‘Plausible Deniability’ and the Consultant

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Abstract

The process of selling consultancy services to large and small clients alike is becoming more and more difficult. The problem may be seen to be particularly acute when the services on offer have a significant intangible component. This paper discusses strategies devised in response to the difficulties of selling a little known problem-solving method (TRIZ), in the notoriously difficult area of creativity and innovation, with the hope that some of those strategies will have parallel relevance in the selling of other services. Key to the successes now being realised in selling the TRIZ capability are tools to assist in the mapping of perceptions, systematic win-win strategies and, of particular focus through the paper, the phenomenon of ‘plausible deniability’. Plausible deniability is the reason that clients are looking for (either implicitly or explicitly) to justify their decision to *not* give you the contract. The paper describes systematic strategies aimed at, first, identifying, and then eliminating such reasons.

Introduction

Think of someone who has a similar problem to you, only a more extreme version, and they are far more likely to have found a solution. There are, of course, many different reasons why selling consultancy services is becoming increasingly difficult. Later on in the paper we will explore some of those reasons. Before that, though, it is perhaps worth exploring this idea of ‘who has a more extreme version of your problem’ in a little more depth. Without wishing to suggest it is an only extreme, it does seem that innovation and creativity consultancy is one of the more difficult ‘sells’ to clients. There are various reasons behind this which we needn’t go into here. More important is the fact that here is a sector that by rights ought not only to have a difficult job selling, but ought also to have derived some novel ways of tackling the sales problem.

For this author, the systematic innovation method, TRIZ (Reference 1), has for various reasons (Reference 2, 3) found it very difficult to find itself a market in most parts of the world. This despite the fact that it represents the output of the biggest single study of creativity and innovation ever conducted – now with close to three million examples of successful innovation having been studied and incorporated into its framework.

One of the main ideas contained within TRIZ is that ‘someone, somewhere already solved your problem’. The TRIZ toolkit, methodology or philosophy – all three being relevant descriptors – is designed to allow users to systematically find the someone and somewhere. The basic procedure can be summarised as shown in Figure 1. Essentially, the process has three steps; first abstract your problem to make it look like someone else's; second use the TRIZ research findings to identify the 'best' generic solutions to those abstracted problems; and then third, translate the generic solutions that will fit your specific context.

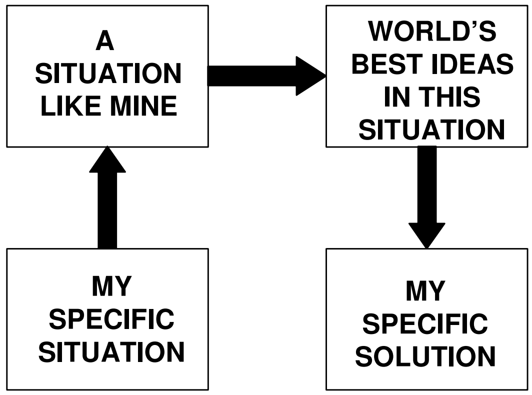

Figure 1: TRIZ Problem Abstraction Approach

This paper is broadly structured to mimic this sequence. Rather than attempting the somewhat naïve and unlikely conclusion that there might be 'a' single right answer to the selling consultancy problem – every specific situation being, of course, totally unique – our aim shall be to spend the majority of time on the abstracted forms of the problem. In order then to counter the usual complaint that abstract theory is of little value without some concrete example, a final section of the paper examines a particular case study where the TRIZ toolkit was used to solve a particularly challenging consultancy selling job. Before we get to that point, however, we need to explore some of the theory and background to the general consultancy selling task. As is often the case, defining the problem is often much more difficult than generating solutions, and so this is where we shall start. Specifically, we begin with a description of the plausible deniability issue and its role in the overall problem.

