VISIBLE AUTHORITY GUIDE · 2026

Lead, *Don't Sell*

How consultants win clients by leading with their approach—in seven stages, with a Niche Tool and a 90-day plan for consulting after AI.

AUTHOR

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WRITTEN FOR

Established independent consultants and founders or partners of small consulting firms (1–20 people)

INSIDE

Consulting after AI · Five selling habits to drop · Seven stages · Niche Tool · 90-day plan

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01 / THE SPINE

Clients buy into an approach, *not a service*

One sentence carries the whole method. Everything that follows—the niche, the piece, the assessment, the proposal—puts it into practice.

> Clients don't buy your services. They buy into your approach to their problem. So lead with the approach—don't sell the service.
>
> THE LEAD, DON'T SELL SPINE · HASSAN ADNAN

Most consultants describe what they do: the services, the credentials, the deliverables. Buyers hear the same list from every firm and compare on price. The consultants who are sought out work the other way round. They show how they see the client's problem before the first meeting, prove that view in an assessment the client pays for, and propose only once both sides know what the work is worth.

This guide sets out that sequence in seven stages. It is written for people who already have the expertise and want clients to come to them for it.

WHO IT IS FOR

Established independent consultants and founders or partners of small consulting firms (1–20 people) who already have expertise and want clients to come to them for it. It is not a guide to starting a firm from scratch: it assumes you can already deliver, and shows how buyers come to see that before they meet you.

02 / CONSULTING AFTER AI

When analysis is cheap, *a way of seeing is scarce*

Four shifts since 2023 make the old selling habits more expensive and a visible approach more valuable. Figures carry a short credit; full references are in the source notes.

POINT OF VIEW

Make your way of seeing visible—and paid for

When analysis is cheap, the scarce thing is a defensible way of seeing the problem—made visible before the first meeting and proven in an assessment the client pays for.

Shift 01

Analysis is becoming a commodity

In a field experiment with 758 BCG consultants, those using GPT-4 finished 12.2% more tasks, 25.1% faster and with more than 40% higher rated quality—but their ideas became more alike, and on a problem outside the tool's competence they were 19 percentage points less likely to be right (Dell'Acqua et al., Harvard Business School, 2023) [1]. An FT column put it bluntly: “If it can go into a slide deck, it's almost certainly turning into a commodity” (Financial Times, Aug 2026) [2].

Shift 02

Buyers decide before they meet you

94% of B2B buyers now use AI while buying (Forrester, Jan 2026) [3]; 61% prefer a rep-free buying experience and 73% avoid suppliers who send irrelevant outreach (Gartner, Jun 2025) [4]; the vendor buyers favour before first contact wins 80% of deals (6sense, Nov 2025) [5].

Shift 03

Content is abundant; trust is scarce

About half of new online articles are now mainly AI-generated (Graphite, May 2026) [6]; 70% of 3,887 companies would not trust a consultancy report produced with AI (Source Global Research, Aug 2026) [7]; only 15% of decision-makers rate most thought leadership they read as very good or excellent (Edelman–LinkedIn, 2024) [8], yet 73% of hidden decision-makers call it one of the best ways to judge a firm's thinking (Edelman–LinkedIn, 2025) [9].

Shift 04

Fees are moving towards accountability

About a quarter of McKinsey's global fees are now tied to outcomes (Business Insider, Nov 2025) [10]. That is the backdrop for stage 6: propose with a business case the buyer can test.

HONEST LIMITS

Content alone rarely wins: fewer than 3% of buyers knew the vendor they chose only through brand or content, and 85% had dealt with it before (6sense, 2025) [11]. Some demand is disappearing as clients bring work in-house (FT, Aug 2026) [12]. Visible thinking earns the shortlist and the first meeting; the assessment and an accountable proposal win the work.

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03 / WHY TRADITIONAL SELLING FAILS

Five habits to drop—*and what to do instead*

Each habit made some sense when buyers had to meet a firm to learn how it thinks. After AI, each one pushes you towards price comparison.

