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Futurist Boutique Branding

These business points can be helpful for amateur futurists who are going to develop their futurist career in a competitive market full of unknown challenges and opportunities.

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Foreword

As a futurist you need to develop a strategic plan, encompassing career and business development, to present your skills in the best light possible. To accomplish that mission you should be able to identify areas of service that they could develop your fame as a foresight professional, spanning from team development to strategic leadership. You should be also able to plan potential publications to write for, whether websites, blogs, popular press magazines and professional journals in order to express yourself and your proficiency. In this way, you may discover new areas of personal and public service to individuals and organizations. It's important to use your personal strategic plan to develop a resume, and/or homepage that showcases what you can offer as a foresight professional.

Your next step is "developing a platform". Using social networks can help you establish your reputation as a futurist, whether through websites, blogs or e-books, or locally through business networks. The best practices that futurists should develop can be found in distinguished futurists' speeches and works. Based on a service/product plan you offer, you can establish your identity and practice either as a consulting or training futurist. You need to identify the markets you can serve and the topics that you can deliver. Logically, you begin your plan by creating a business development plan. Now you should end your plan by developing a strategic plan as a futurist. This should encompass both your career and business developments to present the skill you have learned.

This document aims at helping you both assess and plan to form intentions that will apply your foresight knowledge in profitable ways. Using its guidelines carefully, you can examine your strengths and the choices before you. It is also an opportunity to look at where your roadblocks are and how you might generate options. For example, you can capture the practice, organization and culture of smaller boutique firms or branding as internal consultants in larger corporations. Set your sights high. Consider the power of social networking and connections you make with people who may be interested in your services. This e-book is a complementary document for another e-book that I published earlier: "*7 Strategic Points for Running Your Foresight Business*" available for free at: <http://www.futuresdiscovery.com/Newsletter/7StrategicPoints.pdf>

By reading and applying the points mentioned in these 2 e-books you can develop a set of best practices for your proposals and contracting. You will be able personally to enhance your professional foresight services to high quality, competitive, and growing levels.

To your success,

Alireza Hejazi, August 12, 2011

1. Personal Need for Brand Focus

“When you try to be all things to all people, you end up being nothing”

– Al Reis

As the futurist consultants, we are not going to deal with all people's needs for consultancy, but their definite problems. In this way, they find how respectful their needs are in our points of view. It's a matter of trust. We should offer our services in a reliable manner, so that our clients become trusted friends of our profession. In my point of view, if we are going to offer only foresight consultancy service to a customer, we should just offer it and nothing else. People expect to receive what they are waiting for. Sometimes we feel that it's a good idea to add some value to our services by offering other services or products, but we may spoil them unwantedly. This can endanger our professional prestige. Our consultancy should be directed to what the clients expect exactly to receive from us and should be concentrated on their definite needs (Levinson and McLaughlin, 2004).

According to Hines (2004), personal branding is about "discovering the inner and authentic you and proclaiming it to your clients". By personal brand we recognize who we are and what we do best, and communicate that to our clients. It's not about selling "new and improved" futures tools. Rather, it's about discovering the inner capacities of a futurist and showing them to the clients. It deals with our professional identity and needs an awaked concentration.

I have experienced a common problem with most of my clients in past years and months. When they explain their problem for me, they have no especial concentration. My job is usually giving direction and focus to their needs or problems. Sometimes they become more satisfied with finding a focus of their matter rather than receiving a long list of my services. I've got another point in dealing with my professional identity rather than my clients' problems: I should become concentrated on my own brand. People should find something different in my consultancy service that may not be found in other consultants. It requires a branded focus.

Reference:

Hines, A. (2004). The personal brand in futures, foresight, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 60-61.

Levinson, J. C. and McLaughlin, M. W. (2004). Guerrilla Marketing for Consultants: www.GuerrillaConsulting.com

2. The Missing Ring: Total Quality Management (TQM)

Referring back to what the futurists usually call “platform building”, I'd like to add something else to your knowledge: Total Quality Management (TQM). People usually come to TQM in fields like: Industrial Engineering or Management, but I believe it is extended to every aspect of our life. TQM is a business strategy.

