

Marketing as a Part of Strategic Management of Consulting Companies

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Abstract

Consulting companies in order to be successful and to provide services at high professional level inevitably need clear strategy. They must have an established vision, following up on strategy that forms their way of development. Continuously changing area, strong competition, growing demands by the clients for professionally provided services with additional value and new technology represent key features that evoke necessity of use of marketing at the activity of consulting companies. At consulting companies, the marketing system has its particulars that are typical for consulting companies. The mentioned particulars regard mainly marketing mixture and the position of consultant.

Key words

Marketing, strategic management, consulting company, professional company

JEL Classification: M31, L84

Introduction

The creation of consulting companies, mainly contribution of its professional help to companies at new business conditions have registered important progress in the attitude of business entities to these services. Consulting companies in order to be successful and to provide services at high professional level inevitably need clear strategy. They must have an established vision, following up on strategy that forms their way of development. Quality strategy as a part of strategic management of consulting companies is the basic condition for successful growth and development.

Consulting companies need to create a good strategy also to search the value. They need to know the client perfectly, his needs and expectations. Furthermore, they need to know their own competence and finally they need to know the relations and interaction with its partners.

The article takes care of strategic attitude that is applied in the management of consulting companies. Our goal is to focus on the marketing strategy that as a functional strategy represents process / way how the consulting company wants to achieve the marketing and company goals, on separate tools of marketing mix as a part of marketing strategy and its particulars under the conditions of strategic management of consulting company and with regards on high competition area in which the consulting companies take part.

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1 Methodology

The main goal of the article is to show the necessity of applying the strategic attitude in the management of consulting companies that can help them to provide effective management and stable position against the competition that is getting stronger. In order to achieve the goal, we have specified it to the following partial goals:

- specify the consulting companies,
- clarify the key aspects of strategic management of consulting companies,
- emphasize the marketing attitude and marketing management in the area of consulting companies with focus on its substance and specifications.

When achieving the given goals, we used the standard scientific methods. By applying the analytical method, we reduce the system of problems to its basic elements in order to study them in details and understand the existing interaction among them. The result of this research are the partial theoretical conclusions and knowledge that were linked by the synthesis into one whole. By the given procedure, we tried to understand the substance of the examined matter. By the use of inductive method when examining the scientific deduction, we proceeded from general rules of development of the mentioned field that is from individual facts to general conclusions. When applying the method of scientific deduction, we proceeded from general conclusions to individual facts. The methods of description and comparison were applied at comparing the practical applications with theoretical knowledge from the authors from different schools, who work on the mentioned topics. The method of scientific abstract was applied at elimination of unsubstantial, sudden from the substantial, and legal.

The object of the discussed topic were the consulting companies and the selected aspects of their management and activities. As it came out of formulation of the above given main goal of the article, we focused on the strategic management of consulting companies with the goal to emphasize the effects coming out of this attitude. Within this context, we tried to understand the consulting companies as business entities and as professional companies. The second attitude of understanding the consulting companies creates the basis for identification of specifications that can differ the process and activities of consulting companies from business entities that provide activities in different fields. These specifications are shown in two basic ways:

1. use of strategic and marketing management of the activity of consulting companies brings effects in the form of successful business of these companies and
2. use of the strategic and marketing attitude in the process of the activity of consulting companies is the condition for its higher professionalism and effects for clients.

When writing the article, we applied two basic principles – theoretical and empirical. The first working method- empirical attitude was based upon watching and upon our experience regarding the object of the examined topic. The second working method is theoretical study that was developed from logical processing of known data. Both attitudes are bound and represent the complex attitude of the problematics that is being solved.

2 Results and discussion

2.1 Strategic management of consulting companies

Consulting companies represent any type of organizational unit that provides consulting services. Daño et al. (2005) divide the consulting companies into these categories: (1) extent, (2) function, (3) territorial competence.

1. Size point of view

- *Big multifunctional consulting company.* Usually these are the transnational companies providing complex consulting services. The greatest advantage of these companies is the brand name, specific consulting methods, procedures and technologies.
- *Medium-sized and small consulting companies.* They provide complex consulting or they specialise on particular field of consulting (Noyelle & Dutka, 1998). The advantages of small consulting companies are high flexibility, individual, "tailor-made" attitude to the client, offer of special services (often above the range of usual offer) according to the specific needs and wishes of the client that often leads to his bigger satisfaction. Mainly the flexibility represents the source of exceptional competence and advantage against competition of the medium-sized and small consulting companies (Biech, 2003). Furthermore, part of these advantages are better knowledge of the needs of the client, direct, resp. personal interaction with client, specialization, higher independence of consultants and a lot more.