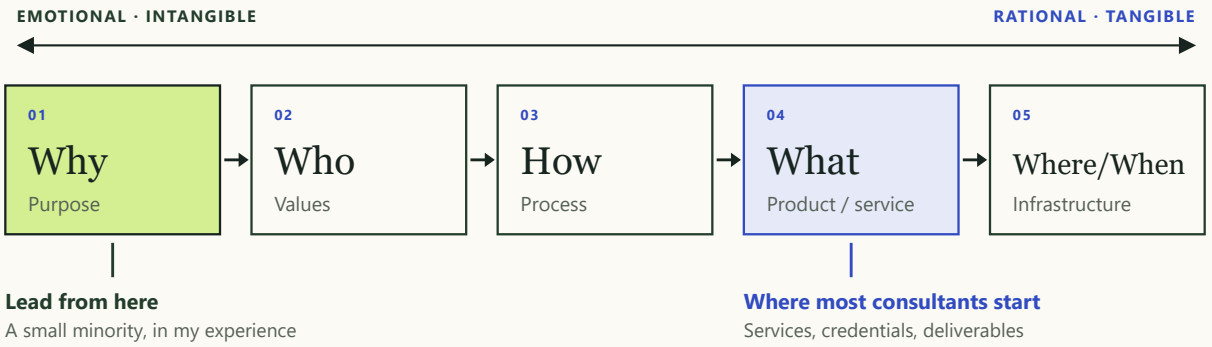
#	TRADITIONAL HABIT	WHAT IT COSTS	LEAD, DON'T SELL INSTEAD
1	**Pitching what you do** (services, credentials, deliverables)	Sounds like every other firm; buyers compare on price	**Lead with why and how.** Start from purpose and process on the why → where spectrum (Figure 01), not from the service list. The author's own model.
2	**Competing on price in a crowded niche**	Red-ocean fights, discounts, no pricing power (“Dare not swim with piranhas”)	**Go where the demand is and own a niche** (“Bees are where the honey is”), with an approach no one else offers. Red ocean / blue ocean: Kim & Mauborgne, *Blue Ocean Strategy* (2005). Both metaphors are the author's.

#	TRADITIONAL HABIT	WHAT IT COSTS	LEAD, DON'T SELL INSTEAD
3	**Volume content** (posts, newsletters, collateral)	Bottom of the pyramid: lots of content, little impact on buyers	**One substantial thought-leadership piece**—report, seminar, webinar or long-form article—at the top of the pyramid, where ideas have the most impact on buyers. Adapted from Laura Ramos, *Nurture Thought Leadership To Nurture Your Brand*, Forrester (2015).
4	**Giving the diagnosis away** in free discovery calls	The client takes your thinking and runs a tender	**A paid assessment** on your yardstick and your terms, producing the client's priorities and their implications. Established practice, e.g. David A. Fields; Alan Weiss.
5	**Proposal sprees**	Proposals written before you know how the buyer decides; you can't charge a penny more	**Propose only after the assessment**, with a business case (payback period, ROI, total cost of ownership) and a value proposition built as *business driver* + *movement* + *metrics*. After Jill Konrath, *Selling to Big Companies*.

FIGURE 01 · THE WHY → WHERE SPECTRUM

Lead from purpose and process, not from the service list

WHY → WHO → HOW → WHAT → WHERE



The spectrum runs from the emotional and intangible to the rational and tangible. Most consultants start at *What*; in my experience only a small minority start at *Why*.

Source: why → where spectrum · Hassan Adnan (the author's own model)

Red ocean

“Dare not swim with piranhas”

A crowded niche where every firm offers the same service is a price fight you cannot win on expertise alone. The discounts start before the first meeting.

Metaphor: Hassan Adnan · red ocean: Kim & Mauborgne, *Blue Ocean Strategy* (2005)

Blue ocean

“Bees are where the honey is”

Go where buyers already feel the problem and pay to solve it, then own that niche with an approach no one else offers.

