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# Panel Presentation: So You want to be a Rock Star (Usability Consultant)

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### **Abstract**

Expert consultants with more than 100 years of combined industry experience will provide brief operational/professional overviews of their practice. They will discuss achievements as well as challenges in their varied types of consulting organizations and practice focus. Lively question/answer and discussion will educate usability practitioners contemplating consulting or already consulting.

### **Keywords**

Business, consultancy, professional practice, usability

### **ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.2 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: User Interfaces — Theory and methods; H.1.2 [Information Systems]: User/Machine Systems — Human factors; General Terms: Usability, Design, Human factors, Theory.

## Goals for the Session

Attendees at this session will:

- Determine what kind of consultant they might want to become.
- Gain an understanding of the many types of challenges to consider before becoming a usability consultant and different approaches to meeting those challenges. These may be business, marketing, financial, and professional challenges.
- Learn successful practices that increase the odds of keeping your consultancy going.
- Learn the coming trends in practice.
- Learn where to go for strategic and tactical advice to assist ongoing challenges.
- "Take-aways" include expert's answers to attendees' questions and discussions among session participants and attendees.

## Audience Participation

- The session leaders will present very short introductions to help attendees understand their frame of reference when addressing specific questions and issues. These introductions will include one or two specific points each speaker wishes to discuss with the audience.
- Question/Answer – The bulk of the session is focused on spirited Q/A and discussion. The moderator will provide topic areas and ask questions of the session leaders, as needed, to encourage audience discussion and questions. The moderator may present a list of topics and ask the audience which topics are of greater interest, through a simple show of hands.
- Handouts [see below] – The audience may also raise questions based on the handout provided at the presentation.
- If technically feasible, discussion notes will be taken and be made available to those who wish to receive them.

## Handouts or Other Materials

The session leaders have collectively created a checklist of items a practitioner should address prior to launching a consultancy and things to do to keep a consultancy running smoothly. This checklist will also contain tips to address these issues. The checklist will also be used to determine topics of interest to the audience and guide questions and discussion.

Handouts authored by or recommended by session leaders will also be available, for example, an article about the ROI of usability, which can be used by consultants to help their clients justify usability projects. In addition, handouts of the session leaders' introductory presentations will be made available.

## Previous Publication or Use of these Materials

This session and these session leaders have not previously presented or published this material.

## Session Schedule

Duration	Topic or Event
5 minutes	Session introduction by Moderator
25 minutes	Maximum 5-minute presentation by each session leader
60 minutes	Moderator-directed questions and discussion with audience, with moderator posing topics, if necessary

### **Detailed Description of Session Topic**

Consultants in usability, whether a single person, team, or larger corporate entity, face challenges in organizing teams, communicating with clients and among team members, marketing services, conducting typical tasks, taking advantages of publicly available data, using past materials, making presentations, obtaining financing, and learning about and using the latest tools and techniques. This session will present 5 veteran practitioners with a total of approximately 100 years of practice, who will discuss the challenges they have faced and how they have solved them. This session should be of interest to both experienced practitioners interested in consultancies and any conference attendees interested in a lively question-answer and discussion session on consulting business strategy, methodology and organization issues.

This session is more about answering audience questions than defending the positions of the various session leaders on a specific point. As such, this session does not represent positions as much as it represents the different kinds of consultant business types and experiences a practitioner is likely to face as they venture into the world of consulting.

The session leaders represent many possible varieties in usability consulting: single-person consultants, small consulting firms, and multiple-person, multiple-site firms. They also embody a wide range of usability services/methodologies and business focus: government and grant research, internet startups, international and cultural issues, and review, design, and evaluation of hardware, software and internet products.

### **Session Leader Backgrounds**

The session is comprised of several well known, highly experienced, and very successful consultants from various types of consulting organizations, large, medium, and small. Their experience and focus also varies widely, covering all aspects of recognized usability practices. Each consultant has over 15 years of experience as a consultant, and some have additional experience as employees of larger companies prior to launching their consulting careers. One session leader has also recently left a sole proprietor consultancy to join a large consulting firm. By design, this session represents just about every aspect of usability consulting and should be able to provide answers to address just about any challenge a practitioner might face when starting out as a new consultant.