2. Functional point of view

- *General consulting companies.* They focus on providing complex consulting services, e.g. economic and organizational consulting, management consulting, marketing consulting, financial consulting, consulting in the field of IT, etc.
- *Functionally specialized consulting companies.* These companies focus on specific field and/ or function. Such as agencies of marketing research, commercial agencies, accounting companies, etc.
- *Consulting companies specialized on fields:* These companies specialise on specific field, resp. they provide special type of operations (e.g. energetic consulting, environmental consulting, process consulting, etc.)
- *Unconventional providers of consulting services.* Their main, resp. original activity is different from consulting. Consulting is understood as supplement to their products and / or services that enriches and makes more attractive their offer (e.g. consulting in the field of architecture, etc.)

3. Territorial point of view

- *Transnational consulting companies.* They establish units and affiliations to provide reachability of the client.
- *Regional and local consulting companies.* These consulting companies provides services in a specific and limited geographic territory.

Consulting companies as business entities of consulting services represent the *professional companies* by its features. It means that they have the following specifications (Michalová, 2006):

- more than 50% employees are professionals,
- there is high emphasize on professional goals including altruistic solution of problems in relation to the clients,
- high level of acceptance of professional regulations is being shown,
- there is emphasize on creation as well as application of knowledge.

Good strategy helps the consulting companies to survive in a difficult competition area and to reach long-term success. The basic role of the strategy is to prepare the company for all situations that can be created in a future with a high probability. If the consulting company has a good strategy, it is different from other competitors and is in a unique position. Strategy makes the owners and managers to think about the goals, to identify the weak parts and the critical points and to look for the possibilities to apply the strong parts. Strategy represents the whole list of activities with important consequences for the consulting activity that must be coordinated by the strategic management.

The basis of the strategic management of consulting companies is a creation of vision, mission and goals that altogether with the analysis of the external and internal area shall allow the selection of appropriate strategy and its implementation, supported by the control process. The most important activity of the managers of the consulting company is making decisions, often understood as the body of the strategic management. Decisions with poor quality can be the important reason for the of business failure of consulting company.

The starting point that precedes all the other management activities and its realization is the *planning*. The process of strategic planning is a list of steps that are necessary for creation of strategic plan and for successful implementation of this plan in the organization (David, 2010). Among the models, introduced in a professional literature the model of J. Thompson and F. Martin (2010) seems to be the most appropriate from the point of view of its use in the management of consulting companies. Model (figure 1) shows all the main steps that must be realized during the process and the process is shown as a continuous activity.

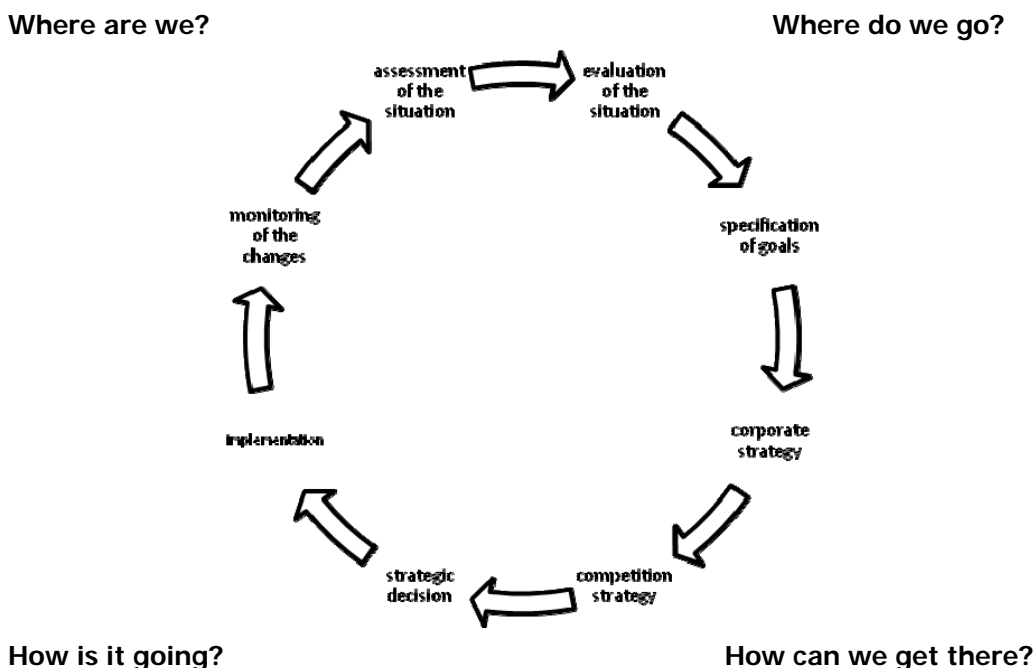
From the other management methods, among the area of consulting companies we mention the *process management* that represents a potential for increase its productivity. The uncontrolled process management can bring a structure of the consulting company with difficult and practically inapplicable process models.

