



Nonprofits and Technology Consultants—Like Oil and Water?

Do nonprofits and techies mix, or is the price too high?

Do you think your budget won't let you hire a technology guru? If so, you may be missing a chance to take advantage of cutting-edge technology to serve your mission. Here are some tips for saving money while getting good technology assistance:

Weigh the Costs and Benefits.

Nonprofits often figure that the benefits of technology consultants don't outweigh their costs. They associate the term "high-priced" with tech consultants. But nonprofit managers who have used consultants say that, in the long run, the investment pays for itself.

Be Flexible. Although not all consulting companies offer reduced rates for nonprofits, better prices can often be negotiated if you're flexible. If your deadline is tomorrow, there's little room for negotiation. But if you're patient and tell the consultant there's no rush on the project, a better rate may be arranged.

Share the Work. If you share responsibility for the work effort with the consultant, it may keep costs down and speed up results. For example, there's often a lot of organizational, design, and analysis work that the nonprofit staff can do. It helps if you show the developer that you want to be more of a "partner" and less of a "client," says Terry Bomberger of

Pinnacle Decision Systems, a computer consulting firm in Middletown, Connecticut (www.pinndec.com).

Find Safety in Numbers. You can also save money by teaming up with another nonprofit that's involved in the same activity as you are. Bomberger points to a project Pinnacle completed in Brooklyn, in which several nonprofits collaborated with a local university to share the cost of developing Web sites.

Use Your Connections. Let consultants know that you can recommend them to other nonprofits and that your project may result in new business for the consulting firm. It's a valuable bargaining chip.

Use Professionals. "It's important to remember the consultant versus contractor issue," says Bomberger. "Sometimes nonprofits think that a person's brother-in-law is the same as a consulting company. If you're going to spend money on a project, you should hire quality professionals, not cut corners with a hobbyist. Don't let the price scare you away. Consultants' years of experience help them move quickly through problems they've encountered before. An amateur could use up lots of time figuring out solutions that professionals already know."

Ask About Their Connections. Find out if consultants have connections that can save you money.

Sometimes consultants have access to discounts. For example, says Bomberger, "Pinnacle has connections with a software vendor that gives nonprofits deals on software packages. If the nonprofit purchased the software on its own through a retail outlet, the difference in price would be substantial."

The fact is that nonprofits and technology consultants do mix. "It's just a matter of getting over the idea that costs are too high," says Pinnacle's Trevor Sides. "If the nonprofit works as a team player, saves time, and helps organize the project, the relationship will work wonders for both parties. We must break down the mindset that consultants are just too expensive. Nonprofits must realize that by not hiring a consultant and embracing new technology, they are wasting money." ■

Resources

Brinckerhoff, Peter, "How to Choose and Work with a Consultant," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 10, No. 2.

Feller, Gordon, "Latest High-Tech Trends: One Giant Leap for Nonprofits," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 1.

Frenza, JP, "How to Stake Out your Claim in Cyberspace," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 4.

Gordon, Lou, "Tech Wise: Nonprofits Join the Revolution," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 5.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.