

Making It As an Independent Consultant

An overview



By Jeff Houser

I haven't left the house in 11 days, yet I'm not on vacation. I spent 3 hours last Friday morning replacing a broken doorknob, yet the clients don't care. They probably didn't even know. Most of the time they don't even know if I'm out of

the office. I'm one of the lucky individuals who have been able to carve out a full-time living as a consultant. Almost all of my work is done on a telecommuting basis. How did I get to this point? It was an interesting road to say the least.

Since this issue is going to be focused on marketing and management, I thought I'd stray from the usual tech related topics of this column to tell the story of how I started DotComIt, my consulting business, and how you can use some of the same tactics to start (or improve) your own consulting adventures.

How It All Begin

I received a computer science degree from Central Connecticut State University during the furor of the Internet bubble balloon. After graduation, my co-op (kind of like an internship) position turned into a full-time job. The company was a business-to-business consulting company. Although they were not a dot-bomb, the hours were crazy and the work was cutting-edge. I was having a blast. I learned something new every day and, unlike a lot of my other college friends, I was actually applying my degree-knowledge every day. Although, I didn't realize it at the time, the style burnt me out rather quickly.

Somewhere in late 1999, I had a vacation request denied. It was my third denial in the past year. A couple of days later, I had a particularly good pizza at lunch and they had my two weeks notice that afternoon. Never ever do that! Acting on a whim is not usually a good idea; always have a plan. I

wouldn't recommend this approach to anyone. Any recruiter will tell you that it is easier to find a job while you have a job. Companies like the thought of luring away talent. There is a stigma associated with being jobless.

Fortunately, I was lucky and never had to experience the idiocy of my act. The company I left hired me back as a consultant after a week. I negotiated an overtime pay charge and, for the first time while working for them, they were insistent that I leave on time. From speaking with other people, it is common for the ex-employee to be hired back as a consultant during the "transition" phase while they seek a replacement.

At the time, I was in the Energetic Acoustic Rock Band, Far Cry Fly (www.farcryfly.com). There was a local group of musicians who had banded together in order to help each other get gigs, argue about (the original) Napster, and share info on other music related issues. It was a user group for musicians (very similar in concept to a CFUG). I noticed their site was built in ColdFusion. I had worked with it (but didn't use it much). I asked if they needed any help, and offered it for free. A month later the company became my second client. I met my third client at the kick-off for a ColdFusion user group. Things started to snowball from there, and I incorporated the following year under the name DotComIt, and the rest is history.

Learn How to Network

You may notice the start of a trend in the previous section. I met a lot of people and they hired me. This is known as networking. Meet people! We've all heard it, but not all of us do it in the way that you should. I can't emphasize enough how important this is. "Learn to Network" is the best advice I can give you on how to find a job, consulting or otherwise. So, how do you meet people? Unfortunately, the people you meet on the curb after the bar closes are not likely to remember you, much less hire you for something. You're best bet is to find a more professional organization. Try some of these:

- **Macromedia User Groups:** Find your local CFUG or MUG. They are a great way to meet people who are interested in the same things that you are. Many of them work for companies that may need help. Some of them will be consultants, like you, and they may have to outsource work. Find a local user group on the Macromedia site here: <http://www.macromedia.com/cfusion/usergroups/index.cfm>. If one doesn't exist

in your area, you may think of starting one.