Metaphor: Hassan Adnan · blue ocean: Kim & Mauborgne, *Blue Ocean Strategy* (2005)

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04 / THE SEVEN STAGES

From a chosen niche *to a compounding practice*

Each stage has one thing to do, one output to keep and one question to ask yourself before moving on.

STAGE 01 · NICHE

Choose a niche you can dominate

WHAT TO DO

Score two or three candidate niches with the Niche Tool and choose one. Focus means relevance and dominance: a niche where your answer matters and where you can become the obvious reference.

THE OUTPUT

One chosen niche, with its Niche Tool scores and the area you need to strengthen first.

ASK YOURSELF

Among these buyers, could I become the first name they think of for this problem?

STAGE 02 · APPROACH

Build a distinct approach

WHAT TO DO

Turn your judgement into a named framework or model that breaks the client's problem into parts. Work through: how the domain evolved (primary research) → how it is changing (trends) → your view of its future → which parts the problem divides into → how you would solve each part.

THE OUTPUT

A one-sentence view that differs from the usual answer, and a named framework whose parts you can explain.

ASK YOURSELF

If a buyer heard only my one sentence, would they know how my view differs from everyone else's?

STAGE 03 · VISIBLE THINKING

Publish one thought-leadership piece

WHAT TO DO

A report, seminar, webinar or long-form article that shows the approach working on a burning problem. Position it with the why → where spectrum.

THE OUTPUT

One substantial piece buyers can judge before they meet you.

ASK YOURSELF

Would a buyer who reads only this piece understand how I think, and why it matters to them?

STAGE 04 · CONVERSATIONS

Meet the people it attracts

WHAT TO DO

The piece earns the conversation; you don't cold-pitch. Take it to the places where your buyers already gather and let the people it reaches start the conversation.

THE OUTPUT

Conversations that begin from your thinking rather than from a pitch.

ASK YOURSELF

Are the people I meet responding to my approach, or to my list of services?

STAGE 05 · ASSESSMENT

Run a paid assessment

WHAT TO DO

Your yardstick, your terms. The framework's dimensions become the assessment's questions, so the assessment applies your approach to the client's situation.

THE OUTPUT

The client's priorities and their implications—for example, a maturity profile across the framework's dimensions.

ASK YOURSELF

Am I still giving the diagnosis away in free discovery calls?

STAGE 06 · PROPOSAL

Propose with a business case

WHAT TO DO

Propose only after the assessment. Build the case on payback, return on investment (ROI) and total cost of ownership (TCO), and state the value proposition as *business driver + movement + metrics*, after Jill Konrath, *Selling to Big Companies*.

THE OUTPUT

A proposal the buyer can test against their own numbers.

ASK YOURSELF

Can the buyer see the payback period in their own figures, not just in my fee?

STAGE 07 · COMPOUND

Close and compound

WHAT TO DO

Each engagement feeds the flywheel: captured market → improved process → better results → more experience → newer thinking → the next piece.

THE OUTPUT

A sharper process, documented results and the material for your next thought-leadership piece.

