



How to Build a Business - 4 Tips from a Consulting Leader

by Phil Stott | September 05, 2013



Is it possible for an upstart consulting firm to take on the traditional powerhouses of the industry and win?

On the face of it, the answer to that question may seem obvious—it's possible, but incredibly difficult. Not only is the issue of reputation a huge factor for those in the business community when weighing firms, it also comes into play in recruiting; typically, the top consulting firms tend to hire the best and brightest B-school talent.

But what if the firm in question is interested in competing in a growth area—one where specialist knowledge of the region is as important as strategic business skills? And what if the person leading the effort already has experience building a world-class business capable of competing with the big global players, almost from scratch?

Those are just some of the questions that are currently of concern to Girija Pande, who is heading up Indian strategy firm [Avalon Consulting's](#) newest venture: the rollout of Apex Avalon, a joint venture between Pande and Avalon Chairman Raj Nair. Based in Singapore, the new unit's vision is to become an Asian strategy powerhouse focused on finding value in the region's key economies—both within existing markets, and by forging new connections between countries that have traditionally been separated by language and cultural barriers.

Creating pan-Asian businesses is something that Pande has experience with: he built Tata Consulting Group's Asia-Pacific business into an entity with more than 11,000 employees in 15 countries.

During a recent visit he made to New York, I had an opportunity to meet Pande, and to learn more about the new venture, and how he intends to build it. Here are four takeaways from our conversation that any entrepreneur or businessperson can apply to their own organization:

1. Build your brand

One of the first questions I asked him was about how he saw his previous experiences in IT consulting translating to this new venture in the strategy side of the industry.

His answer: while the industries may be different, there are "a number of parallels" in terms of positioning the firm for success. Chief among these: building the brand, a process that Pande envisions occupying much of his time for the next two years, and which will largely be related to getting the word out to existing contacts, and the quality of the work the firm can deliver. As Pande put it, "in this business, if you don't deliver quality, your name will be mud." The key, as Pande sees it, then, is to build a portfolio of work that you can stand behind—doing so not only gives you examples to present to future clients, but also builds your reputation the old-fashioned way: through word of mouth.

2. Build your network

Beyond the branding issue, other parallels include showcasing vertical strength, and selling against a client focus—both areas that Pande feels can be carried over to Avalon from his experiences at Tata. Without the backing of Tata's resources, however, the firm is also looking to partner with other firms around the region to increase its footprint and capabilities.

3. Know your value proposition

One of the keys to building a successful business is knowing what you bring to the marketplace, and how you are perceived there. Are you a low-cost provider? A trusted partner? A place where clients can find custom solutions or pre-packaged one? To understand his own firm's position, Pande has a simple methodology: "When we win or lose business, we ask ourselves *why* did we win or lose? Why did a client choose us or another firm? If you can answer those questions, you have an idea of your value proposition."

4. Go where the opportunity is

Pande was particularly interesting on the subject of why he was bullish on building a business in Asia—and his belief that it could eventually come to compete with established U.S. and European firms. Pointing out that "two-thirds of mankind" live in the region, he noted that the challenge of people lifting themselves out of poverty presents opportunity—a cycle that benefits all concerned. And, with a business model that is seeking to make inroads into a list of countries including India, China, Indonesia, Thailand and beyond, Pande's belief is that people who have an intimate knowledge of local markets (and especially languages) will have a critical role to play in determining the success of the organization. Part of the reason for that: he sees opportunity in opening up links *between* some of the Asian economies where none have existed before—a state of affairs that will require consultants who can not only understand the business and strategic paradigms at play, but communicate with local businesspeople and officials on the ground too.

Back, then, to the question of whether an Asian consulting firm can compete on a global basis: that's one that Pande has already helped to answer with his work at Tata. Whether he can repeat the trick in the strategy sector is another question—but one that will be worth watching as his five-year plan unfolds.

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