Professional application of process requires also the course of realization of the consulting project that represents the core of the activity of the consulting company. It is described as consulting process into which the consultant enters altogether with the client. Professional consulting requires not only to pass successfully all the parts and steps of the consulting process but also to be compatible with the process of the consulting company itself as well as with the process in the organization of the client. As the process defines the requests for production, the omission of some of the phases or steps can cause problems and negative effect on the result and the contribution of the whole consulting process. The effective consulting process is the core of the consulting

activity. It overlaps the whole consulting company and its process whereas they create the base of its whole production.

The strategic management itself is extremely complicated process. One of the main reasons due to which the process of strategic management is important, is the fact that it helps to identify, build and maintain the competition advantage. The competition advantage is necessary for maintaining the stability and the prosperity in the continuously strong competition area. Nowadays we can meet such attitudes of consulting companies in relation to strategic management that differ from the traditional attitude leading to find the way how to cope with the changes in the area towards the search for the responds regarding the changed character of market and the competition conditions.

Figure 1 Model of the process of strategic planning according to J. Thompson and F. Martin



Source: own processing according to J. Thompson, F. Martin, 2010

Strategic management of the consulting companies currently is facing these main challenges:

1. *monitoring of the area and detailed understanding of its clients*- represent the necessity for specification of strategic goals and setting up the communication,
2. *sufficient knowledge and understanding of strategic goals*- is the basic assumption for motivation of managers of consulting companies and its key employees (consultants) at its realization,
3. *overcoming the problems related to the presentation of the strategy into practice of the consulting company*- these problems are usually related mainly to

- formal part of the strategy, system of management of the consulting company or by inappropriate setting up the priorities and procedure of its realization,
4. *assign the right people to right tasks.*

Strategic management represents one of the hard key skills of managers of consulting companies.

2.2 Position of the marketing management in the strategic management of the consulting company

Today the success of the consulting company is not possible without marketing attitude. Continuously changing area, strong competition, growing demands of clients for professionally provided services and the additional value and new technologies represent the key features that require the necessity of use of marketing in the activity of consulting companies. It is possible to say that the use of strategic and marketing management in the area of consulting companies differs from its type and size. In the international consulting companies as well as in the big national consulting companies the strategic and marketing attitude play important part of their activity, but in the medium sized and small consulting entities, the reality is different. Managers of medium sized companies and mainly of small consulting companies pay minimum attention to the strategic attitude of its activity. Its consequence is a very slow and insufficient knowledge of the area, trends, clients, incomplete strategy and poorly functioning internal company procedures and relations that will be negatively shown in its own consulting process. In case of consulting micro companies (with less than 10 employees), this fact is more different. The owner is usually also the manager whereas he is also the lead consultant (managing consultant, senior consultant, managing auditor, etc.). In such case, the key available capacity of the hours of work is usually allocated to external entities (consulting projects, collaboration of the client, etc.) internal process and activities focus mainly on core business. It is obvious that the strategic and marketing management in small and medium sized consulting companies do not have strong position. They are more intuitive and are not considered as necessary part of its activity.

Strategic and marketing management can improve the economy of consulting companies, get new clients, improve relations with clients and help them to keep the position in the continuously changing and strong competition area. Many consulting companies can survive even without formal strategy, but the clear vision of what they want to achieve and by which means will help them to achieve it. In its management, process and activities they consciously or intuitively apply the *marketing management*.

