

## **THE HUNTER, THE FARMER, AND THE FISHERMAN**

*BY ROBERT KELLY*

***WHICH SALES  
MODEL IS  
BEST FOR  
YOUR  
PRACTICE?***

### **In Brief**

A sales metaphor is helpful in understanding your strengths as a business developer and as an intellectual framework for developing your consulting practice's business development approach. Most firm managers and Practice Leaders continue to use the classic Hunter-Farmer model when thinking about what types of business developers the firm needs in order to grow. *Should we just have farmers, or do we need to bring in more hunters.* The hunter-farmer model, residue from traditional industrial sales theory, may be useful for some larger, established firms, or for product firms that have professional service arms, but it is useless for a great many consultants and Practice Leaders. Frankly, the model does not adequately describe the business development approach of most successful practicing consultants. Well what does? This article adds a third element to the Hunter-Farmer Model -- the Fisherman and explains why the Fisherman's best attributes are descriptive of successful Practice Leaders.

# THE HUNTER, THE FARMER, AND THE FISHERMAN

## *WHICH SALES MODEL IS BEST FOR YOUR PRACTICE?*

By Robert B. Kelly, Principal, Client Dimensions

I'm a consultant! There, I've said it. I've been a consultant for the greater part of my career. In spite of the many jokes about my profession, second perhaps only to the number of lawyer jokes out there, consultants are plentiful and profitable for good reason – they help solve complex problems and create value that is much greater than their fee. Sure, there are consultants who don't deliver value, but they don't survive too long. Genuine consultants who dispense great advice and solve problems command big fees because they are worth it. There are tens of thousands of consultants who generate fees of \$1,000 to \$3,000 per day, and others who command \$15,000 or more per day. And they do this year in and year out because clients believe they are worth the fees, year in and year out.

### ***WHY THE NEED TO SELL!***

You would think that with all the value that consultants create, they would never have to market or sell their expertise, but this is not the case. Clients don't go out of their way to seek new consultants. Therefore, it's incumbent on good consultants to market to prospective clients. One of the most important functions of the

Practice Leader and senior consultant is business development, and you will rarely find a successful Practice Leader who isn't also a terrific business developer.

Curiously, I never met a consultant who initially set out to become a "marketer" or "seller" of anything. Most started out by developing an expertise and applying it to varied problems in ever changing situations, so the consulting field was perfect for them. After being a consultant for a few years grinding out lots of deliverables and billable hours, things change. To move up the career ladder or receive higher compensation, consultants must learn how to develop business. But is there a clear career path and training for this? Sometimes, but some simply find that they just seem to have a knack for developing business while many others face the choice of either sink or swim.

As my own career evolved, I found that managers increasingly expected me to generate more and more business, apparently because they felt I had a knack for it. Frankly, I felt I was thrown in the water and was expected to swim - too often gulping many

mouthfuls of water while I learned.

### ***HUNTER-FARMER***

To survive, I began studying the subject of consulting practice business development and noticed that some consultants excelled at bringing in new clients, while others were more adept at nurturing existing clients into long-term relationships. As my interest in this subject intensified, I began reviewing literature about traditional sales processes and as much as I could find about professional services and consulting sales, which frankly was meager in the 1980s. Much of the literature described a model of sales that seemed to make a lot of sense at first blush - the Hunter-Farmer model. In brief, the Hunter (or sometimes paradoxically referred to as a Tiger) was the stereotypical aggressive sales rep who was best at bringing in new clients. The Farmer was perceived as being laid back when it came to developing new clients, but did a great job of cultivating relationships and new business with current clients. The table below contrasts the hackneyed attributes of the hunter and farmer. As with most stereotypes, these generalities are not universally applicable or without exception.

## WHICH IS BEST

Many professional service firm managers often look at their practice leaders as either one or the other. They try to figure out which is better, or if there is an appropriate balance between them. Firm managers continue to struggle with which approach makes most sense for them. David Maister, author of the seminal book, "Managing the Professional Service Firm," suggests that the Farmer model is ideal for the true professional service firm (those that are trusted advisers with no particular technology or solution in mind before they thoroughly understand the client's problem, and then devise appropriate solutions). On the other hand, many technology firms who have necessarily developed a professional services arm to increase sales believe that a firm's business development arm must consist of both hunters and farmers to balance things out.