Not just the industrial engineers or managers look for quality, but also the futurists search for a reasonable level of quality in their services. O’Hara (2007) urges academics to take a leaf out of the business community’s playbook using TQM, measurable goals and objectives, standardization, scalability and gearing more directly to the job market. John Naisbitt (2011) in His well-known book: "High Tech- High Touch" reminds that without the personal skills of quality management, companies do not benefit from more or better technological support.

As the futurists, we should be able to manage the quality of our services. Some of my past clients still refer to me for my services only because of the quality they had found in my earlier works and satisfied with. If I'm going to keep my customers, I should maintain the same level of quality I usually offered in my services and even add more. Think about a futurist's website or weblog that you can find great ideas in them. Compare them with a futuring company's homepage in which only business information are available. Which one really satisfies you and your needs for content? Yes, the content is the king. People love to download something from our website.

Do we really look for their brands or the quality of service or product they offer?! The reality is that quality is the key to success of every futurist's practice, firm and organization in a competitive market. Since 6 years ago I have come to this conclusion that people do not search just for well-known big names and brands, they are thirsty for unknown brands, but higher quality. This can be true for small futurist firms and consultants. The remaining question is that how can we utilize TQM in our services? Should we follow the same way that industrial managers and engineers apply TQM in their works? Or, should we develop a futurist one?

Reference:

Naisbitt, J. (2001). *High Tech - High Touch*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

O’Hara, M. (2007). Strangers in a strange land, *Futures* 39, pp. 930–941.

3. Become a Market Scanner

As a case of personal experience in futurist boutique branding, I'd like to offer some points on becoming a freelance futurist.

Many people prefer to be employed at an institute or company to have a reliable fixed income, but they have to sell their freedom and time to hiring companies. This may not be a problem in a post-recession time, especially at the beginning of a new economic shock that is on the way just as what the people talk about these days because of recent disputes between the Democrats and the Republicans over the US general budget. Anyway, as the futurists we should be enough strong to stand on our feet under every economic condition and this requires a reasonable understanding of becoming a freelance futurist.

According to Anne Wallingford (1999), "a freelancer is an independent business owner. The product being sold is the freelancer's own knowledge and skill. But a freelancer must not only have a talent. A freelancer must be his or her own marketing rep, janitor, accountant, marketing rep, the salesperson, human resources contact, the marketing rep, bookkeeper, file clerk, general office staff, and marketing rep. Did I mention marketing? Not only does the freelancer need a talent, but without the ability to market this talent, the freelancer will not stay in business."

We should target markets in which foresight services may be sold at good price. However, even the best markets are not permanent and we should develop enough flexibility to maneuver between different markets and even find new markets, keeping our services and clients active and alive. Sometimes, we should be a skillful market scanner rather than a futurist or foresight professional. I think that market scanning can be regarded as one of occupational priorities that every futurist should deal with on a regular basis. I understand that sensing the market is a hard job, especially in economic hard times when everyone hides the information, but we should do something.

Reference:

Wallingford, A. (1999). What is a Freelancer?,

Retrieved from: http://www.aw-wrdsmth.com/FAQ/freelance_career_faq.html

4. Become a Proposal Psychologist

Remembering one of my past notes on becoming a "Fut-o-psychologist", I see that Freed has covered the same idea in the second part of his book on proposal writing (Freed, 2003). Freed reminds us that our primary task is to convince our client, both logically and psychologically, that we can help him solve his problem or realize his opportunity. We should be able to do that well, especially in competitive situations.

To become a proposal psychologist, we should provide a valuable insight. Our suggested insight should be able to make our client and his company smarter than ever and provide a basis for learning whether or not he needs to change. Providing an insight is so important that Freed has determined the objectives of our projects based on a client's current situation as: lack insight, have insight, or have plan. Throughout the book we find: "insight" as an undividable part of planning. It seems that they are everlasting twins. Even his baseline logic has psychological roots.

