



THE GIFT OF GUIDANCE

When I started my career as a consultant to photographers over 33 years ago I was the only consultant that I knew of.

A few months later, I was introduced to Elaine Sorel, a rep who began a consulting career in New York City, shortly after I began in Boston. We kept in touch for years visiting and often comparing notes. Elaine was a true pro, committed to her clients and to our industry.

Shortly after meeting Elaine in NYC, I was invited to go to Los Angeles to join buyers on what became the first panel to discuss the then, new topic, of self-promotion.

The business of photography was starting to really come alive as this was barely post 1978 and photographers were still uncertain as how to price and license based on the new copyright law.

Marketing was just starting to become a “thing” and photographers were still hired based more on their relationships with clients, and being hired for visual style or focus was not even a concept.

After the panel discussion was over, a woman approached me and asked if I would go to breakfast with her as she was interested in doing what I was, working as a consultant to commercial photographers.

We met, and I talked with her about her experience and her desire to help photographers and we agreed that we would support each other on our mutual coasts.

That woman was Maria Piscopo who went on to have a very successful career and who penned one of our most influential books on marketing for photographers. We are a much better community because of Maria’s work.

The industry of consulting to photographers has grown massively and now there are dozens of consultants and marketing firms that offer these services to their photography clients. Often the consultants offering services are experienced and dedicated but sometimes their training or knowledge is extremely lacking.

Consulting services when offered by knowledgeable, experienced providers is a true gift for photographers.

Photographers often work alone, or with a small staff and it's hard for them to understand the different buying trends and changes that exist in our marketplace.



In addition, Consultants can also offer you the Client's perspective, an understanding of what they're looking for both visually and financially in today's marketplace. These are huge assets that you can utilize if you move forward creating your plan for success.

And don't get me started on editing your portfolio. No photographer should edit their own work...period.

As I've been giving advice to photographers for quite some time and I am deeply committed to photographers receiving the best information possible for their individual business, I want to share with you my thoughts on what you should be asking when you hire a consultant.

Before you hire a consultant, do check on the type of services they offer, but also check on the quality of service that other photographers have received. I get calls often from photographers who are looking for a new consulting relationship, as they felt burned by their last one.

/ MATCH YOUR NEEDS WITH YOUR CONSULTANT'S BACKGROUND

What services do you need from a consultant and does your consultant's background speak to the needs you have?

Today's consultants come from a variety of backgrounds. Some consultants started as agents or art buyers or photo editors and some have little or absolutely no experience.

Clearly the experience of an advertising art buyer is different than an editorial photo director. If you're looking for an edit of your work and you are a photojournalist, the consultant who was a photo editor might be more appropriate than the consultant who was an advertising art buyer.

Then of course when you talk about marketing firms you really have to be careful and check the background of those in charge.

Employees come and go often there and they aren't always properly trained. If you're thinking of working with the firm also ask how many clients each consultant handles.

Then ask if each program is created individually or if you are being fit into an existing template of services.

These are all great questions to ask before you even ask the consultants fees.

For if the consultant doesn't have a background that's appropriate, or they handle way too many clients, each of whom are squeezed into an existing template of services, your business will not be receiving the individualized attention it deserves.

At that point it really doesn't matter what the consultant charges.

When I called one of the most popular marketing agencies on behalf of my client and spoke to the person who is in charge of deciding whether or not photographers were accepted into their portal, she told me she had no experience buying photography and had majored in English and recently graduated from a four year college.

Yet this woman was deciding the fate of whether or not a photographer would be accepted onto that company's popular web portal.

/ GET A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF THE TIMING INVOLVED

A professional consultant should be able to give you an accurate timeline for each part of a project they are working on. I've had photographers call me angered and disappointed because their edits with their past consultant took 4-6 weeks and sometimes several months longer than they had expected.

I turn my edits around in 2-3 weeks max and we always have an opportunity to discuss the work in a post edit consult, a service that many consultants miss.

/ GET LARGE PROJECTS OUTLINED AND PRICED IN WRITING

Consultants are business people.

They should willingly provide you with a written document (invoice) of their services for your project. Ask if they provide written quotes.

There may be some projects that need more information before they can give you a quote, but certainly get an idea of the price before any project begins. That's good business.

If they're not doing good business between the two of you why would you count on their advice at all?

I always provide an invoice and a written document for my client when we are working on a larger project like an edit, the development of a sales and marketing program or a portfolio build.

Get a detailed description of what you're both hoping to accomplish, each person's responsibilities clearly labeled, and the timeline and final financial investment listed.



This document is not only an acknowledgement of the project, it's your communication tool throughout the project.

FINALLY...

/ GET REFERENCES AND CHECK THEM OUT

It's critically important to get 3-4 recent references from a consultant. Call or email and ask them questions about the Consultant's reliability, their knowledge, their empathy, and their timeliness.

Then ask the one really important question that truly needs to be answered. Especially if they raved about their consultant.

(This is actually a question I used to ask potential caregivers when my children were young.)

“No one is perfect and everyone has something they do that’s not quite the way you might have liked. What did this consultant do that could have been better?”

I’m hoping that this information I’ve provided, has filled you with more confidence and excitement about hiring a consultant to be your team partner.

If you feel a consultant is needed, put off the desire to buy that new lens, or camera body and instead invest your time and then your money and your faith in a relationship that could build your business in a way you never could, alone.

Consulting services can be a gift to the photographer who wants to grow their business, and is uncertain of the steps to take, or simply needs a kind, caring, insightful and experienced consultant to guide them on their way!