- **Chamber of Commerce:** Find and join your local chamber of commerce. They usually have networking events on a routine basis. The one I'm in has multiple meetings where the only purpose is to network. They meet at least twice a month for "Business After Hours", and regularly have a business before hours. Most of these are free for members. You may be able to get into some events as a non-member, if that works better for you.
- **Go to a Trade Show:** There was recently a small business trade show in Connecticut. I went to every booth and handed out a business card. I asked the Web development companies if they outsourced work. I asked the real companies if they had a Web site. I walked out of there with more than a dozen leads to follow-up on.
- **Other Networking Groups:** In addition to your local MUG or Chamber of Commerce, look for other networking groups. In my area, I know of a .NET user group and a "computer society" that has a "special interest" offshoot for Web development. There is an object-oriented group, and also a small business owner's group. Most of these are related to the things I do on a daily basis, and attending is a joy. If I attended all of them, I wouldn't do anything else.
- **Conferences:** Go to a conference, such as Macromedia (at the time of this writing) MAX or CFUNITED. These conferences offer plenty of networking opportunities and you can educate yourself to boot.
- **Ask People:** Ask people on your current contact list (you do have a contact list right?) if there is anyone else they think you should know. Offer to take that new person out to lunch to talk to find out about their job. Tell them what you are looking for.
- **Blog Syndication:** If you have a blog and can syndicate it on Weblogs. macromedia.com or FullAsAGoog, you'll never know who is going to start reading. Blogging wouldn't be my first choice if I wanted to meet someone local, but most of what we do can be done off-site. If you find a niche (perhaps Flex and ColdFusion or Mobile

Device Development), the results can be appealing.

These are just some ideas to get you started. Let me know what you've done that worked. I'd love to hear your ideas.

Convincing Them You Can Get the Job Done

Now that you're out there and meeting people, a few of them are going to want to hire you in some capacity. They will want to know that you are capable of doing what they want you to do. This is often easy to prove to a technical person, such as yourself, since you both speak the same language. If you're dealing with a non-techie such as a recruiter, HR person, or business owner, you have a bigger hurdle to jump over. How do you prove yourself?


- **Education:** "I'm a computer programmer and I have a degree to prove it." As far as I know, very few people actually check to see that you have a degree (but I wouldn't recommend lying about it). Having additional classes or training outside of your education can't hurt. If nothing else, it should keep your mind sharp and on top of current development issues.
- **Certifications:** Get the appropriate certifications. The Macromedia certifications are a good start; look here – <http://www.macromedia.com/support/training> – for more info. I also routinely take new tests on Brainbench, an independent certification authority (<http://www.brainbench.com>). There always seems to be a debate about the merit of certifications. I understand that not everyone tests well, and that questions are sometimes out of sync with the real world, but the non-techies are almost guaranteed to see certification as a sign of competence.
- **Demo Site:** Create a demo site that you can point people to. There is nothing like seeing and using a demo app to help your networking buddy realize that you know what you're doing.
- **Write:** Contrary to popular belief, writing articles in magazines like *CFDJ* are not the realm of the super smart uber geeks (or at least they don't have to be). If you have an idea, or an area of exper-

tise pitch them an article (<http://coldfusion.sys-con.com/main/proposal.htm>). My first article proposal was accepted within hours. When you sit down with the potential client and say something like "I suggest you do this, as I wrote about in x article." And hand them the article. It'll look impressive. Being successful in the book-writing world is a bit harder (see the CF5 book graveyard), but will give you even more street credibility than an article.

- **Speak:** Take that area of expertise that you wrote about and prepare a presentation for your local Macromedia User Group. Most likely the manager will be happy to schedule you as a speaker. You can also do general presentations to non-techie groups. I bet talking to a business owner group about how they can use the Web to improve workflow might bring up a few leads. Conferences are another source of speaking engagements, and many conferences put out a "request for papers" in advance of the conference. Watch for them and submit something. By the time you read this, the CFUNITED request for papers will have been closed and Max 2006 will probably not be open yet. Look for other options.

Most likely some combination of these will work.

Where Do You Go from Here?

It is said that the three most important things about real estate is location, location, and location. Well, the three most important things in consulting are network, network, and network. Keep your network active, and actively try to grow it. If you're lucky, it helps, but I don't want to leave that to chance. 

About the Author

Jeff Houser has been working with computers for over 20 years. He owns a DotComIt, a web consulting company, manages the CT Macromedia User Group, and routinely speaks and writes about development issues. You can find out what he's up to by checking his Blog at www.jeffryhouser.com.

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