

Part 1: Winning Through Your "Guru Quotient"

By Carl Friesen CMC

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First of a series

It was a make-or-break deal for a major office of an international engineering firm. This was the reconstruction of the country's busiest airport, and would be the country's biggest construction project.

Being involved in this size of engagement would show the firm's ability to tackle large, complex projects. Because the airport had to remain fully functional during the entire project, the firm would get a chance to showcase its skills at staging the work effectively. The job would provide thousands of billable hours for the firm's people, and build their skills tremendously.

How did this engineering firm, working in partnership with another firm, win the engagement? Not through political connections or low-balling the price.

One of the main reasons lay with half a dozen employees. These were not members of management. Rather, they were acknowledged "experts" on airport design. These highly skilled professionals had demonstrated their skills solving thorny problems at other airports.

Their participation in the bid process, with their resumes in the proposal, gave the airport authority client the confidence that they would get the benefit of some of the best brains in the business.

Having just a few acknowledged gurus working for the firm helped win it this major engagement.

This meant thousands of hours of billable work for the engineers doing the less-differentiated work of designing overpasses, underpasses and roads. What's more, this firm could charge out the time of these "experts" at three to four times the rate of its garden-variety designers.

These professionals command a high level of respect among the people whose opinions they value the most - their peers. They are in high demand, and travel widely to bring their expertise to bear. They earn a high level of income, choose the kind of work they want to do (and how much), and decide on the terms on which they want to work.

How does an ordinary professional, whether an accountant, actuary, architect, consultant, engineer or lawyer, attain this level? Through building a guru quotient.

What makes a guru, anyway? To see why this is important, let's first take a look at what a guru is and does.

A guru is different from a "garden-variety" professional in several key ways. She or he has a higher level of expertise and knowledge, is more sought after, and can succeed at more challenging projects.

A guru is, of necessity, an individual. A firm can't be a guru, although it can contain them. The guru may train disciples to teach her or his methodology, but it all depends on the individual guru behind the methodology.

To be a guru, you must be well known - at least, within the range of people relevant to the issue. This can mean a widely-acknowledged individual such as Peter Drucker or Charles Handy, who might appear on a TV talk show. But also, it can be someone acknowledged in a specific area, such as David Maister on professional firms, David Foot on demographics or David Ury on negotiations.

We also see gurus in very narrowly defined fields, such as Ellen Flynn-Heapes on professional firm strategy, Dan Poynter on self-publishing non-fiction books, or Suzanne Lowe on differentiation in professional firms. So, the level of fame can be great, even if it is only within a small niche.

Fame alone isn't enough. Britney Spears is famous. You need to be well regarded for your expertise. Competence in your area of skill is essential. To get this, you need fame among the right kinds of people - those with influence, whose opinion carries weight.

There's a lot to be said for bleeding-edge thought that pushes the envelope, and many now-accepted truths were promoted by people who were originally thought to be living in some kind of alternative universe. However, the concept of peer review has a great deal of validity.

A guru isn't necessarily flashy, and in fact anyone with too much style is often suspected of having little behind all that style and show. How much respect do you have for a keynote presenter that shows up with animated PowerPoint with video clips and sound, large gestures and a book on the back table she or he will happily autograph for you, and not much substance to present?

Some highly-promoted speakers and authors may have a lot of charisma and speaking ability (think Anthony Robbins), and what they impart may actually help people. I don't think of them as gurus, however.

They lack the intellectual credentials of a guru. It's not necessary to have a Ph.D. to be a guru, but at least an undergraduate degree seems to be becoming the minimum. It also helps to have professional qualifications in your discipline - particularly if you are in engineering, architecture, law or accounting. Without credentials, your fight for acceptance will always be an uphill one.

In the next article in the series, we'll look more closely at other aspects of being a guru - and then look at steps for becoming one.