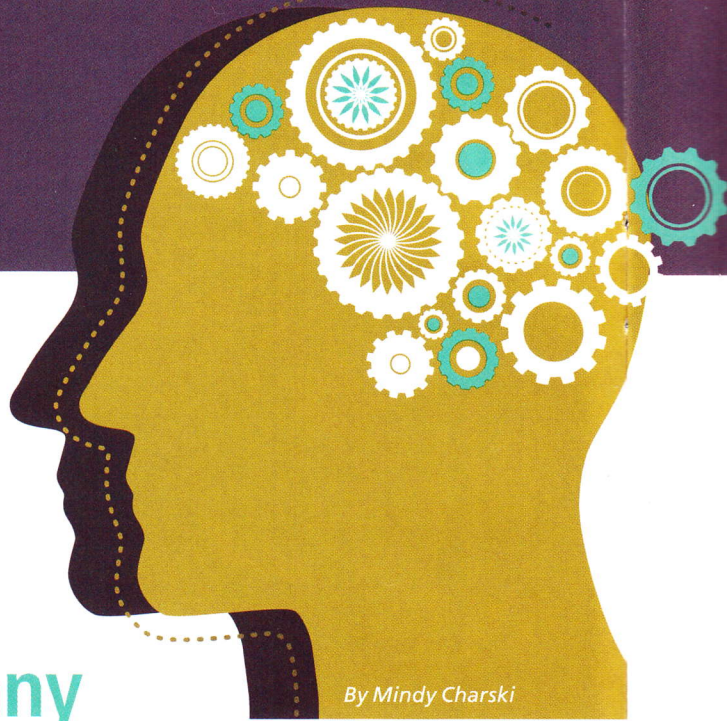


Business School

Student Consultants Can Deliver Bright Ideas For Your Company



By Mindy Charski

It's not like Shane Skinner, owner of Alpine Lawn Care in Bozeman, Mont., was in the market for a consultant four years ago. The idea of hiring someone for business advice had never even occurred to him.

"We were working day to day and doing all right and thinking, 'That's just the way it is,'" he says.

But then a client who teaches at Montana State University asked if he would like to receive free consulting from business students at the school.

"I told him we'd be super happy to have that kind of help," Skinner says.

Skinner worked with four undergraduate students over the spring semester of 2007, and by the end the school year, he had a number of suggestions for solving some of his business problems. Among them: Accepting credit card payments from customers to get paid faster, launching a website, and using a client database the students set up to more easily generate renewal contracts for lawn care and snow removal.

"It was a great experience," Skinner says. "You kind of get in ruts and you see things your way. It was really nice to have other eyes looking at our business and [asking] 'Have you tried this? Tried that?'"

How The Programs Operate

Serious-minded students at colleges and universities across the country are eager to help micro-business owners with tasks as varied as advertising strategy, feasibility studies, market research, social networking and strategic planning.

It's a mutually beneficial arrangement. Business owners can garner the knowledge of creative minds on the cheap

while students get the chance to apply new skills, bulk up their résumés, and possibly rack up course credits.

These consultants aren't unpaid interns, whose use is governed by Department of Labor rules. Instead many student team consulting projects are conducted through undergraduate or graduate courses led by faculty members who also serve as mentors. Schools often have a formal application process in which business owners are asked to describe the help they're seeking and to share financials like balance sheets and income statements; there may be an interview with a faculty member, too.

Timelines vary, so businesses applying in the summer may be considered for the fall semester at some schools and the spring term at others.

You can find student consulting opportunities in your area by calling local business schools or by requesting a referral from the Small Business Institute at smallbusinessinstitute.net.

Many schools don't charge fees to work with students, which makes the endeavor particularly valuable.

"Let's say the students each put in 40 hours of work," says Gary Bishop, who teaches consulting courses at Montana State University. "If there are three in a team, that's 120 productive hours that a business would have had to pay a consultant perhaps to do that."

While it's true that some programs seek large clients, many others prefer working with smaller, local companies.

"A neighborhood cleaner looking at maybe adding another location or investing in some equipment would be a natural," says Paul Belliveau, who formerly ran Rutgers Business School's MBA Team Consulting Program and is the co-author of "The Experiential Student Team Consulting Process" (Custom Publishing, 2006).

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Smaller firms tend to be more willing to open not only their books—on the promise of confidentiality—but also their calendars.

"I believe in highly collaborative consulting," says adjunct lecturer Jeffrey Kurtz, who teaches consulting courses at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "I tell the client to expect to spend a couple of hours each week on this."

Working With The Students

Jewelry designer Allison Marshall says she put in "tons and tons of hours" when she worked with a team from Christopher Newport University for a semester in 2007. The owner of A. Amsler Designs, which is based in Williamsburg, Va., not only met with the five students assigned to her project, but also worked on various requests, like doing an inventory of all her products.

Still, she recognized the value of sharing her time and found the experience to be worthwhile.

"You can't even believe that an undergraduate group would be so professional and just outstanding and incredible," says Marshall, who didn't pay a penny for the consulting services.

The team designed a logo she still uses and gathered anonymous feedback from previous customers that included questions about the functionality and prices of her jewelry. The students also researched local competitors and jewelry styles that appeal to various audiences.

The consultants suggested that Marshall attach a jewelry tag on each piece for branding purposes and helped her get started with that effort. The tags, which are made of sterling silver and gold plate, feature her logo and company name. Marshall says they have "elevated" her product in terms of name recognition and presentation.

There were other recommendations Marshall didn't implement, however. She used the accounting program the team suggested only briefly before switching to QuickBooks, for example.

Professors recognize that some student suggestions will prove too time-consuming or costly, and they don't expect clients to implement every one.

"If that owner walks away with one tangible thing that the students provided for them that will enhance their

business and make it more productive and easier to operate, we were a success," professor Bishop says.

Matching Clients With Students

Bishop's students have worked with a diversity of clients in recent years, including guest ranches, painters and carpet cleaners. But the instructor does turn down requests. He won't, for instance, accept businesses that are simply seeking "free labor," like to input data into a database.

"That's not working with a company, that's working for a company," Bishop says.

Likewise, teacher Kurtz will reject projects that won't give his students enough to work on during the semester or that require more than that time for completion. He also says no to those business owners he thinks won't take the effort seriously.

"If they're just casting seeds to the wind and hoping something grows by working with my students, they're not committed to it," Kurtz says. "The students aren't going to get a good experience, and the client is wasting his or her time."

But for Product Launch Associates in Woodinville, Wash., the idea of providing a valuable learning experience was one reason the boutique marketing agency paid \$2,500 to work with graduate business students at Seattle University during the summer of 2009. The partners also sought young minds to help sharpen messaging for a new line of smoothies manufactured by one of their clients, Juiceheads in San Bernardino, Calif.

"[The students] had us focus our messaging in a direction that we had thought about but didn't realize how important it was to young people," says agency president Robert Kingsley. "We changed the messaging on our packaging slightly, but changed the messaging in our collateral material [like coupons] dramatically to focus more on freshness."

So would he recommend that other business owners consider working with student consultants?

"Absolutely," Kingsley says. "I thought it was a win-win for both sides." ■

Mindy Charski is a Dallas-based freelancer who wrote articles for PCWorld.com as part of her graduate school coursework.