

## Professional Providers All Look Alike. Don't They? Getting Beyond the Marketing Statements

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Whether you need a contract CFO, strategic plan, branding expertise, or a web master, the chances are good that you will be interviewing vendors and providers to help with the project. Some preparation and awareness will help you begin to differentiate providers in ways relevant to you and your business.

- Know what you want a provider to do. Describe the outcomes desired, not just the problem to be solved or opportunity to be developed. If successful, what will be different? How will you know?
- Recognize the importance of rapport. The provider needs to be able to "get into your head" personally, managerially, and organizationally. This does *not* mean "think like you do." To do that would mean you were paying a lot of money for agreement. It *does* mean she understands your way of looking at the world, taking in information, and making decisions. It means understanding your values and priorities. It means acknowledging your strengths, weaknesses, and your "will/won't/can't budge" points.
- Strive for comfortable discomfort. You and the provider need to feel comfortable enough to be honest. You need to know that it is safe to reveal sensitive information, and that it will be handled sensitively. You want to walk away from meetings feeling "heard, not judged." You do not, however, necessarily want to feel entirely *comfortable*. A good provider will push (not shove) your comfort zone. Did he ask a question or make an observation or two that prompted you to shift in your seat? Reach for that cup of coffee? Pause because you didn't have an immediate response? *That is what you want!* That means he is taking you and your organization into the discomfort zone, which is a prerequisite to change and improvement.
- Attend to both of your reactions. You need to be willing to explore the questions, consider the observations, challenge the suggestions. The provider needs to be willing to stay with you, supporting your exploration and doing an exploration of her own without jumping to conclusions or going in for the kill. Just because you are experiencing some healthy discomfort does *not* mean safety disappears. Your rapport with the provider is critical at this point, and trust should remain high.
- Know if it goes too far. Like a Pekinese with a pork chop, some providers may chew into the bone. A provider's job is *not* to devastate you or rip apart your operation. Rather, it is to *explore, ask, discover, guide, facilitate*. Sometimes that will take you and your organization down dark alleys and into tightly guarded bastions. The provider's priority is to unconditionally support the healthy growth of the organization and its people. His strategy is to work with you to discover the high leverage intervention. "Undoing" somebody is seldom high leverage.