According to the author M. Blažková (2007), the marketing management is the process that includes marketing planning, implementation and control. The important activities of marketing management, its individual phases as well as activities among them are communication, making decisions and motivation.

Big transnational consulting companies plan their activities for few years in advance. They realize the necessity to be prepared for possible changes as well for the chance to keep the position at the intensive competition market. Medium-sized and small companies (eventually micro) consulting companies have the advantage of higher flexibility, capability of quicker reaction to the change. Plan, as the result of plan-

ning process allows identifying the sources of competition advantage, to set the goals and strategies and to provide financial means, necessary to build the company, realization of strategies and to control how is the company successful and how it fulfils the goals. Therefore, it is important to have a plan prepared in written that increases the chance to reach the given goals and control (Blažková, 2007).

The base of the results and decisions given within the strategic planning is the marketing strategic planning. The process of marketing planning and marketing actions shall be part of every business activity. Its inseparable part is the sufficient quantity of information needed mainly for the phase of analyses and making decisions. The specific feature in the consulting companies there is a fact that part from the business entities in the other filed a/or in other markets necessarily need sufficient information regarding not only the activity and the area but also the conditions in which their clients work. Therefore, the consulting company shall be able to have at disposal enough information on the development of its core even apart from its area, shall be able to process such information and to react on them effectively, by its mission, goals, requirements of its clients. Without a quick access to information, the consulting companies are in risk of unprofessional decisions in relation to them as well as in relation to their clients.

The process of receiving information when setting up the goals of consulting company. It takes into consideration the conditions and specific requirements of the consulting company as well as of its clients. In practice, it happens that managers and/or owners of medium sized companies and mainly small consulting companies focus more on short-term goals than on long-term (strategic) goals. The consequence of inappropriate goals is the inappropriate *strategy*.

Consulting companies as business entities choose strategies leading to reach the given goals. The emphasize is on increase of market participations, receiving and maintaining the trust of their clients, looking for resources, etc. the base of shown behaviour is the growing access of consulting companies that meets the marketing goals and with a high probability it provides the required growth. The base for the growth of access of the companies is the selection and application of growth strategies. They allow to the consulting companies to receive new clients, maintain the loyalty of current clients, the quality of existing services, develop better, innovative services and even they allow to enter the new markets and to new fields. In the last period at the consulting companies, it is possible to see the trend of diversification when they look for new possibilities of its growth. According to such access, they choose the strategies leading to reaching the goals. The emphasize is on increasing the market share, receiving and maintenance of trust of clients, looking for resources etc. The inseparable part is its strategic access therefore the orientation shall be inevitably on the creation of values for the clients.

Marketing strategy as a functional strategy represents procedure/way how the company wants to achieve the marketing and company goals. It includes specific strategies for market segment and target markets to which the company wants to focus with regards to its features. The part of marketing strategy is the product- market mixture, competition strategy and separate tools of marketing mixture (Lesáková et al., 2014). Among the competition strategies, we mostly meet the strategy of diversifications in the consulting companies.

They try to differ from the competition by providing better services whereas the emphasis is on creation of value. Creation of value for the client is the first step in the process of value creation. Then after choosing the value, there is another phase of process of its creation that is providing value. In this phase, the consulting company makes decisions on characteristics of services provided to the clients, its price, distribution and other added services. Specifically, in this phase it is very important what is the character of consulting process that represents the base for value creation for clients as a source of competition advantage of consulting company. Consulting company can create space for creation and supply of value to its clients by prolonging the life cycle of consulting process by the phase of consulting activities.

The contents of third step is the communication of value by using individual tools of marketing communication. In the last period, there is a rapid increase of videos that against the traditional attitude (mainly printed communication means). It can get to the substance of the matter a lot more quickly and more clearly as text and they save the time of the client. The basic advantages of video marketing or communication via video is the ability to effectively and attractively inform, simple forwarding by internet, great attractivity by verbal and audio-visual communication, support of other communication tools, support of image and look of modern consulting company, etc. Next often-used competition strategy of consulting companies is the strategy of concentration (specialization). Consulting company focuses on one or only few segments, or on space in the market to fill it. Then the polarization continues within which the big consulting companies grow and individuals can find the client because they are better available due to price as big companies.

