consulting engagement like building a custom home. Lead with logic, respect emotion, manage first impressions, hold the timeline and involve the client throughout. The parallels are direct and the lessons transfer immediately.

A Personal Parallel Between Homebuilding and Consulting

My wife and I lived in our previous house for eleven years before deciding to move closer to her work. The new house would be thirty percent larger and significantly nicer. The big difference was that we were building it from the ground up. We chose the floor plan, exterior brick color, hardwood flooring, lighting, fixtures, tiles and everything else. It was fun and exhausting. The four to five month process reminded me constantly of consulting.

Both building a house and running a consulting project are big purchases. Each requires effort, money and carefully managed expectations. The parallels are striking and worth exploring for any consultant who wants to sharpen their client delivery skills.

It Starts With Logic

We spent months visiting different locations and builders. We maintained a list of criteria ranging from house location and size to layout, lot, price and finishes. We used Zillow to look at comparable prices. We checked county zoning plans to see where new roads would be built. We talked to realtors and read online reviews about builder quality. We spoke with friends who had built houses. The research was thorough and deliberate.

The consulting parallel is clear. Do we make a logical case for the client to buy from us? Is there a clear return on investment? If the client wanted to explain to their boss why they should hire us, is that message easy to tell? Logic must come first. Without it, the engagement lacks a foundation that stakeholders can defend and champion 1. A compelling

business case is the equivalent of a well-researched lot selection.

Emotions Matter More Than You Think

We first thought about moving roughly a year earlier, but instead used that money to buy a rental property. Priorities changed. Then an email arrived saying the last lot in one of our target neighborhoods was on the market. I remarked to my wife that I did not want to wait another five years to live in a house I loved. That is not really logic. That is emotion.

Consultants must ask whether they understand the client's pain points. Do we know the source of the client's heartache or fear? Have we addressed the head, the heart and the hand of the problem? Logic wins the argument, but emotion closes the sale. Clients hire consultants because something keeps them up at night. Acknowledging that emotional driver builds the trust that pure analysis cannot.

First Impressions Set the Anchor

The model homes where the sales office was located looked amazing. That model home was sixty percent more expensive than the one we bought. Of course, we anchored on what we saw on the showroom floor. The same dynamic applies to consulting. Are the proposals, marketing materials and qualifications impressive? What first impression does the client get from our website, conferences and interactions? Are they as polished as that model house?

First impressions are powerful and difficult to reverse. Clients form judgments quickly, often before the substantive work begins 2. Investing in the quality of your proposals and materials is not vanity. It is a strategic move that shapes how the client perceives everything that follows.

A Team of Professionals Working as One

During the homebuilding process, the salesperson, the designer and the builder were all professionals. They listened well, demonstrated experience and gave good counsel. More importantly, they acted as a cohesive team. They complimented each other's work and implicitly gave us the confidence that we had made the right choice.

Consultants should ask whether they are supportive and complimentary of their team

members. Do we know each other's roles and direct the client to the right place? Does the client feel like we are providing a total solution, or are we continually passing the buck? A fragmented team erodes confidence faster than any single mistake. Clients watch how the team interacts and draw conclusions about competence from what they observe.

The Concierge Experience

This house was a middle-of-the-road customized build. We chose many design features, but we did not create the architectural plans. Roughly eighty percent of the plans were set, and we could alter the twenty percent most visible to the eye. Covered patio, color, cabinets, countertops, fixtures and lights were ours to choose.

Still, the salesperson, designer and builder made us feel special. They took a routine task and turned it into a personal, customized concierge process. Remember, there were fifty or more of these homes in the neighborhood. Consultants should ask whether they are making the experience unique for each client. Do clients feel special and catered to? Do we rely too much on templates and copy-paste materials? Helping clients feel cared for is a differentiator that no template can replicate.

Keeping the Timeline Intact

The builder was maniacal about timelines. They reminded us that design selections had to be done by January with materials ordered. The walk-through for electrical, plumbing and mechanical had to be done by March. It was a drumbeat of deadlines. They kept the process moving. This required sacrifice, including multiple days off work for design center visits, but it kept us engaged and working with the builder.

Consultants must ask whether their statements of work accurately convey timeline expectations. Are we asking for enough accountability from clients? Are we letting the timeline slip because we do not want to offend the client, at the expense of project success and profitability? Deadlines are not just administrative details. They are the rhythm that keeps both sides accountable and moving forward.

It Always Costs More

We received an enormous seventy-five percent discount on a bundle of upgrades, and yet

we blew past that amount and spent even more. It happens. There is always more that you want done with the house. The consulting parallel is direct. Are we pricing the work so the client can add more features if they want? Does the quality of the work create incentives for the client to buy more? Is our work worth buying more of?

Pricing strategy should leave room for the client to expand scope naturally. When clients see value, they want more. Structuring the engagement to accommodate that growth benefits both the consultant and the client.

Surprises Erode Trust

Even though we communicated continuously, there were still surprises. Things not included in the price appeared. Features we could not have surfaced. Even a miscalculation in the price emerged. Surfaces suck the energy out of a project faster than almost anything else.

Consultants should ask whether they are unknowingly or unnecessarily surprising clients. What are we doing to set expectations and then exceed them? Predictability builds trust. When surprises happen, and they will, the key is to surface them early and bring options rather than just problems.

Beware of Self-Doubt and Buyer's Remorse

The house was being built and we were excited about it. Yet we still visited an open house for a comparable property in a neighborhood we had been watching. Call it buyer's remorse or just self-doubt. We wanted confirmation that we had made a good decision. We were gauging our sunk and opportunity costs.

Buyer's remorse is a well-documented psychological phenomenon that affects major purchases of all kinds 3. Consultants must ask what they can do to continually remind the client that they made the right choice. Are we making sure the client is saving face? Are we making the client successful? Reinforcing the decision throughout the engagement prevents doubt from undermining the relationship.

Being Part of the Process

Watching the house being built was one of the most satisfying and cathartic parts of the

process. It was deeply satisfying to see the quality of the workmanship behind the walls. The builder spent ninety minutes walking us through the house and showing us how they reinforced the beams, caulked the seams and laid out the electrical. It made us proud of the house and, more importantly, of our decision.

Consultants should ask whether they are sufficiently showing the client the quality of the work throughout the process. Are we just disappearing for a few months and surprising them at the end with a deliverable? Are we getting the client's engagement throughout the process? Involvement breeds ownership. When clients see the work being done, they trust the result and champion it to their organizations.

- 1Statement Of Work, Wikipedia
- 2Four Ways To Overcome A Bad First Impression, Harvard Business Review
- 3Buyer's Remorse, Wikipedia

Summary

Building a house teaches consultants to balance logic and emotion, manage expectations and keep clients engaged. First impressions, timelines, costs and surprises all mirror the consulting lifecycle. Involve clients throughout, and they will own the outcome.