Plausible Deniability

Plausible deniability, for those that have never heard the term before, is a phenomenon common amongst managers working in organizations (Reference 4). The concept works something like this;

1) someone (in this case, the consultant) approaches a manager with a proposal that something should be changed
2) the manager is faced with a difficult decision; pleasure-seeking thinking (Reference 5) points in the direction of giving the idea a try because there is an opportunity to look like a hero to superiors. Pain-avoidance thinking (Reference 5 again) on the other hand points in the direction of not changing anything, because if something goes wrong, there are going to be questions along the lines 'why did you tamper with a perfectly satisfactory system?' Generally speaking, in most large organizations where short-term thinking is frequently dominant, pain avoidance tends to dominate pleasure-seeking. In this situation, a manager is likely to err towards the do-nothing approach.
3) The do-nothing approach, however, also carries with it the potential of pain: what if someone else (e.g. a competitor) adopts the change idea and it turns out to be a success? In this situation, the questions coming

down from above will be things like 'why didn't you see it coming?' or – absolutely catastrophic if news gets out that you turned the idea down – 'what on earth caused you to reject that?'

4) In order to make sure there is a good answer to this potentially career limiting scenario, the manager, therefore needs a plausible explanation for why not adopting the change was the correct thing to do.

Plausible deniability, in other words, is the reason that managers are looking for (either implicitly or explicitly) to justify – usually to their superiors – a decision *not* to do something.

Finding a plausible explanation why something should not be done is what plausible deniability is all about. In the case of TRIZ, there are still many, many potential reasons for potential clients to reject the method. At the other end of the spectrum, though, is probably Six Sigma. Six Sigma has successfully made the transition from niche to mainstream in most parts of the world. One of the key reasons why this transition has taken place is that Jack Welch stood up and announced to the world that Six Sigma saved the company some enormous amount of money. The Jack Welch and GE experience, from the moment he announced it, makes it very difficult for a manager in another company to produce a plausible reason for not doing something with Six Sigma. Irrespective of whether it is actually true that GE did or did not save so much money by adopting Six Sigma, the plausible deniability case is a very difficult one. In actual fact, pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance motivators now make it more likely that Six Sigma will be adopted than not. Of course, whether it will be accepted inside a company will depend on the particular pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance motivations of the people within the company – neither of which is particularly relevant to our discussion here, which is more about making the sale rather than making the sale a sustainable success once the decision has been made.

Clients Are Wary Of Taking On Consultants Because…

Plausible deniability may be seen to set a general context in many consultancy selling challenges. A rejected bid for consultancy work may be accompanied by a reason, but that reason may bear little relationship to the actual truth. Usually, in fact, there will be a whole spectrum of underlying and often invisible reasons from which the 'plausible deniability' driven reason emerges merely as the externally visible manifestation. It is often tempting to assume that the fuzziness and complexity of these kinds of problem situations cannot sensibly be unravelled. Potential clients will frequently not tell the truth, whole truth and nothing but the truth; different stakeholders will have different opinions, and decisions, when they are finally made, often seem to be driven by a logic that is more unconscious than conscious. The human brain tends not to be so good at dealing with such levels of complexity. Yet again, however, someone somewhere has been thinking about the problem and has devised strategies to help. In this case a tool known as 'Perception Mapping' (Reference 1) emerges through a synthesis of the work of Edward De Bono (Reference 6), NLP and TRIZ. Reference 1 provides a complete description of the mechanics of the process for those that might be interested. As far as the discussion here is concerned, the bare bones of that process first require that we define a question that we would like to answer. In this case, the question 'clients are wary of taking on consultants because?' seems like a good start point. Next up we put ourselves in the position of the potential client (or maybe ask them directly – even though we are likely to get politically correct answers, the process is designed to extract the real underlying issues). From this perspective, we write down a list of reasons. The specific list will inevitably vary from one specific situation to another. Many lists, however, will be likely to feature several variants of the generic list presented below:

a) Perceived to be too expensive
b) No guarantee of success
c) Lack of belief that consultant can understand context
d) Wariness about signing ‘blank cheque’
e) Poor previous experiences
f) Wariness of employees working with consultants
g) ‘Using your watch to tell you the time’ market perception
h) Disruptive to organisational processes
i) Might uncover something we don’t want uncovered
j) Might give us a message we don’t want to hear (ostrich effect)
k) One bill leads to the next
l) Overselling (senior consultant sells; junior delivers)
m) Significant part of cost is ‘catching up’
n) Lack of time to find most appropriate consultant
o) Lack of knowledge of actual consultant capability
p) Buy-in more likely if solution comes from within
q) Consultant will take up too much of my time

Having completed the list, the next part of the process requires us to take each of the perceptions in turn, and ask the question ‘which of the others does this one lead to?’ Importantly, each perception at the end of the exercise must lead to one and only one of the other perceptions. When done in a group setting, any disagreement over the choice of the ‘best’ one has to be debated and settled before moving on to the next stage. Once the ‘leads-to’ questions have been answered, unless any of the perceptions conflict with any of the other ones, the next step involves constructing the perception map. This is simply done by translating the ‘leads to’ part of the analysis into an arrow connecting different perceptions. The resulting perception map for the above list is reproduced in Figure 2.