The basis of successful marketing strategy of consulting companies are the strong relations with the clients. The assumption is that the consulting company is in contact with its clients, informs them and makes them join the whole process of creation of the value. Clients try to look for the maximum value for appropriate costs as time, information, and financial means. Providing value and its maximizing means keeping long-term and perspective relations with clients. Consulting companies therefore restrain from traditional mass marketing and they pay attention to targeted marketing. They build strong relations on collecting and processing detailed information on individual clients and its coordination with all opportunities and entities who come in touch with clients for maximizing the loyalty and satisfaction of the client.

Processing the quality strategy is difficult. It is more difficult to apply in practice. The implementation of strategy requires creating such conditions in consulting company that will allow realizing the strategy successfully.

2.3 Characteristics of marketing of consulting companies

Marketing mixt of consulting companies

Marketing planning allows making system of the marketing. In consulting companies, the marketing system has its characteristics typical for consulting companies. The mentioned characteristics regard mainly the marketing mixture and the position of consultant.

Marketing mix of consulting company is created by seven "P":

- product
- price
- place
- promotion
- people
- process
- physical environment.

The product of consulting companies are the consulting services. They are the specific professional services provided by qualified professionals and/or specialized organizations for solving the specific problem. Consulting services are in the category of business services. Regarding its effects leading to changes of production systems, productivity and effectivity the consulting services are in a group of information-intensive services. They are typical for application of high level of knowledge leading to problem solutions of clients regarding business processes of high qualified workers with high level of education and professional qualification – advisory, consulting to information technologies, legal, accounting, architect-engineering, research-development, commercial, research of the market, marketing, personal services. Consulting services are very innovative. They use mainly internal and implicit resources of innovative activities and have very strong contacts with suppliers and clients (Kubičková, 2009).

The product of consulting services is the specialization, professionalism, knowledge and practice that the consultant brings to the client (Biech, 2003).

Price for consulting services is usually set based upon individual consulting acts (consultation, consulting, project ...). The hourly rate is being applied for calculations of services for consulting as transactional price directly in the invoice or based upon agreement on a total price for consulting. In the methodology of separate EU states, there is a following diversification according to qualification and practice: leader of the project/ project team (project leader), senior consultant and junior consultant. As further access regarding price creation for consulting services, the person-days are being applied or monthly fees.

Characteristics for place or distribution in the marketing mix of consulting companies is mainly is that there are a lot more than in other fields closely bound by consultant and communication. It is very important how the consultant as a transferor of consulting service can intermediate or communicate this service to the client, how he sets data of the client and how he help him with implementation of proposed solutions.

Communication is an important marketing tool of the consulting company. Within the communication mixture there is a special position of personal communication (consultant with the client) and specific communication skills of the consultant. Effective marketing communication of consulting company leads to creation of positive image and strengthening of the brand name of the consulting company.

Process is another specific tool of marketing mix of consulting companies. The course of realization of the project it is possible to design as consulting process into which the consultant enters together with the client. The consulting process starts by first contact between the consultant and the client and terminates by evaluation of the collaboration. Omission of any of them can cause problems and can have negative impact on result and contributions of the whole consulting process. During the whole consulting process, there is an intensive communication and collaboration between the

consultant and the client. The participation rate between the consultant and the client is one of the basic elements of effective consulting attitude.

Area in which the consulting is provided is an inseparable part of presentation and of the image of the consulting company. If the part of consulting is provided at the area of client, consulting companies emphasise the professional and quality equipment of their area. Altogether, with brand name and communication the area of consulting services participates on creation of positive image. Then it builds trust in the mind of clients and increases the conscious of the consulting company.

Consultant as a part of marketing mix of consulting company

The important characteristics of marketing mix of consulting company is the seventh "P" – people. The position of the consultant and its role at consulting process as well as at developing the relations with clients. The consultant is the transferor of consulting services. Level and quality of consulting services provided to the clients depend on the consultant. The consultant is the guarantee of the quality and of the success of consulting company, and is an inseparable part of its product, brand name and image. Therefore, he has the right for important position in the marketing mixture of consulting company.

