

How to Help Clients Buy Professional Services

A transcript of a conversation with Walt Shill, Global Managing Partner, Client Services at ERM: Environmental Resources Management

A close-up photograph of a computer keyboard. The central focus is a large, rectangular key with a vibrant blue background and the word "Consulting" printed in white, bold, sans-serif font. Surrounding this key are several other white keys with black markings: an arrow pointing right, a letter 'Q', and a key with a right-pointing chevron and a left-pointing chevron. The keyboard is set against a blurred orange background that occupies the top portion of the image.

Consulting


Introduction

Walt Shill is one of the most experienced and insightful providers of expert services I know. His insights helped shape my understanding of the conditions under which clients buy professional services.

The following is a transcript of excerpts from a lengthy phone conversation between Walt and one of my colleagues, Jacob Parks. The transcript highlights some of the themes that Doug Fletcher and I explore in depth in our book, *How Clients Buy*:

- Help Clients Buy
- Build Relationships by Solving Problems
- Reaching Higher Requires Higher Trust
- Demonstrate Insight
- Do Great Work
- The Bigger the Project, the Bigger the Risk
- Demonstrate Your Craft
- Stay in Touch

I hope you'll find Walt's insights as helpful as I do.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom". The signature is stylized and appears to be written on a light-colored background.

Tom McMakin, Co-author of *How Clients Buy* and CEO of Profitable Ideas Exchange

About Walt Shill

While conducting research for *How Clients Buy*, we had the opportunity to speak with Walt Shill about his considerable experience as a provider (and buyer) of professional services.



Walt Shill is the Global Managing Partner, Client Services at ERM, a global environmental consultancy. Over the last 30 years, Walt has held senior positions at Accenture and McKinsey & Company. During his career, he was CEO of a successful startup company and founder of an investment firm.

Walt holds degrees from Virginia Tech and the University of Virginia.

Transcript

Here's the transcript of the podcast accompaniment to Tom McMakin's blog post, [Can a Billboard Improve Your Sales?](#) that features Walt Shill.

I actually don't think you can sell professional services, I think you have to help clients buy them. In the old days, I mean it's long time ago, before the paved roads and electricity, we didn't use the word sell. We didn't even use the word sales. We recorded professional fees. There was this view that clients have problems and they need to help discover, understand, and tackle them. The way you do that is you build relationships, and you **demonstrate the capability to solve problems.** And then, once people realize you helped them solve problems, then they will come back.

As you move higher, that trust level becomes more critical because, in order to really help someone improve performance or solve a problem, you've got to know what the real issues are. And some of those get pretty sensitive.

Building relationships is different than building a network. Demonstrate insight, demonstrate the ability to solve problems. And that means you - whether it's through thought leadership, speeches, conferences - find those avenues where people are able to share points of view. And now, with the ability to have blogs, and LinkedIn, and everything else, there are multiple channels and avenues. Saying you know a lot of things is one thing, being able to demonstrate insights or some unique perspective is the tougher part.

I left McKinsey, 15, 16 years ago, so I'm way out of date. But the time I was there, the view of McKinsey was, "Can we have an impact on the world and the business?" So it wasn't driven from a sales view, it was, "Our mission is to have a positive impact." The way I experienced it was more of a view of, "How do we serve the world, how do we serve this industry, how do we become integral to this industry?" And when a project was lost, it was less from a revenue or a sales point

of view, or meeting a monthly sales target, than it was from our inability to communicate the value we could have added.

When people talk about marketing and branding, sometimes I'll ask, "Well, what do you think about McKinsey's marketing?" Then they look at me, and I would say, "You know, the billboards." And they go, "I don't think I've ever seen a billboard." *Exactly*, and they don't run advertisements. So why do they have this reputation? It's really driven by 1) relationships and 2) thought leadership. The view was, "If we're a thought leader, we will be recognized."

If you did high-profile work in one industry, it spilled over very quickly. **So the other business development secret is to do really great work.** You can spend money on building awareness, but the only way to get unprompted preference was to do great work in that industry.

The other thing that I always underestimated that I now value the most is if you hire a consultant, it's a career risk, and **the bigger the project, the bigger the risk.** While I think I knew it, I don't think I emotionally knew it, and how important it was to sell internally, not just to the person. So I think I now look at it through the lens of, "How do I help them understand that we can sell this to their colleagues in a way that will make it palatable or understandable?" Because anything that's of any significance is driving organizational change, and organizational change is really hard.

I think that that ability to demonstrate your craft [is crucial]... And that's one of the things that McKinsey does very well because they'll go do, you know, strategy for an opera or strategy for a major non-profit, and everybody on that board gets to see how it's done.

I also think **the best folks just stay in touch.** I know many consultants, particularly strategy consultants, who say, "Man, I just don't want to be a pest." If you're connecting in a casual way and not selling, I think most clients are happy to connect with you. Staying in touch and giving and being in the mode of, "Hey, I'm just connecting, I'm staying in touch, and if I can help, let me know," I think really works. Obviously, that takes time, but it does have an impact.

When I was running the startup, and we were raising money, there was one fund that I thought was a perfect match. They had invested in other companies like ours,

and they knew some of the same people. I had sent emails, letters but I could not get through. It took forever. When I finally met the guy, the meeting goes really, really well. I said, "Steve, I have to ask you, why did it take so long to get a meeting with you?" He said, "Oh, I just wanted to know if you were serious." "What?" He said, "You know, **if you don't have the persistence to call me eight times, you'll never win in this business.**"



HOW CLIENTS BUY

The Real-World Guide to Selling Professional Services

A survival guide for every service professional, this book helps you up your game by schooling you in the secrets of finding, connecting with, and build lasting professional relationships with the clients you want and deserve.

GET THE BOOK

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