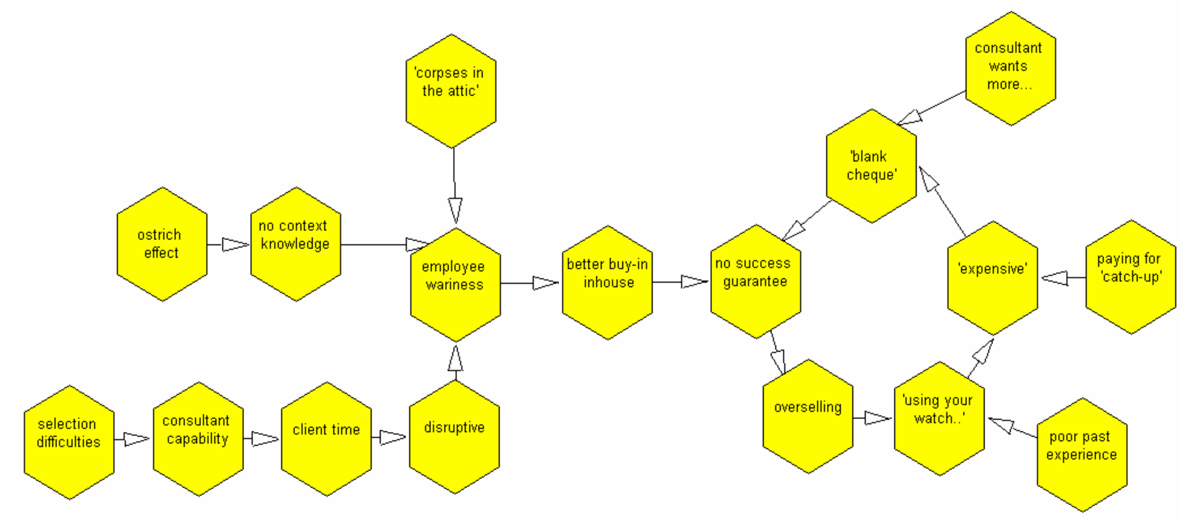

Figure 2: Perception Map For ‘Clients Are Wary…’ Problem

By definition – given the rule that every perception must lead to one and only one other perception – there must be at least one closed loop in the map. Indeed, that is what occurs in this situation. According to the process, these loops are important. Also important are perceptions that several other ones lead to. These are known as ‘collector points'. In the figure, we can see that 'employee wariness' has three other perceptions pointing to it, and is thus a collector point.

The main aim of the perception map is to make sense of complex situations. By forcing the user to examine a big complex issue a little bit at a time, by engaging the creative parts of the brain (the main purpose of a question like 'leads to' – the polar opposite of the more normal 'caused by' thinking of root cause analysis), and by making it difficult to see the big picture until right at the end (and thus making it very difficult to be anything but 'fair' while doing the exercise), the process allows us to manage the complexity without any kind of simplifying filtration. Only right at the end of the process, when the map is drawn, do we see – from the loops and collectors – what is actually important in a given problem situation.

In this instance – which, remember, is merely present as a generic representation of the client wariness problem – the map suggests to us that several perceptions are important to the problem – five in the loop, plus one collector. Any map constructed for a specific problem could result in a markedly different combination of collectors, numbers of loops and sizes of loops. In each case, the aim is to distil from a long list of candidates, which ones are more important than others. Perception mapping is essentially a problem definition tool. The next step involves transforming the improved understanding of a situation into some meaningful solution directions. This task is aided here through the use of another TRIZ tool, the conflict elimination matrix (Reference 1). This tool represents a framework into which large numbers of business conflict situations achieving a win-win outcome have been placed. The idea behind the matrix is to act as the 'someone, somewhere solved your problem' bridge; the general idea being to map your specific conflict situation onto pairs of the parameters that make up the matrix. Again space limitations prevent us from going into too much detail here. The point of this section of the paper is merely to show a process that can be repeatably used in any number of other situations.