Assumption of the professional attitude of the consultant to the problems of the client and requirements is that he has at his disposal - complex of knowledge, abilities, skills, experience and characteristics known as professional competence. They represent ability to provide activity, capability to provide it in a particular field in which he is qualified. Consultant is competent if he fulfils these three conditions (Kubeš et al, 2004):

- He is equipped by characteristics, knowledge, skills and experience that is necessary for such behaviour.
- He is motivated to apply such behaviour, he sees the valued in the required behaviour, and is willing to apply his energy for it.
- He has the possibility to apply such behaviour in such area.

It is necessary to underline that the consultant is competent only if he fulfils all the three conditions. According to Barzošová (2010), absence of any of these will not allow the competent provision. Professional competence represents skills and abilities of consultant and characteristics of his professional attitude. They represent the base and factors of making decision on choosing the consultant by the client based upon which they fulfil the control function in relation to the consultant.

In the field of evaluating the special and professional skills of consultants the *communication skills* are required and the *communication competence*. Effective and successful communication between the client and the consultant presumes mainly the capability to listen, or active listening and asking questions. Another required skill needed in participation in negotiations is to overcome the comments.

The most common activity of the consultant is the *presentation*. From this level then the level and character of consulting activity as well as relation of the consultant-client is being reflected. The presentation skills are usually described as communication skills (Mikulaščík, 2010). It also due to the fact that the target of the presentation itself is to get the feedback (positive) from the participant apart from the intermedia-

tion of information. Another reason is the fact that the form of communication, way of presentation of the matter represents one of the decisive factors of success of the presentation.

The inseparable part of the professionalism of the consultant is the ethics and his social responsibility. The task of the consultant, beside other, is to coordinate different values that are often contradictory. In his decisions and recommendations, he must consider not only his preferences but also mainly the interests and requirements of the client. Even the consultant could be interested in a solution that would bring him profit but it would not be good for the client or for the company, he must decide and proceed with responsibility. The realization of the consulting profession requires the specification and definition of the ethical standards in general as well as with regards on separate parts of consulting. Consultant as a professional shall avoid misleading publicity. Misleading publicity is such activity that presents and can mislead a person to whom it is dedicated and due to its nature can influence commitment or can cause damage to the competition (Krsková, 1994). Untrue publicity in consulting happens if the consultant presents about him and/or his consulting company information and data that are untrue. He applies praising attitude and/or dishonest declarations. Professional consultant shall not criticize his competitors and other professionals nor shall compare himself to them in his favour by presenting his own services. Such attitude can be seen if the consultant tries to make bigger the attractiveness or competition advantage of his offer or consulting company in relation to the client.

Consultants usually apply the routine knowledge and skills and reach the required result. Such way of work is responsible and effective, but it is not sufficient. Consultants can rely less on standard solutions. Therefore, they shall pass the separate competence that will make available new ideas and unconventional solutions – creativity (Königová, 2006). Creativity in consulting relates mainly to the process of changes that bring a lot of unknown and mean a risk and uncertainty. Regarding the management of changes, the proactive attitude is typical based upon looking for new methods of work. Strategy of changes is the implementation of such strategy that presents new patterns of behaviour, thinking and attitudes at key groups in the organization of client. Strategic change remains in designing, managing and maintaining the fundamental changes in the strategy that regards mission, products, market, people, organizational structure and additional attributes and which turn into new harmony between organization of the client and its area.

Regarding the professional competence of consultant, it is necessary to mention even his *creative intelligence* that overlaps all the given professional competence. Professional competence represents skills and abilities of the consultant and characteristics of his professional attitude. They represent the base and factors of making decisions on selection of the consultant by the client, based upon which they fulfil the control function in relation consultant-client.

Conclusion

Strategic decisions must clearly show how they contribute to the additional value and to the maintenance of the positive competition position of the consulting compa-

nies. Consulting companies that are more client- oriented are able not only to use the opportunities better in the market, but they are also able to proceed successfully at making relations with clients. They are successful because they perfectly satisfy the needs of their clients and even exceed their expectations. The current client of consulting companies is being changed – is becoming more difficult, more educated, more informed, he changes his expectations and/or habits. Consulting companies that do not understand their activity only as providing (consulting) services but also as providing value to the client has the assumption for achieving the long-term competition advantage.

Owners and managers in the consulting companies must create strategies set for improving the attitude to their clients. Clients will contact those consulting companies that provide to their clients the highest value. The satisfaction of the clients is not only the goal for such companies but also a marketing tool.

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