I respect and understand both arguments, but believe they may be appropriate only for large firms or already well established firms. Nearly 45% of all consultants are independents, and many more are autonomous practice leaders in small to medium-sized firms, responsible for developing their own practice

I believe neither approach is appropriate for this great number of consultants who are still growing, building their practice, and becoming established. In fact, I think the hunter-farmer analogy doesn't

Hunter	Farmer
Bag the big game	Cultivate relationship
Take charge	Let things develop
Vision	Reality
Aggressive	Laid Back
Prospector	Planner
Competitive	Collaborative
Always be closing	So, what do you think
Pitcher	Catcher
Brutish	Subtle
Entrepreneurial individualist	Team player

explain the qualities of the vast majority of successful Practice Leaders.

## NOT QUITE RIGHT

Early in my career when I was developing a new practice, I had few clients and was not a widely recognized guru. I had valuable expertise and felt I was at my best when cultivating established clients, but I needed lots of new clients before I could become the farmer type suggested by the customary Hunter-Farmer model. I also could not afford to hire a hunter to find me new clients. So I took it upon myself to develop hunting skills. I went to various training courses and read lots of books on the subject and I indeed developed some hunting skills. But overall, I felt like I was fighting a dual personality; some days wearing my hunting gear and others donning my farmer jeans. It just didn't feel right trying develop and integrate both hunter and farmer attributes. I worried that I would not develop sufficiently

as either a hunter or a farmer. But did I really need to?

As I struggled with how to aggressively grow a practice while cultivating relationships, I studied other consultants who had similar challenges, yet were succeeding even though they exhibited few of the classic hunter or farmer characteristics. I contemplated the question, if successful consultants in young or small consultancies are neither hunters nor farmers, then what are they? I came across the answer and realized that I had mistakenly characterized myself as a farmer. I was neither hunter nor farmer. I was a fisherman.

## I WAS A FISHERMAN

You may be thinking, okay, here we go with another metaphor. But I have found that for most consulting practice leaders, the fisherman model is a more apt description of the successful business development traits than the traditional (and narrow) hunter-farmer model. The fisherman is

a model of both patience and well-timed aggressiveness that we need to *land* new clients. The fisherman also has the wisdom and respect to cultivate the fishing beds so as to always have a source of food (a.k.a. revenues).



pays to bring the wrong fish into the boat).

The fisherman model is worthwhile considering because it is both a description of the characteristics of many successful Practice Leaders as well as a guide for developing your

I'll forewarn you - I am not a highly experienced or knowledgeable real fisherman. Most of my experience was as a boy, trolling for bluefish in Nantucket Sound. I remember preparing rod and reel, making sure my tackle box was stocked the night before we went fishing. We would chart our course and plan our day. The next day we would get up early, head for Horseshoe shoal because that's where our research indicated all the fish would be. After arriving at the shoal, we would use our trusted fish finder -- the seagulls -- to help pinpoint the best fishing spot. We would set what we felt was the appropriate lure on the line, drop the line, and slowly troll the area. We would make course adjustments if nothing bit, or change our lure. When we got a bite, we would be patient, allowing the fish to nibble before giving a bit of a yank to set the hook. Timing was important; one had to resist trying to reel it in too soon and allow the fish to run a bit first. At the right time, we would reel it in and see if it was a good catch. Sometimes we realized that the fish was not right for us and we threw it back in (it never

practice. Fishing requires some solid planning about where to go to find the fish, research about what the fish like to eat, and what lures might attract them to nibble. It requires patience while fish are nibbling and aggressiveness when its time to reel it in. It also takes the courage to throw some fish back in when it's not right for either you or the fish.

### CONSIDERATIONS

Why is all this worthy of consideration? Because too many firm managers continue to use the hunter-farmer model as a guide to their recruitment efforts and performance reviews. Many managers I've worked with have relayed opinions such as, "I don't feel like we're getting enough business out of current clients, we need more Farmers" or, "What we really need is another hunter like Sharon," or, "I think we need to instill more hunting skills in some of these people." With only the hunter-farmer framework as a mental model, many managers are missing the boat (no pun intended) by not recruiting and developing more fishermen. And if you are a practice leader who struggles to

improve perceived deficiencies in your hunting or farming skills, perhaps you should forget about it and consider whether or not you're really a fisherman. If so, be confident in yourself and hone those natural fishing abilities that will allow you to grow your business.

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