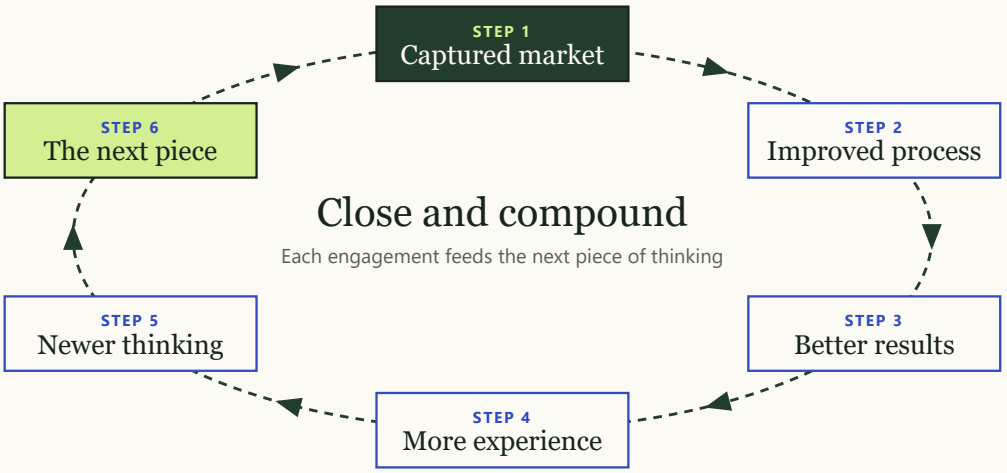
ASK YOURSELF

What did this engagement teach me that belongs in the next piece?

FIGURE 02 · THE FLYWHEEL

STAGE 07

Each engagement feeds the next piece of thinking



Captured market → improved process → better results → more experience → newer thinking → the next piece.

Source: Lead, Don't Sell flywheel · Hassan Adnan

ESTABLISHED PRACTICE AND WHAT IS NEW

Paid diagnostics are not new; starting from the piece is

Paid diagnostics before proposals are established practice (e.g. David A. Fields; Alan Weiss on agreeing scope before proposing). The contribution of this method is starting the sequence from a thought-leadership piece, the Lead, Don't Sell framing, the Niche Tool, the why → where spectrum and my own results.

05 / THE NICHE TOOL

Score two or three niches *before you choose one*

Five areas × four yes/no questions. Each “yes” scores 1, so each area scores 0–4 and a niche scores 0–20. Print the tool and circle Y or N for each candidate niche.

Illustrative self-reflection, not a validated instrument. The Niche Tool is the author's own evaluation tool.

#	QUESTION	NICHE A	NICHE B	NICHE C
AREA 01 · DEMAND				
01.1	Are buyers aware of the problem you want to solve?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
01.2	Are they aware of the kind of solution you propose?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
01.3	Do established consulting firms already serve this niche (proof that buyers pay)?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
01.4	Does the niche have regular events, associations or media where buyers gather?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
	Demand subtotal (0–4)	__ / 4	__ / 4	__ / 4
AREA 02 · EXPERIENCE & CREDENTIALS				
02.1	Does your experience directly complement the niche?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
02.2	Do you hold relevant credentials?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
02.3	Have you successfully delivered projects in the niche?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
02.4	Can you gain missing credentials quickly?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
	Experience & credentials subtotal (0–4)	__ / 4	__ / 4	__ / 4
AREA 03 · PROCESS				
03.1	Can you map the process that delivers results?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
03.2	Do you have access to advice that helps you refine it?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
03.3	Is delivery predictable?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
03.4	Can you state the outcome the process delivers in measurable terms?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
	Process subtotal (0–4)	__ / 4	__ / 4	__ / 4
AREA 04 · CAPABILITIES				
04.1	Do you have the resources and talent to deliver the process?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
04.2	Can you outsource the capabilities you lack?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
04.3	Can you find talent that can be trained on the process quickly?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
04.4	Could you fund the resources for six months with no income?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
	Capabilities subtotal (0–4)	__ / 4	__ / 4	__ / 4

#	QUESTION	NICHE A	NICHE B	NICHE C
AREA 05 · DISTINCT APPROACH				
05.1	Can you state your view of the problem in one sentence that differs from the usual answer?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
05.2	Do you have a named framework or model that breaks the problem into parts?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
05.3	Can the framework's parts become assessment questions?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
05.4	Do you have your own proof—a case, data or event—that shows the approach working?	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N
	Distinct approach subtotal (0–4)	__ / 4	__ / 4	__ / 4
	Total (0–20)	__ / 20	__ / 20	__ / 20
	Lowest area score (below 2 = fix first)	__ / 4	__ / 4	__ / 4

DECISION RULE

Highest total, no area below 2

Score two or three candidate niches and compare. Prefer the highest total with no area below 2; an area at 0–1 is the first thing to fix or a reason to choose another niche.

REFLECTION NOTE · NOT SCORED

More knowledge or more experience?