That process, then, involves us defining, firstly, what we would like to improve in a situation, followed by what is stopping us. Based on the Figure 2 perception map, the thing we are looking to improve here is to stop clients from feeling wary about taking on consultants, and the most significant thing stopping us was the collector point relating to the wariness of existing employees (in that, if this problem was solved, according to the analysis, it would lead to a better guarantee of success, which would in turn break the loop. Under different circumstances, we could have picked any other element in the loop, or the collector point). Figure 3 then illustrates the outcome when we map this wariness-versus-lack-of-guarantee conflict onto the matrix.

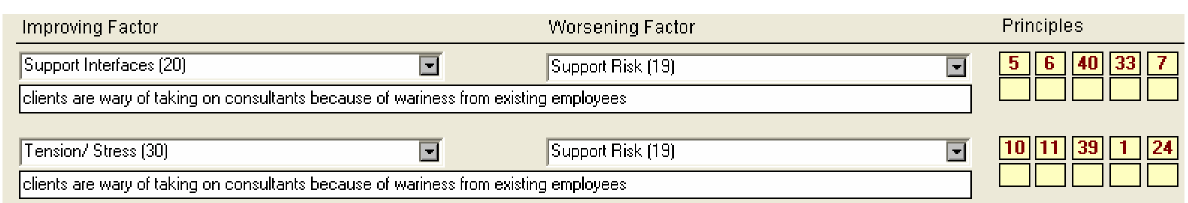

Figure 3: Mapping The Problem Onto The Business Conflict Matrix

The numbers on the right of the figure indicate the inventive strategies that have been used by others to successfully overcome the problem. The history and scope of these strategies is some way beyond the scope of this paper (see Reference 1 again if you want more details). That history shows there to be just 40 different possible strategies at this point in time. This finding is based on the analysis of close to three million conflict situations across every field of human endeavour – from biology to architecture, advertising to software design. Each strategy is designed to act as a generic solution direction; good solutions will be found if you travel in this direction. The simplest way of using the strategies is as a means of systemising a normal brainstorming process – so that instead of the normally very random nature of that process, we now have certain focus directions to think towards. The point being that each strategy represents – generically – how someone, somewhere has already solved your problem.

Making sense of the inventive strategies is quite difficult in the absence of the particulars of a specific case. Nevertheless, a brief analysis of the strategies highlighted in Figure 3 reveals the following possible suggestions:
Principle 5 (Merging) – find out what worked well in the company in the past and connect to this success in some way
Principle 10 (Prior Action) – commence direct communications with employees before arriving at the company to start the job, rather than suddenly appearing out of the blue one day; discuss your role with them before starting; diffuse tensions before they have a chance to build
Principle 7 (Nesting) – find the 'connectors' amongst the employees and enlist their help (find their pleasure-seeking/pain-avoidance motivators) to ensure buy-in from other employees; find the 'influencers' at the various levels in the organisation and ensure they can see that their input is actively being sought; involve them in meetings with management
Principle 1 (Segmentation) – recognise that different people operate in different modes of thinking (Spiral Dynamics – Reference 7), and tune communications to suit the specific audience accordingly; disconnect the changes being introduced to an organisation from peoples' employment
Principle 24 (Intermediary) – use employees from previous clients to interact with employees at this company to offer re-assurance that the consultant has their best interests in mind, and advice on how to get the desired outcomes from them

A Simple Case Study

Just in case the preceding analysis comes across as too abstract, we shall end the discussion with a specific problem situation where the latter solution generation methods were used. The case involves a start-up advertising agency (another group of people who have a consultant-client sales problem greater than most). As is often the case with new companies, the agency was having trouble attracting clients. The oft stated (plausible deniability) reason given by clients for rejecting the bids they received from the company was that they had no references and no track record. A classic Catch-22 situation – no clients without references; no references without clients. Since the theme was recurring with so many client contacts, we decided to tackle the problem directly as a contradiction. Figure 4 illustrates the translation of the specific problem into the abstracted form recognised by the conflict matrix – in this case the desire to acquire clients without having the necessary supply interfaces. The matrix then suggests the inventive strategies most commonly used by other companies in a similar situation.