Another important point in dealing with the insight is the verbs that we use for it in our proposals. Freed has suggested words like: "to learn, assess, compare, determine whether, evaluate, understand, or identify". These words have psychological weight not only for us, but also for our audiences (clients).

Freed has considered a proposal psychologist as a medical doctor who is going to discover something unknown. He goes with Heiman's categorization (1998) in defining 5 roles of proposal buyers: economic buyer, user buyer, technical buyer, coach and the ratifier. We should align our psychological behavior according to each of these 5 kinds of buyers' needs and characteristics. The remaining question is: "*How can we develop reliable psychological skills to improve our influencing power not just as proposal writers, but also as futurist consultants?*"

References:

Freed, R. C. et. al. (2003). *Writing Winning Business Proposals*, NY: McGraw-Hill, pp. 81-140.

Heiman, S. E. et. al. (1998). *The New Strategic Selling*. NY: Warner Books.

5. Develop Persuasive Proposals

A business proposal should be persuasive. This is the essence of what Freed (2003) has offered in the 10th chapter of his book. He has introduced the concept of "Persuasion-Information-Persuasion" or shortly PIP (p. 172). P-slot refers to situation: This is why the project should be conducted—to solve your problem or realize your opportunity. I-slot is for methods: This is how we will solve your problem or realize your opportunity. Second P-slot is for benefits: This is what you will receive—the benefits of the project itself and of our working with you.

PIP goes at all levels and embraces methods section, building a matrix with why, how and what should be done within the project's framework. In a higher range, factors influencing the level of necessary persuasiveness are categorized as: Relationship with buyers, Competition, and Sales objective. We should remember that P-slots are filled with themes, results and benefits. How about themes? According to Freed (2003), themes are the repeated expression of your abilities and capabilities to address hot buttons, meet evaluation criteria, and counter the competition. There are 3 main elements of identifying themes as follows:

Hot buttons: are needs and desires of individual buyers that can be addressed during face-to-face meetings with the client and other buyers, by altering the project's methodology, and/or by changing the proposed individuals on your project's team. Hot buttons almost always have emotional content. Coming back to what we can find with Block (2002), there is a detailed process of face-to-face meetings from personal acknowledgement to exchange wants and offers (p. 72).

Evaluation criteria: are collective needs and desires of the buyers. They often are written down. Evaluation criteria typically have technical content. Block has named it as wants and offers. He has a detailed description of evaluation criteria in offering a process of 11 steps in managing the feedback meeting (p. 231). The process starts with "restating the original contract" and ends with "giving support".

Counters to the competition vis-à-vis the specific evaluation criteria for this proposal opportunity. Block has put this idea in another way (p. 310). He believes that many consulting firms divide themselves into those who sell the work, those who manage the work, and those who do the work. Any kind of competition or counter completion may be defined within such a categorization.

References:

Block, P. (2002). *Flawless Consulting*, CA: Pfeiffer. pp. 70-73.

Freed, R. C. et. al. (2003). *Writing Winning Business Proposals*, NY: McGraw-Hill, pp. 104-116 and 171-178.

6. Assess Your Proposal Realistically

Richard C. Freed's "Writing Winning Business Proposals" is a real guide for everyone in writing effective proposals. I've found the book useful also for the futurists and foresight practitioners. It is enough valuable to be read not just once, but for many times.

Freed has a strategic point of view on writing business proposals. Comparing his book's main theme that is called "baseline logic" with strategic management topics, we may find a clear similarity to the main tasks of strategic management: developing a strategic vision & mission, goal setting, crafting, implementing & executing, evaluating & reviewing the strategy (Bourgeois & Brodwin, 1984). He goes with "current situation", "desired results", and the "benefits". The "evaluating & reviewing" element is evolved as "Pyramid Principle". Perhaps he could cover the topic of "controlling" the outputs in a better manner on page 73. Anyway, 7 great lessons that I learned from Freed, are based on his useful job in reminding me the reasons of failure (and success) of proposals:

1. Too often, proposals are unsuccessful because the proposers assume they are selling to organizations rather than to individuals.
2. Most proposals are illogical at their core because the writers don't understand the baseline logic.
3. Usually the proposers indicate only the benefits of having the plan implemented. What they fail to realize, or at least to communicate, is that the quality of the communication often depends on the quality of the plan.
4. Many proposals fail to sell and many projects fail to succeed because proposers and buyers have not defined (and achieved consensus on) the overriding questions.
5. As a proposer I should offer something more than technical expertise or a logically constructed methodology, more than elegant-sounding resumes or qualifications. I should convince my client that I want to work with him.
6. The clients aren't really buying our product or service; they are buying what that product or service delivers—benefits.
7. The secret of creating outstanding, creative proposals is: "Collaboration". We should put collaboration into practice for the benefit of our clients.

References:

Bourgeois, L. J. and Brodwin D. R. (1984). Strategic Implementation, *Strategic Management Journal* 5, pp. 241-264.

Freed R. C. & et. al. (2003). *Writing Winning Business Proposals*, NY: McGraw-Hill, pp. 1-140.

7. Beyond the Conventional Benefits

Clients concentrate on the benefits that we may provide them through our consulting service, but is there anything beyond the benefits? Freed (2003) has something interesting to share with us.

He reminds us that the counselor and the client have different expectations about how they will each benefit from proposed approach and results. The reality is that people aren't buying our service; they are buying what that service delivers—benefits. Not just the benefits, but the strategic privileges. They are looking for benefits that may enhance their strategic position in a business or an occupation. They want to know more about the distance they must go to eliminate their pain or realize their opportunities.

So, as we see the perception of benefits is different among different people. This perception varies by buyer and is conditioned by buying role. We are different people with different needs, desires, responsibilities, and perspectives. What might be a problem in customer service to one person might be a problem in sales effectiveness to another. What to one person might be perceived as increased inefficiency might to me be eroding profits. Yes, we are faced with different markets and different clients.

Reference:

Freed R. C. & et. al. (2003). *Writing Winning Business Proposals*, NY: McGraw-Hill, pp. 90-93.

8. Two Case Studies

A. Designed Learning Inc. (DLI) Assessment

Designed Learning (DLI) is one of the most effective consulting service companies based in the US established and run by Peter Block. I'm not bolding DLI because Block's "Flawless Consulting" was one of the textbooks I studied at college, but because DLI's website is a perfect example of effective communication with the clients and customers who are interested in buying Block's services. I can regard Block a good communicator of services. He is a brilliant artist in the field of influencing communication.

DLI uses a mix of tools including: Peter Block's Flawless consulting, HR consulting skills training, as well as internal consulting skills workshops to teach the competencies that are required for building consulting relationships (Block, 2011). An introductory assessment of DLI's services according to what is portrayed in their website and also what we are going to capture with our studies at this forum can be as following:

A. ICT Role & Function Analysis

- The general topology of DLI's website:

Training: Useful information is given on how to become a student of DLI and learn how to develop consulting skills.

Consulting Skills: The best part of the website can be found here. A set of short articles along with educational programs (workshops) are offered to enrich the website users and viewers with a good knowledge on consulting skills.

Ideas: Peter Block has offered a brief on most effective ideas that can be used both in offering and analyzing consulting services, whether as a consultant (service provider) or as a client (consultancy user). He always keeps his company open to new ideas on consulting and names DLI a learning company.

Books: DLI has introduced books published by Block in recent years in this section.

Blog: Block's blog can be found here. He has a rich-content blog that can be a real example for me and every other guy who is interested in writing meaningful posts.

About Us: Company's business information can be found here.

Contact: Users and clients can contact DLI at this point.

Press Room: The latest announcements on workshops and other offerings are stated here.

Site Map: Directions are provided to show the exact place of items that exist on the website.

In addition to aforementioned sections, DLI has a useful subjective categorization: Consulting Skills, HR Consulting Skills, Internal Consulting Skills, IT Consulting Skills, Leadership Training Consultant, Leadership Skills Training, Influencing Skills, Influencing Skills Training, Negotiation Skills, Negotiation Skills Training, and Six Conversations That Matter.

