

## Why I Love Big, Name-Brand Consulting Firms

By Jennifer Selby Long

I suppose you didn't expect to see the owner of a small firm singing the praises of big, brand-name consulting firms, but there's much to be said for them. I have at least four reasons to love big, brand-name consulting firms.

*Big firms produce lots and lots of research.* It's built in to their massive overhead expense, along with sweet office space and other nice perks. Back in the day, when I worked for one of the big, brand-name firms, every firm charged a hefty fee for those research reports. It was a sweet business model for them, since they got paid for the reports, and the reports helped them up-sell more work. Then the 23-year-old minions (that was me) went in and did the work for high fees.

These days, so much good research is available on line for free that the big firms now give it all away, which means I still have access to it without having to incur massive overhead of a research department.

Granted, the big firms' research often presses the edge of credibility when they employ the guy who created the "proprietary" model for their industry and then conduct research to prove that the model is great.

However, many models have quite a lot in common (gasp!), so I'm still able to make practical use of the research findings and help my clients make good use of them when the rubber hits the road. After all, the magic isn't in the model itself. It's in how well the model can be executed with real, live human beings and a company's existing processes and culture that determines the success of any change.

*They get to know specific industries very well.* If a large client has received their industry-specific recommendations from a big, brand-name firm, I generally trust that the data is well-informed.

It may not provide leading edge or breakaway strategies, and I'm certainly not saying that the firm's report should be a substitute for executives making their own strategic decisions, but it certainly will reflect what's actually going on in a given industry.

Remember, big, brand-name firms have large research departments and future-oriented thinkers to stay out ahead of industry trends and developments, and that's what they're getting paid for.

Where they're going to struggle is in bringing a true outside perspective. Maybe if you're in the automobile industry, you need fewer perspectives from inside your industry and more from outside your industry. Now, the automobile industry is an easy target, but this statement can apply to any company facing a big business goal or challenge. Just knowing what your competitors are likely to do doesn't necessarily give you a break-away perspective.

*Big firms provide an entry point in any conversation.* O.k. I admit this one is a little bit silly, but it's true. It's been 20 years since I worked for a big, brand-name firm, but to this day people continue to be intrigued.

With their massive fees, gorgeous offices, and corporately blinged-out partners ("Hey, who wants to ride in my new Bentley?", "Oh, this old thing? It's the first Rolex I bought with my first bonus."), the big, brand-name firms have done a stunning job of creating an almost insatiable urge to get a peek behind the big doors. It's sort of like a modern-day *Mad Men*, with a slightly nerdy twist.

I can always count on this topic to be of interest, although I'm sure what I say is less interesting than the image would suggest. We worked hard, did what we were told, and followed the prescriptions dictated by the partners, clinging to our methodology binders the whole way. It's really rather dull. I can safely say that all three of the companies I worked for after the big, brand-name firm had more interesting workplaces with better stories.

*Big, brand-name firms create a lot of business for me now.* The big, brand-name firms are staffed with young, ambitious people who got the best grades in school.

That's who comes in after the initial engagement is scoped out. They aren't taught much of anything about people, and why would they be? It's not profitable to engage in real execution when you carry such massive overhead, and big, brand-name firms are filled with people who don't even like people in the first place. **Do not -- repeat, do not -- let a big firm get anywhere near your people.**

Selby Group affiliate Chris Nichols jokes that we should rename our Change Management practice *Change Clean-Up*.

It's really quite a symbiotic relationship, when I think about it. The big, brand-name firms don't like dealing with people, they hate the actual execution of strategy, they don't make any money at it, and their staff is entirely too inexperienced to help leaders through the personal transformations essential for change and growth in any organization.

Meanwhile, I hate spending hours on industry-specific research and detest spending even one hour in a meeting debating business models. Mercifully, some of the Selby Group affiliates enjoy that work and do it exceptionally well, so

in situations in which no big, brand-name firm has been around to help with business strategy, I'm still personally off the hook!

Well, there you have it – four perfectly good reasons that I love big, brand-name consulting firms. What are yours?

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