

IN THE LAND OF THE GIANTS

*The avenues
leading into*

Fortune 1000 clients have long been littered with small firms that have been stepped on by larger and more aggressive rivals. Here's a look at seven small firms that thrive beside the elephants.



Firm: Saint Consulting
Billable consultants: 48
2006 revenue: \$19.8M
2006 growth rate: 37.9 percent

P. Michael Saint was running his own small PR firm when he received a call in 1984 from a friend. The friend, a developer, wanted to build a quality office building to replace an abandoned junkyard. "I told him to expect opposition from the neighbors," Saint recalls. His friend's lawyer advised him to slip quietly into City Hall in August when everyone was on vacation and pick up a permit; it would be a no-brainer.

The permit got shot down on the basis of neighborhood opposition. For help, the friend turned to Saint, who surveyed the neighbors, recommended steps to mitigate concerns, and launched a petition drive to support the permit. At its December meeting, the City Board approved the permit, which was unopposed. Saint Consulting, suddenly a land use consulting firm, was launched with Saint as CEO.

Today, Saint Consulting, headquartered in Hingham, MA, has 83 employees spread over 14 offices in the U.S., Canada, and the UK. It will do \$27 million in land use consulting this year. Saint has completed over 900 projects to date and expects to hit 1,000 by the end of 2007.

Land use consulting draws on political and organizational expertise, public relations, and zoning and planning expertise to help companies get the necessary approvals for new facilities, such as a store or office building. The firm can also reverse its strategies to help a client stop a competitor from getting the permits needed to open by drumming up opposition.

“Every local PR firm says that they can do real estate projects, but that’s just a small part of what they do. We worked on 210 billable projects just in January of this year alone. As far as we know, we’re the largest firm of this kind in the world,” says Saint.

Land use consulting may be a small, somewhat esoteric niche, but the potential is huge, Saint believes. “We are just scratching the surface. Every Western-style democracy has these kinds of issues,” he says. Issues could be any or all of the following: traffic, height, density, environmental, noise, or just plain NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard).

“Backroom deals don’t work anymore. You can’t just hire an inside fixer to cut a deal,” adds Patrick Fox, president, Saint Consulting.

To ensure its leadership position in the field, Saint runs Saint University. Here the firm teaches new employees everything they need to know about zoning, land use issues, site analysis, environment, and political campaign skills. By the time they are done, the employees can hold their own against bureaucrats, professional planners, and lawyers. “We tend to recruit political campaign managers,” Saint adds. These are professionals who otherwise run political campaigns for candidates.

Saint also conducts an annual survey, the Saint Index. It provides insight into attitudes toward land use issues and the types of people who oppose projects. “Seventy-three percent of people are opposed to anything new,” says Fox, which suggests that there will always be a need for Saint’s services. The survey results go to clients (repeat clients being the source of much of Saint’s business), prospects, and the media.



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