When you score Capabilities, ask yourself whether you need more knowledge or more experience in this niche. The prompt comes from the original tool and is kept for reflection; it does not add to the score.

06 / PROOF

Lead, don't sell, *in practice*

Two observations from the author's own work. They illustrate the method; they are not a promise of results.

210 · 40

A seminar instead of a pitch

Lead, don't sell, in practice: a family-business seminar in Lahore (Falettis) attended by 210 people representing 40 families—while other advisers kept selling standard family-business constitutions.

24k → 98k

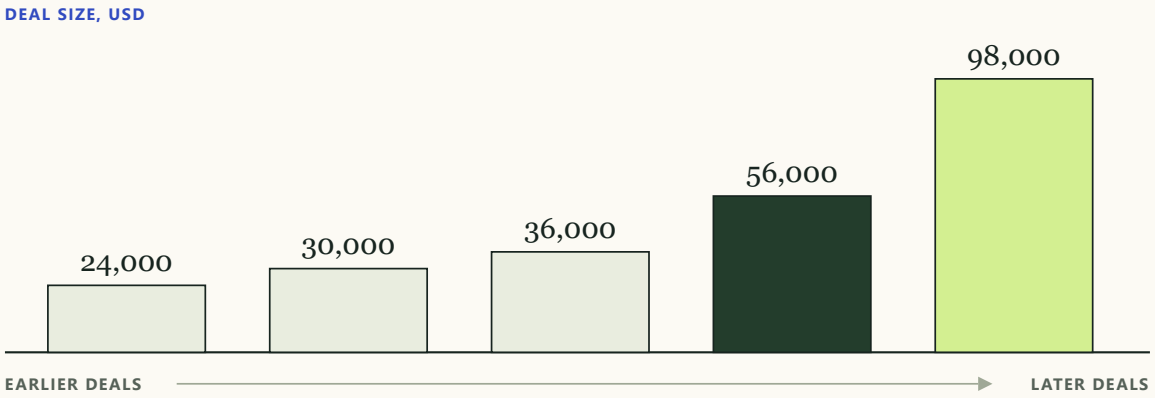
The flywheel in deal size

The flywheel in practice: deal sizes in my own practice rose from USD 24,000 to 30,000, 36,000, 56,000 and 98,000.

FIGURE 03 · THE DEAL-SIZE LADDER

REPORTED OUTCOME (AUTHOR'S ACCOUNT)

Deal sizes in my own practice, in order



Successive deal sizes, USD. Historical engagements; not a guarantee of future results.

Source: Hassan Adnan, own practice (author's account)

07 / THE NEXT 90 DAYS

Twelve weeks *from niche to first assessment*

A plan for established consultants. Each block maps to the stages above; the pace assumes you are delivering client work alongside it.

WEEKS	ACTION	STAGES
1–2	Score two or three niches with the Niche Tool and choose one.	1

WEEKS	ACTION	STAGES
3–4	Draft your distinct approach: the one-sentence view and a named framework.	2
5–8	Write or stage one thought-leadership piece; update your profile so it reflects the approach.	3
9–10	Document your minimum viable process and turn the framework into a paid assessment format.	5
11–12	Distribute the piece to the right buyers; run the first assessments; propose with a business case.	4, 5, 6

After the first assessments: four growth levers

Lever 01

Distribution of ideas

Webinars, documented case studies, regular synthesis, one dominant channel.

Lever 02

Talent

Acquire and retain people; give them sub-problems to solve.

Lever 03

Partners

Partners who build on your framework and add sub-area or location expertise.

Lever 04

Systemization

Document the process, manage utilization, obsolete yourself quickly, on-the-job training, toolsets.

Start this week

1. Write down two or three niches you could serve.
2. Print the Niche Tool and score each one.
3. Choose the highest total with no area below 2. Its lowest area is the first thing to fix.
4. Then use weeks 3–4 to draft your one-sentence view and a named framework (stage 2).

08 / SOURCE NOTES

Figures, credits *and where they come from*

Bracketed numbers in the text refer to these notes. Dates are publication dates; sponsor interests are noted where relevant.