The nature of website is static, but enjoys on time updates with a PHP based control panel connected to a MySQL database available to Block and his team. The contents of the site that are usually short articles can be loaded quickly within a user-friendly design that has ornamented DLI's website. Block's blog is based on Word Press blogging system and is equipped with a subscription service that sends instant updates to subscribers' email addresses when a new article is published. It is spam-free. The website uses PHP based components, Google sitemap meta code verification that helps the retrieval of website's contents by Google and other search engines, LivePerson monitor button code, Java scripts, CSS styles, search box and of course, a video clip (6,696 Kb) from Block introducing briefly his book: "Flawless Consulting". 2 PDF brochures are also included. It provides what is expected to be found at a foresight consultancy website, and even more than our expectancy. The homepage has an encouraging voice to attract the clients and viewers register at workshops and join the conversations.

B. Freed's Conceptualization Analysis

DLI has targeted effectively the clients' interest in consulting affairs. DLI's Flawless Consulting Workshops train professionals to become consultants by emphasizing several essential components (Block, 2011). Block has followed Freed's 4 steps of defining a **logical methodology** clearly (2003, p. 60). In defining the process of becoming a consultant, he goes logically in this manner: "The first step, contracting, is probably the most important. The second step in the consulting process is the discovery phase. The third step involves feedback to the client and the decision to act. The fourth phase in the consulting process is implementation, carrying out the plan. The fifth phase involves evaluation and appropriate follow-through." (Block, 2011). This is exactly the same golden formula that can be also found in his book (Block, 2002). He completes the job by implementing Freed's formula of **Methodology=actions + activities** (2003, p. 71) in launching his consulting training workshops (Block, 2011). This can be especially seen in the activities that he has suggested at his workshops: Flawless Consulting 1: Contracting, Flawless Consulting 2: Discovery, and Flawless Consulting 3: Implementation.

C. Bishop-Hines Conceptualization Analysis

Bishop and Hines' verse of "Framing, Scanning, Forecasting, Visioning, Planning, and Acting" (2007, p. 184) may not be found exactly in Block's services, but a similar process with a different sequence can be recognized in his consultancy (Block, 2002). It can be summarized as following table:

Bishop-Hines	1. Framing	2. Scanning	3. Forecasting	4. Visioning	5. Acting
Block	1. Contracting	2. Discovery	5. Extension	3. Feedback	4. Implementation

I'm not sure how aware Block has been of Bishop and Hines' work, but I'm sure Block had proposed that process of consulting long before Bishop and Hines invent their strategic foresight process (at least 2 decades earlier). Perhaps it's better to analyze Bishop and Hines' proposed process with Block's method of consulting.

References:

Block, P. (2002). *Flawless Consulting*, CA: Pfeiffer.

Block, P. (2011). Trainers Become Full Partners,
<http://www.designDLlearning.com/consultingskillsinaction/trainers-become-full-partners.php>

Freed, R. C. et. al. (2003). *Writing Winning Business Proposals*, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Hines, A. and Bishop, P. (2007). *Thinking about the future: Guidelines for strategic foresight*, DC: Social Technologies.

B. Competitive Futures Inc. (CFI) Assessment

Competitive Futures Inc. is a foresight service offered by Eric Garland based in St Louis, Washington DC. CFI combines long-term strategic forecasts with competitive intelligence to tell leaders about to turn foresight into profitable opportunities (Garland, 2011). An assessment of CFI's services according to what is portrayed in their website and also what we are going to cover at this forum is as following:

A. ICT Role & Function Analysis

- The general topology of CFI's website:

About Us: Some information can be found about the firm, clients and the founder, Eric Garland here.

Methodology: The best part of the website is here as the methods used by CFI are well-introduced. It is divided into 6 sections including: Methodology overview, STEEP analysis, Strategic trend research, Forecast assessment, Implications, and Scenario development.