#### **Aaron Marcus, President, Aaron Marcus and Associates, Inc.**

Founder and head of a 25-year old firm that does usability analysis as well as design. The company has served approximately 250 clients and 500 projects. Aaron Marcus has given lectures and tutorials worldwide for 30 years and published more than 250 papers. Marcus has written chapters in approximately four handbooks of human-computer interface design. During the firm's history, it consisted of offices on the East and West coast with approximately 25 people. Aaron Marcus also taught in universities for approximately 10 years.

#### **Janice James, Director, User Experience, Perficient, Inc.**

Janice has more than 18 years of experience in the field of usability research, evaluation, training, and user centered design services. For eight years, Janice ran her own consulting firm, focusing on helping clients fully understand how their users think about and interact with the tools they use in their work. Late in 2006, she joined a large consulting firm as Director of User Experience. Janice has provided consulting services to companies ranging in size from start-ups to Fortune 500s, including CNet, AOL/Netscape, Hewlett Packard, Unisys, Intuit, Humana, BestBuy.com, eBay, AARP and McGraw-Hill. Prior to individual consulting, she introduced usability and user centered design to a number of major corporations. Within these corporations, Janice led efforts in developing and then managing usability and UCD programs. She was the principle founder of the Usability Professionals' Association and served as President and on the Board of Directors for a number of years. She is also active in other industry associations. James was a contributing author of a usability textbook and is the co-author of a recently published book of UCD and Usability case studies.

**Theo Mandel, Ph.D. CEO and Principal Consultant, Interface Design & Development, LLC**

Theo has 15 years of experience as an independent consultant in usability and user interface design. Following an M.A. and Ph.D. in Cognitive Psychology, he spent 11 years in IBM conducting research on graphical user interfaces (GUIs) and object-oriented user interfaces (OOUIs) in the design and development of IBM OS/2 and Microsoft Windows operating systems working with industry experts such as Edward Tufte. He was part of the IBM group responsible for developing and authoring one of the classic reference texts in software user interface guidelines. After authoring his first book on user interface design, Mandel left IBM to form an independent sole-proprietor consultancy. Theo has worked with international small- to large-corporate clients in reviewing, prototyping, designing and developing PC and web applications and websites. He has established usability groups and evaluation labs in numerous companies. He co-founded a medical software company developing electronic medical record (EMR) software for tablet and touch-screen devices. Theo has authored a second book, contributed to academic publications, and written articles on usability and interface design.

**Larry Marine, Intuitive Design**

Principal consultant for a small group of independent consultants and contractors. Larry has 15 years of consulting experience. The company provides all aspects of usability services from user research, design, and usability evaluations and tests. Larry works either alone or in teams with other consultants, depending on the needs of the project or client. Works with all types of clients and projects, from large to small, specialized to wide appeal. The company was launched after graduating from the first accredited Cognitive Science program in the world, Dr. Donald Norman's Cognitive Science program at UC San Diego. His active participation in and contributions to local and national usability-oriented organizations combined with his demonstrated design acumen earns him wide acclaim as a true usability expert.

**Nicholas Simonelli, President, Performance Research and Design, Inc.**

Nick has 25 years of experience in a self-owned consulting business and Fortune 500 companies conducting focus group research and product usability research (hardware and software); designing user-computer interfaces; creating and managing usability labs; rapid prototyping; developing research programs; increasing company awareness of ergonomics/human factors issues; and managing design and standards efforts. Nick is experienced with conducting international research and is an established programmer, writer, lecturer, and presenter. He has been active in the HFES association and has authored numerous publications.