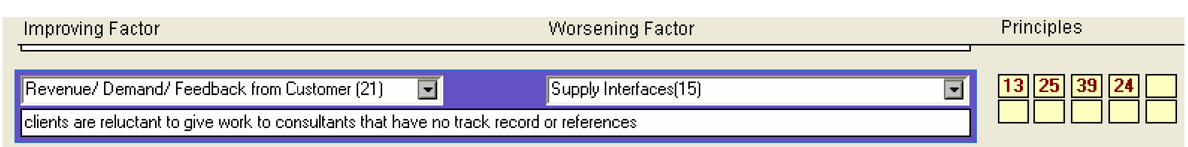

Figure 4: Mapping The Catch-22 Problem Onto The Business Conflict Matrix

To cut a two-hour idea generation exercise to its conclusion, the eventual solution adopted by the company made use of strategy 13, ‘The Other Way Around’. The Reference 1 definitions of this strategy are:

A. *Invert the action(s) used to solve a problem.*

B. *Make movable parts (or the external environment) fixed, and fixed parts movable.*

C. *Turn the system, object or process 'upside down*'.

Admittedly none of these recommendations sounded too promising at first, but the team kept to the task and eventually came up with the suggestion that they should turn the sale process around and reject clients. A good test of a neat innovation is that at first sight it sounds very wrong (if it immediately sounded like a good idea; why isn’t everyone else already doing it?). That certainly seemed to be the case here. But then, as the group thought about the idea more, the initial seed grew towards the well known psychological phenomena where if you tell someone they can’t have something, they are far more likely to want it. Out of this then came the idea for a campaign to ‘interview’ potential clients for their ‘suitability’ as the first major client of the company. After an initial approach, every company was then sent a (carefully worded!) ‘rejection’ letter. Over 50% of the companies reacted to this letter with a request to find out why they were not deemed to be a suitable client. This in itself is a significant statistic. More important though is the fact that during the subsequent discussions, the company acquired two clients in the space of a month. In neither case did the question of references arise at all. In both cases, the ‘plausible deniability’ questions had been amply answered by the novel approach and demonstrated psychological understanding of the company. In other words, they made it easy for their new clients to demonstrate to their superiors why choosing them had been the right decision.

One of the reasons for picking such an obscure case study (and solution!) as this is that it is very unlikely that anyone reading it will assume that it is relevant to their situation. It is included merely to show that the methods described in earlier sections are being used – actually now with several dozen companies – to generate real solutions to real problems. Your problem is inevitably different. It may be similar enough that Principle 13 might help you to generate your own answer, but the context of this case study is absolutely unique to this situation, and therefore the specific interpretation of the Principle could only ever have been relevant to the specific circumstances in which the company found themselves. This phenomenon probably accounts for a very large percentage of all failed change initiatives in companies – trying to transplant a specific solution from somewhere else into your inevitably unique setting is merely a shortcut to getting it wrong.

Final Thoughts

At root, the vast majority of people are motivated by ‘pleasure-seeking’ and ‘pain-avoidance’ factors (Reference 7). This includes clients in the process of rejecting your proposal. Plausible deniability comes from either or both of these drivers. While a potential client in the process of rejecting your proposal needs a pleasure-seeking/pain-avoiding, plausible reason to justify the decision to his or her superiors, there is also a desire to let you down lightly. Primarily influenced by pain-avoidance, the rejection message given to the consultant is likely to be the one that is perceived to cause least offence, or sound the most plausible rather than be the actual reason or reasons. One of the functions of the perception mapping tool, therefore, is to help make sense of such complex, fuzzy, emotive situations. It can play an important role in distilling the real reasons why something happened, even though those reasons may not have been specifically stated. Ideally, the tool is used before approaching a client rather than as an after-the-event analysis tool. Of course it is useful to learn what went wrong, but it is far better to not let things go wrong in the first place. By identifying the plausible deniability issue a priori, by designing proposal strategies that deliver ensure key stakeholders get the pleasure they seek without the pain, and by identifying and designing-out compromises and contradictions, we give ourselves a fighting chance of getting the outcomes we want.

There can be no simple answers to complex problems. If, as the famous aphorism goes, we really can 'never step in the same river twice', then there can be no such thing as an off-the-shelf solution to either the consultant/client relationship or plausible deniability issues. At the very least, however, there are repeatable strategies and thought processes that can force us to think about and define what the 'right' questions to ask might be. This is a start.

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