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Meet the MasterMinds: Ford Harding on Cross Selling Your Way to Success

Ford Harding is the founder and president of Harding & Company, a firm that helps management consultants, accountants, architects, attorneys and engineers win new clients. Harding has trained professionals in twelve countries in the art of selling and marketing services.

Harding is the author of the classic book, *Rain Making: The Professional's Guide to Attracting New Clients*, and *Creating Rainmakers: The Manager's Guide to Training Professionals to Attract New Clients*. His latest book, *Cross-Selling Success: A Rainmaker's Guide to Professional Account Development*, looks at how service providers can enhance their practices by bringing more value to their established clients.

Before starting his own company, Harding spent fifteen years with a consulting firm where he sold a wide variety of consulting engagements. His client list includes AT&T Solutions, CSC Consulting, DiamondCluster International, Kurt Salmon Associates and Towers Perrin.

MCNews talked to Harding about how consultants can benefit from his selling strategies.

MCNews: Let's start with this—what motivated you to write a book on cross selling?

Harding: I was motivated by the frustration I hear again and again from professional firms about missed sales opportunities. I remember talking to the head of a consulting firm that had just lost out on a major IT project for a long-term client. The consultants didn't know the project even existed until it was awarded to somebody else.

The justification for having multiple practices in one firm is to provide additional value to the marketplace, to your clients. If you aren't doing that, then why are these different practices sharing one roof? I don't think there is any firm with multiple services that couldn't add 25% to its revenue if it just did cross selling more effectively. Those are the main reasons I wrote the book.

MCNews: How do you define cross selling?

Harding: Cross selling is about extending services with your current clients into different areas to meet their needs in a more comprehensive way. For example, you might realize that another service area within your firm could help your client with a problem, or it might be that the same project you are completing for a client needs to be done at another branch of the client's company. In any case, cross selling is about focusing on the client's needs and identifying new ways your firm can meet those needs.

MCNews: Do you think clients want to keep multiple consulting firms involved in opportunities so they don't end up relying on just a single firm?

Harding: That varies with the client. There are clients who do want to disperse the work and make a point of doing just that. Of course, if clients send that message clearly, you don't try to cram anything down their throats.

But, there are many clients who want to simplify the buying process and find that there are certain benefits to using the same firm for multiple services: the vetting process is faster and cheaper; the assurance of quality work is often greater because the relationship is deeper and stronger; the consultant has more at stake in the account; and, the learning curve for the consultant is lower in terms of understanding the culture and organizational dynamics of the client.

MCNews: Are today's clients more, or less, receptive to cross selling than in the past?

Harding: Some clients are inordinately sensitive these days to any perceived conflict of interest for professional firms, and for good reason. But there are numerous cross selling opportunities where there is no conflict of interest at all. And, as long as consultants handle cross selling in a professional manner, clients welcome it because of the potential benefits I just mentioned.

MCNews: What is a "portal" project, and what are the features of an effective one?

Harding: Well, a portal project is one that gets you in the door with a client so you can learn about those organizational dynamics and find out how you can serve that client efficiently. It allows you that opportunity when you otherwise might have difficulty because other consultants serve the client, or the client just doesn't know you that well.

Portal projects must be clearly in the client's best interests, and you need to demonstrate their value at the end. They also tend to be smaller relative to the size of your firm's typical assignment, small enough so they don't create a lot of price resistance from the client. Sometimes they are even free, but not necessarily so.

Such projects allow you to get inside the organization and talk to the people you need to know to sell more services later. Typically, they address a question the client needs answered right now. For instance, a client might have a problem that requires a \$40 million fix, but the client may not be ready to face the expenditure and the work needed for that fix. Maybe there is a piece of that larger puzzle that the client wants to figure out quickly, and you can help with that.

MCNews: Any advice on how consultants can broaden their exposure within a client organization without just looking like a salesperson?

Harding: First of all, I'd like to challenge the underlying premise in your question that it's bad to look like a salesperson. Most of our clients make their living by selling something, and someone who wants to sell to them, as long as it is done in a professional and appropriate way, does not offend them. Clients expect it and, in some cases, may be surprised if you **aren't** looking for ways to add value by bringing to their attention a problem they don't see.

While it's not necessarily bad to be perceived as someone who sells, you don't want clients to believe you are **only** interested in selling. A good salesperson sells against a client's need, and doesn't just push a product or service.

MCNews: Are there personal or professional characteristics for a successful cross seller?

Harding: Yes, I think there are. First, they don't have a strip-mining mentality. They are not interested in making a quick hit now that might hurt the client relationship later. Instead, they take

the long-term view of things. They want to be in that account for years to come and realize that for that to happen, the client must perceive that they consistently provide value well in excess of the cost of the service. They always put the client's interests first and clients trust them in that regard.

Successful cross sellers are relentless in two areas: quality of service and the development of relationships. Relationships are the foundation for selling additional work because they give you access to the people who have issues you might address; they allow you to have the conversations that uncover need and pave the way for later sales.

The best cross sellers also have extensive internal relationships. Within their own firms, they are known and know others well enough to talk about each other's services. They know how to behave together when they go out and meet with a client, and so they work together smoothly.

MCNews: What prevents consultants from being more effective at cross selling?

Harding: One significant obstacle is the silo thinking of consultants themselves. Generally, consultants have functional areas of expertise, and they are quite comfortable talking about that area with clients; they are very uncomfortable talking with a client about anything else. And, they may be just as uncomfortable introducing consultants from other areas of expertise. In fact, they may not even **hear** an opportunity for another practice area when it passes their ears.

Another issue has to do with risk. If I have a long-term, profitable relationship with a client, I don't want to risk messing that up by bringing in someone who might make the client unhappy. There are some grim stories to that effect, so you can't be naïve about bringing others to your clients. After all, every firm has people and practices that are better than others.

MCNews: What is the most common area in selling services that needs improvement?

Harding: There are a couple of areas that come to mind. One is getting professionals started early enough with the development of people skills that when they get to the point in their careers when they need to start bringing in revenue, they have the foundation and contact base to be successful. It's appropriate to say to junior people, keep your eyes open, your nose down and do the work. You don't want them out there trying to make big sales. But there are things they can do to prepare themselves so that when they do make the transition, it isn't such a brutal jolt.

In most of corporate America, selling becomes a less and less significant part of your job as you rise through the ranks. In consulting, it's almost a complete reversal, with selling becoming more and more important as you get promoted.

Selling is a skill, and it's more like playing the piano than it is like studying physics. People tend to mistake understanding for mastery. Smart people, and consultants generally are smart, tend to confuse the two. Mastery is the ability to execute under pressure. It's not that hard to understand how a piano works, but to play a Chopin piece at Carnegie Hall in front of 800 people is hard, even if you understand the fundamentals of how a piano works.

Effective selling requires going back to the basics again and again. In good sales organizations, people are constantly refreshed in the basics. But in the professions—including consulting—it tends to be more of a one-time dunking. So, that's an area that could definitely be improved.

MCNews: Thanks for your time today.

You can find out more about Ford Harding, his books and services at www.hardingco.com.