## Session Leader Position Summaries

### **Aaron Marcus, President, Aaron Marcus and Associates, Inc.**

Although the academic issues are challenging and interesting, corporate projects actually deal with products and services with deadlines and real-world, immediate implications. One approach to transitioning is to take on a long-term research project that gives the consultant enough time to learn business skills, which are very different from academic life: different terminology, politics, people, objectives, and goals. I experimented with growing a firm into a larger corporate group from the beginning and eventually was able to "franchise" the headquarters office to a second of approximately equal size. Unfortunately, the economy collapsed so strongly that it was necessary to close these physical offices and experiment running a virtual office consisting of former employees and new staff all as contractors. This form of business presents different challenges and opportunities. Throughout the history of the firm, we have had to change the market and focus. Originally oriented to advanced R+D projects supported by government grants or large corporate research departments, it was necessary to shift to consumer products in order to survive. In addition, the platforms evolved, and it is necessary to remain flexible and agile in meeting changing market needs. This evolution has led from a focus on mainframes and large network computers to PCs, to multimedia PCs, to the Internet, vehicle embedded systems, and to mobile devices. Throughout this process, by developing a stable process, stable internal terminology, and being able to patiently wait out economic turndowns and shifts of technology, we have been able to flourish for more than two decades.

### **Theo Mandel, Ph.D. CEO and Principal Consultant, Interface Design & Development, LLC**

After working in a large computer corporation for 11 years as a usability architect, I surprisingly found the ceiling for my corporate career fast approaching. I had not seriously considered going out on my own as a consultant, but things ended up moving in that direction quite nicely in four areas. (1) For 7 of my 11 years in the company I was remotely managed, so I was used to working independently within a large organization. (2) In my last few years within the company, I was acting as the company consultant to vendors and key software companies involved in developing industry user interface guidelines, so I already had contacts and potential clients in my portfolio. (3) The third piece of the puzzle fell into place when I wrote a book on usability and user interface design that was about to be published. (4) The final decision to leave the corporate world for a consulting career was eased when the company offered a severance package to employees wishing to leave.

One of the first decisions as a new consultant was to define myself as a solo consultant or a consulting company that just happened to actually be one person. I started out with the company image and over the years and I have become an established, well-known consultant by name, I have changed the image and website to reflect my level of expertise in the industry. My major challenges and opportunities over the years have been dealing with the peaks and valleys of consulting work, working out of a home office, and learning to enjoy time away from work, even though income isn't generated when I'm not working. Although I've written two books, I find it difficult to find time and energy to work on publications rather than efforts that reflect direct results with clients and potential clients.

### **Larry Marine, Intuitive Design**

Understanding usability processes is only one part of the consultant equation. A successful consultant must also be a business person and be able to work well with a wide variety of personalities and typical organizational politics. As more companies become aware of usability processes and benefits, they will look for consultants who not only provide the services they want, but deliver high quality results. The problem is, the client will likely not know what a high quality result looks like, but they will know if someone met their expectations. For a consultant to succeed, they must learn how to exceed expectations. Unfortunately not all clients know what they need, so the successful consultant must know how to set, manage, and meet the appropriate expectations, and those expectations change with each project.

Since there are no real consultant education programs, this is not something everyone is prepared for when starting out. I have learned a great many things as an independent, not the least of which is how to work well with clients, and all of this was from the school of hard knocks. As an industry, I feel it is incumbent upon all of us to strengthen the perception of value our industry brings to product design. I feel it is more beneficial to the industry as a whole to help new consultants succeed in both the professional processes we provide as well as the business approaches we practice.

**Nicholas Simonelli, President, Performance Research and Design**

Those of us who have been around for a while know that careers are not so much planned as random. You create an embryonic skill set during your education and launch into the world of employment, typically working for someone else. After that, industry, professional, and political events all exert influences that take you places you would never have guessed. Unique opportunities, stressful corporate downsizings, mergers, and various other exposures, shape your professional network over a period of years. You take on assignments as offered and occasionally have the flexibility and creativity to carve out your own technical interests. Your skill set grows.

However it plays out, after some time you mature into a technically competent and confident professional ready to "plan" your next career move – as some do – or have it handed to you. In my case, I worked first for a large successful manufacturing company to bring usability skills to a group that had little skill in this area beforehand. I had an opportunity to flourish, create a reputation for the group, the discipline, and myself. I was quite content until I got "the call." Lured to interview for a mysterious, under the radar startup, I soon found myself and my family uprooted and working in a position of much more responsibility, but in a different direction, evolving from hardware usability to upcoming internet services. The boom eventually went bust and a rude choice presented itself as the venture slowly collapsed, downsized, and moved. Not willing to move again, options included the scary prospect of going solo.