Research: Eric Garland has offered a brief on research and analysis that he conducts at his company and has named a number of his sample projects in this section.

Training: Garland has concentrated his training services on two areas: trend forecasting and competitive analysis.

Issues We Cover: CFI covers a range of fields of studies including: Talent crunch, Aging population, Global urbanization, Natural resource scarcity, Infrastructure, Economic development, Peak oil, and etc.

Blog: Garland's blog can be found here. Of course, he has another blog at WFS.org.

Contact: Users and clients can contact Competitive Futures at this point.

In addition to aforementioned sections, CFI publishes an e-newsletter called: "*Competitive Futures Trend Report*" that is sent to the members of the website. The nature of website is dynamic and enjoys a light loading system with concise contents and user-friendly design. Garland's blog is utilized with RSS & feedburner. The website uses XML based components, Java and JoomlaWorks scripts, CSS styles and SWF effects. It provides what is expected to find at a foresight consultancy website, but it can be improved in different ways (like embedding interactive components to give more sense of livelihood of a consultancy service to its clients).

B. Freed's Conceptualization Analysis

CFI claims that it is the only consultancy in the world to train intelligence professionals and executives in the art of combining foresight with day-to-day management. It also claims that it is unequalled as a provider of business development intelligence. Such claims may be challenged by other foresight services offering companies. Freed (2003) reminds us that "the world is full of experts" (p. xiv). Such claims may sound a little hyperbolic. They collect information on markets, customers, competitors, and regulations, to let the clients turn the future into profitable reality. Other websites like Shaping Tomorrow offer the same trend collecting service, even more professionally. I could not find a competitive benefit in Garland's trend analysis service differentiated from other similar services. There is a lack of "*counters to the competition*" in selecting trends themes (Freed, 2003, p.116).

The turning point of CFI services is Future Intelligence (FI). While the website has offered a quick view of a hybrid future intelligence system, Garland could offer more explanation on FI. I think that he is using it as a "hot button". Hot buttons are needs and desires of individual buyers that can be addressed during our face-to-face meeting with the buyers, by altering our project's methodology, and/or by changing our project's team. Hot buttons are almost always psychologically oriented and process-oriented (Freed, 2003, p.104). In essence, CFI can be regarded a proper boutique case for a young futurist like Garland.

C. Bishop-Hines Conceptualization Analysis

CFI goes well beyond SWOT analysis (Hines and Bishop, 2007, p. 184). They have introduced "Future Intelligence" method as a leading factor to consider real questions for every trend. Meanwhile, they claim that they see their clients turn future disruptions into billion dollar opportunities! If such claims are true, then we may be faced with a giant foresight company, even bigger than RAND! So it will be no longer a boutique!

The well-known paradigm of: "Framing, Scanning, Forecasting, Visioning, Planning, and Acting" (Hines and Bishop, 2007) cannot be clearly seen in CFI services, but it may be considered by Garland and his team in their activities. CFI services are mainly concentrated on trends and this may not be very attractive in our turbulent time in which trend analysis is not as credible as past years. CFI has flourished Bishop-Hines' recommendations in their trend analysis service (Garland, 2011). According to Bishop and Hines (2007), "When analyzing the impacts of a particular trend, for example, first consider current assumptions about where the trend is now and where it's likely to go. Next, determine the perceived rate of change, by consulting both conventional wisdom in the marketplace and expert opinion and quantitative evidence. ...Then consider the timeframe of impact" (Hines and Bishop,

2007, p. 23). This is evident in "Trend Forecasting" and "Strategic trend research" sections of CFI's website.

References:

Freed, R. C. et. al. (2003). *Writing Winning Business Proposals*, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Garland, E. (2011). Competitive intelligence plus forecasting: Future Intelligence, <http://www.competitivefutures.com/methodology/future-intelligence-forecasting-competitive-intelligence>

Hines, A. and Bishop, P. (2007). *Thinking about the future: Guidelines for strategic foresight*, DC: Social Technologies.

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The Future Is a Chance to Be New