[1] Dell'Acqua, McFowland, Mollick, Lifshitz-Assaf, Kellogg, Rajendran, Krayer, Candelon and Lakhani, *Navigating the Jagged Technological Frontier*, Harvard Business School Working Paper 24-013, 22 Sep 2023 (758 BCG consultants; productivity, quality, homogenised ideas, 19-point drop outside the frontier). https://mitsloan.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2023-10/SSRN-id4573321.pdf. Published in *Organization Science*, Mar–Apr 2026: https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=64700

[2] Financial Times (Robert Armstrong), *Who needs consultants in the age of AI?*, 6 Aug 2026 (opinion column). https://finance.yahoo.com/technology/ai/articles/needs-consultants-age-ai-040015268.html

[3] Forrester (John Buten), *B2B Buyers Make Zero-Click Buying Number One*, 22 Jan 2026, citing the Buyers' Journey Survey 2025. https://www.forrester.com/blogs/b2b_buyers_make_zero_click_buying_number_one/

[4] Gartner, press release on B2B buyers and rep-free buying, 25 Jun 2025 (n=632, surveyed Aug–Sep 2024). https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2025-06-25-gartner-sales-survey-finds-61-percent-of-b2b-buyers-prefer-a-rep-free-buying-experience

[5] 6sense, *2025 Buyer Experience Report* press release, 11–12 Nov 2025 (more than 4,000 buyers; vendor research). https://6sense.com/news/the-timeline-for-influencing-b2b-buyers-is-shrinking-insights-from-6senses-2025-buyer-experience-report

[6] Graphite, *AI Now Writes as Many Online Articles as Humans*, 15 May 2026 (detector-based study; the publisher is an SEO agency). https://graphite.io/research/ai-now-writes-as-many-online-articles-as-humans-do

[7] Source Global Research survey of 3,887 companies, as reported by The Telegraph (3 Aug 2026), Resultsense (4 Aug 2026: https://www.resultsense.com/news/2026-08-04-consultancy-clients-distrust-ai-reports/) and the Australian Financial Review (13 Aug 2026: https://www.afr.com/companies/professional-services/consultants-face-backlash-from-clients-over-plans-to-use-ai-20260813-p60o0f). Secondary reports; the survey report itself was not read.

[8] Edelman and LinkedIn, *2024 B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report: Reaching Beyond the Ready*, Feb 2024 (n=3,484 across 7 countries). https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2024-02/_2024%20Edelman-LinkedIn%20B2B%20Thought%20Leadership%20Impact%20Report%20Final.pdf

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[12] Financial Times, syndicated in The Irish Times, *Consultants head for a showdown with their own clients as AI upends industry*, 31 Aug 2026. https://www.irishtimes.com/business/2026/08/31/consultants-head-for-a-showdown-with-their-own-clients/

Credits for borrowed ideas

- Red ocean / blue ocean: W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, *Blue Ocean Strategy* (2005).
- Thought-leadership pyramid: adapted from Laura Ramos, *Nurture Thought Leadership To Nurture Your Brand*, Forrester (2015).
- Value proposition as business driver + movement + metrics: after Jill Konrath, *Selling to Big Companies*.
- Paid diagnostics before proposals: established practice (e.g. David A. Fields; Alan Weiss on agreeing scope before proposing).
- The author's own: the Lead, Don't Sell spine and seven stages, the why → where spectrum, the Niche Tool, the flywheel, “Bees are where the honey is” and “Dare not swim with piranhas”. Proof figures are the author's account of his own practice.

VISIBLE AUTHORITY · GUIDE

Lead with the approach. *Don't sell the service.*

Provenance: *Lead, Don't Sell* is Hassan Adnan's method, developed from his talk *Consulting Mastery – Intro* and tightened for this 2026 guide. Third-party ideas are credited where they appear. The Niche Tool is illustrative self-reflection; the proof reflects historical engagements, not a guarantee of future results.

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