That was 14 years ago and solo I went. I'm alternately solo or duo depending on the year. Networking and word of mouth is 90% of the source of new business. The peaks can be sharp and the troughs very disconcerting. You expand your skill set either deliberately or in response to client needs. It continues to be random, but you learn to enjoy the surprises (or find a corporate position again). You go from having one boss to having many bosses, occasionally feeling like you are your own boss. It's not for everyone, but it is a career pathway chosen by some and forced on others.

## Usability Consultant's Checklist

A valuable take-away from this session is the collectively-created checklist a practitioner should address prior to launching a consultancy and things to do to keep a consultancy running smoothly.

### Why

- Personal goals (money, time, flexibility, location, family, etc.)
- Business goals (strategy, focus, new opportunities, etc.)

### When

- How much experience is needed before heading into consultancy?
- Consider taking an interim job/company before starting own consultancy
- Presence (books, articles, presentations, participation)
- Financial backup plan

### How

- Coming from academia
- Coming from corporate world
- Office vs. office in home
- Consulting image – individual vs. company
- Company/Individual name, logo, tagline
- Setting up shop
- Setting up clients before you begin
- Business/Taxes
- Business insurance (General & Professional Liability - \$1M umbrella policies)
- Consulting model – fixed bid, project based with min/max, time and materials
- Consulting projects – one-shot, long-term, repeat business
- Project location – onsite vs. remote work
- Working remotely – time differences, conference calls, WebEx, wikis, etc.
- Business tools – remote usability (Morae), etc.
- Website, Blog, marketing collateral, business cards, press release, advertising, networking
- Join/participate in industry organizations and conferences

### Where

- Geographic location
- Home office - pros and cons (Office in the home or home in the office?)
- Lab space and other facilities

### Who/What

- Sole proprietor
- Consulting firm w/employees
- Principal Consultant w/employees/contactors
- Employees vs. contractors vs. consortium
- Will you be a physical or virtual company?
- Will you focus on one aspect of usability (specialties/methodologies)? For example, usability evaluations (user testing)?

## **Getting Clients and Keeping Clients**

- How decide which clients and industries to target
- Getting new clients
- Keeping old/current clients
- Marketing the consultant/company
- Advertising (online, print, ...)
- Networking with clients and colleagues
- Referrals from colleagues and clients
- Publications/Press:  
Books, articles, presentations, press releases, quotes
- Participate in industry organizations and conferences
- Managing the client relationship:  
Contracts, Statements of Work, Non-Disclosure Agreements

## **Making Money and Setting Fees**

- Hourly rate vs. fixed-bid price
- How do you decide what to charge
- Charge different rates for different clients or services
- Estimating projects
- Defining deliverables
- Travel time – to charge or not to charge for your time sitting on an airplane
- Retainers, incentives, bonuses
- Billing clients and collecting money
- Backup plan - secure a line of credit on home or elsewhere to handle cash flow in a pinch (loan rates are lower than credit card rates)

## **Growing Your Business**

- Short-term and long-term goals – Make a 1-year, 5-year plan
- Staying in an industry niche or branching into new areas
- Working with new technologies or industries
- Establish/copyright/trademark/patent methodologies, services and products
- Participate (attend, network, present) in industry organizations and conferences (UPA, STC, CHI, HFES, Vertical Market chapters).
- Grow your skills and knowledge

## **Consulting Insights and Tips**

- Fighting the consultant image
- Leveraging the consulting image (employees are right, but management won't listen, but will listen to the same advice from a consultant!)
- Juggling multiple client projects
- Juggling work vs. home/family
- Working with clients
- Frustrations of project management, running a business, having employees
- How do you handle staff? Where do you hire them from? What do you do with difficult staff? Do you offer internships and training people up, or only hire experienced people? What are your training policies?
- How do you include product development in the mix?
- How do you deal with competitors?