The Stepping Stone

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The Killer Engagement Bio

by John West Hadley

What is an "Engagement Bio?" This is a personal services version of a résumé; what a consultant might refer to as a Consulting Engagement Bio. It should be the compelling picture of what that consultant brings to the table that helps sell him or her as the right person for the assignment. I specifically said, "should be," because more often than not, it isn't. Just as many people have a difficult time creating a résumé that is an outstanding sales brochure for their candidacy, consultants (and consulting firms) generally have the same trouble with their engagement bios.

Think of your engagement bio like you would a compelling résumé. It should have the same key elements:

- Contact info.
- A biographical summary of your work history, education and other professional activities that point to relevant experience and skills.
- Compelling bullet points that describe accomplishments.

The difference is in the emphasis. The biographical portion is going to be very much summarized, perhaps even reduced to a couple of paragraphs, while the descriptions of past engagements will often be longer than typical résumé bullet points, more along the lines of three- to five-sentence paragraphs for each.

Let's put ourselves in the shoes of the prospective client who is reviewing whatever materials you have sent in hopes of securing a meeting, or left behind after the initial meeting. There are three critical questions your engagement bio must answer to be truly effective:

1. ***Does it have a strong, professional appearance?***
2. ***Does it pass the 10-second test?***
3. ***Does it answer my primary question, "Will this consultant deliver?"***

Let's look at each of these in turn.

Does it Have a Strong, Professional Appearance?

Your engagement bio should have a look that says you are a professional who cares about making a strong presentation. This is one of the first work products you are showing me. It shows me how you choose to represent yourself and your work, and I'm going to reach an initial conclusion about the likely quality of the work product you will ultimately produce for me based on what I see. I know that your engagement bio wasn't (or shouldn't have been) just thrown together on the fly—it's something you (or your firm) have invested significant time and thought into producing. If it doesn't look highly professional, what can I expect from your efforts once you have the assignment?

Here are some basic rules for creating that strong, professional image:

- Make it the right length. Typically limit it to one page, unless you have critical qualifications and engagements that absolutely require it to be longer.

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Just as many people have a difficult time creating a résumé that is an outstanding sales brochure for their candidacy, consultants generally have the same trouble with their engagement bios.

- All sections, indentations and bullet marks should be perfectly aligned, nicely spaced, with good, even margins. Use plenty of white space to make it easy to read.

- Use a professional, easy-to-read font like Arial, Times New Roman, Garamond or Verdana, and never use a font size smaller than 10 point anywhere on it–-that would look like fine print. (Increasing the basic text to 11 or 12 point–-but not larger—is a good idea.)

- Have ***ZERO*** tolerance for grammar and spelling mistakes, including varied tenses. This is a work product from which a client will draw conclusions about the quality of your work! What does it imply about your normal work product if you have errors in something you gave that level of attention to?

- Use strong words: generated, created, etc., avoiding passive tenses. Then try to start your sentences with them. And don't just use the same words over and over again.

Does It Pass the 10-Second Test?

Unless you grab a client's attention in the first five to 10 seconds of reviewing the bio, he or she probably won't do more than glance at the document. In that case, it's just wasted paper and a lost opportunity to enhance your presentation.

What's the key to passing the 10-second test? It's to give a quick (and engaging) picture of the "package" you have to offer. Make it really easy to figure out the essence of what a client would be "buying" if he or she hired you, instead of making them dig through the rest of the materials to figure it out.

I find the best way to pass this test is through an opening executive summary of your "package." Particularly effective is a marketing headline followed by bullet points covering the broader summary of what you bring to the table.

Does it Prove You Will Deliver?

This is about showing the client how you've delivered in the past—communicating those past engagements in a way that creates visualization of the results you can produce for the client.

Coming up with powerful engagement bullets essentially involves first writing case studies of past engagements that clearly express:

- The essence of the assignment, especially what made it a particular challenge.
- Actions you took to address it.
- The results you achieved for your client.

Then you need to boil that story down to just a few sentences. The bullets need to be very focused and clearly communicate a result. They are particularly powerful when those results are expressed with metrics.

To get the client really interested and wanting to know more, think of the bullets as teasers. Don't try to give the client all the details, save that for when you meet with him or her—when he or she asks you to tell them more. And shy away from bullets strictly about what "the firm" did. The client is buying you and your expertise, not the firm. The firm will support you, and a client understands that, but first he or she needs to be convinced that YOU will deliver.

By the way, people often make the mistake of trying to

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tailor their résumés to every opening to which they are applying. This is another place where your approach to an engagement bio is different. You do want to tailor your engagement bio to different opportunities.

Come up with a laundry list of engagement bullets you can draw upon for different potential assignments and prospects. Then customize that section of the bio to fit the perceived hot buttons of the particular prospect. However, be careful when customizing the summary or bio section; in fact, generally avoid doing that. There is a great advantage to including the complete (short summary) description of what you bring to the table, even if you only include engagement bullets that address the client's current, specific needs. An client's needs will evolve, and he or she may have other needs you have yet to uncover. If you don't include the more complete summary, the client may never realize you have those additional skills.

So that even after he or she has hired you for a particular project, the client may go ahead and approach someone else for additional work of which he or she doesn't realize you are capable. Plus, if you do a great job for the client, he or she will become a testimonial to your work. You want the client to say to some other prospect, "Jim did a great job for me, and as I recall he has expertise in the issues you are looking at. You should talk to him." ❑

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suggestive clothing, never got the exposure she needed to move up because her senior manager kept her out of high visibility meetings. She had become an object of intrigue rather than of substance. With some simple changes, we developed a look for her that was professional and attractive—as well as perfectly appropriate for meetings at the highest level.

Women who do business internationally need to be sensitive to other cultures, while cultivating an authoritative presence. I worked with one younger-looking client whose tight fitting, high fashion garb disqualified her from high-level meetings abroad. By making better color selections, choosing high quality fabrics, and wearing clothes with a tailored but not tight fit, she developed a more sophisticated look and was soon asked to represent her company with key business contacts overseas.

While having to focus on appearance may seem unfair, it can also be empowering and fun. And, best of all, maintaining a professional image can help us achieve what we deserve in our careers—success! ❑