

For some, success comes as a dollar figure, yet rarely is this figure stagnant. We keep finding new benchmarks. If success is based on earnings, there's always a new carrot. Harvard University psychologist Daniel Gilbert says in his book, *Stumbling on Happiness*, while psychologists have spent decades studying the relationship between wealth and happiness, "they have generally concluded that wealth increases human happiness when it lifts people out of abject poverty and into the middle class, but it does little to increase happiness thereafter."

But if we don't define success by a monetary benchmark, how do we determine if we are successful? Perhaps the answer can be gleaned from a quote attributed to Warren Beatty, "You've achieved success in your field when you don't know whether what you're doing is work or play." In other words, when we are fully engaged in our work, the lines begin to blur between what we do for a living and what we do for fun.

GLOWING WITH FLOW

Most of us have experienced a state of mind called "flow" when working. The term flow was coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book



Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience and it is described as a state of consciousness so focused that we feel strong, alert and at the peak of our abilities. At this point, work becomes fun.

So how do we get there? To find out, we spoke to three successful promotional consultants—two industry veterans and one relative newcomer who owns a distributorship. To get a supplier's perspective, we also spoke to a supplier rep.

Interestingly—although these four industry professionals come from different backgrounds and live in different parts of the country—their picture of a successful promotional consultant is remarkably similar. So were their opinions about how promotional consultants become successful.

Beyond the obvious qualities such as sales ability, creativity, good listening skills, perceptiveness and flexibility—each industry professional agreed that successful promotional consultants have three key elements in common: commitment, a desire to learn and grow, and interaction with peers through volunteerism and networking.

IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

PPAI Immediate Past Chairman Paul Kiewiet, MAS, CIP, president of promotional products industry consulting firm BrandKiwi, LLC (UPIC: kiwi) in Kalamazoo, Michigan, believes successful promotional consultants are deeply committed to the industry and their work. "They are in this for the long haul and work for long-term relationships rather than for short-term profit," he says.

Kiewiet, who has 25 years of industry experience, formerly served as vice president of marketing for distributor firm CorpLogoWare, LLC (UPIC: CLW), and ran his own distributor firm Promotion Concepts, Inc., which he sold in 2005. "People who are committed to the success of others find success for themselves," he says. "Clients reward promotional consultants who approach each opportunity with solutions



that are client-centric rather than product-focused.”

David Woods, MAS, president and CEO of Neenah, Wisconsin-based distributor Adventures in Advertising Corporation (UPIC: ADVINADV), agrees. “To rise to the top in any profession, you have to be very dedicated, and you have to work really hard at it,” he says. “To be successful, you have to have passion for your work.”

Sonya Beam, CAS, owner of Alpharetta, Georgia-based distributor firm The P.O.P. Shop (UPIC: ThePO797), looks for commitment when interviewing potential new hires. “We look for people who want to stay around awhile, and learn and apply that knowledge,” she says. Beam knows a little something about success—her distributorship was named one of Atlanta’s top 10 promotions firms by the *Atlanta Business Chronicle*. Most of the company’s business is procured by referrals.

BE INVOLVED, BE SEEN

By volunteering and through networking, successful promotional consultants get out there; rather than isolation, they choose integration into the industry community. It’s not only

about what you know (product knowledge), but who you know (supplier contacts). The more you know the products and people in the industry, the better the consultant you’ll be to your clients.

Through the industry’s regional associations, the Regional Association Council (RAC) and PPAA’s board and committees, promotional consultants have opportunities to volunteer and build their circles of influence. An 18-year veteran of the promotional products industry, Woods has been an active volunteer with PPAA for many years, including serving on the PPAA Board of Directors and as board chairman in 2000. Most recently, in 2007, he served as chairman of the Promotional Products Education Foundation (PPEF).

“Through volunteering with PPAA, I met a whole circle of friends—people I really treasure—whom I probably never would have met otherwise,” Woods says. “These experiences have been among the most rewarding times in my life.”

Mark Shinn, MAS, president of Newcastle, Washington-based supplier rep firm Incentives West (UPIC: IDEAWEST) and 2008 RAC president, believes volunteer experience plays an important role in promotional consultants’ success. “The people who volunteer know that getting in the circles of leaders will help them in their businesses,” says Shinn who has more than 17 years of industry experience and has concurrently served on the boards of the Promotional Marketing Association of Northern California (PMANC) and the Northwest Promotional Marketing Association (NWPMA). “It’s so important to surround yourself with leaders.”

Kiewiet describes volunteering and success as two components of a symbiotic relationship. “Volunteerism pays back the volunteer many, many times over,” he says. “By volunteering at the community level, at the regional level and at the national level, you will get back far more in return than you could ever give. The relationships you build are priceless.”

Through volunteering, promotional consultants can get to know supplier contacts, says Shinn. "They can learn who works for which supplier and how their day-to-day activities get intertwined with their volunteer activities."

All four industry professionals agree that networking is also important. "Tradeshows, seminars, supplier visits and other industry events help build contacts and give you the chance to learn who the suppliers are in this business," Beam says.

"Industry networking and friendships have value beyond profits—from knowing who can do the impossible for you, to reaching out to a friendly competitor on the other side of the country for advice," Kiewiet says. "Take advantage of networking opportunities. You'll find a world of wonderful, fun and funny people."

LIFELONG LEARNERS

Beam, Kiewiet, Shinn and Woods agree that successful promotional consultants never tire of learning. "This is a great industry for lifelong learners—for people who like to grow and change. It's a fun place to be," Woods says.

"Focus on gaining not only product and industry knowledge but also general awareness about current events." By way of example, Woods discusses how the global economy and supply chain have impacted the industry in recent years. In addition, product safety has come to the forefront. "Buyers are asking questions about product safety—particularly with food and beverage items, and anything that might make its way into the hands of children. To be a successful consultant, you must have a good grasp of what's going on in your industry and in the world," he says.

Shinn agrees that continual professional development is crucial to lifelong success. "PPAI and the regional associations offer many opportunities for learning, and we need to be lifelong learners," he says. "Volunteer and jump into professional development as soon as you can. When you're part of both of these, it will make a difference in your business."

Beam says professional development has

played a strong role in her career. "It's helped me build contacts and clients," she says. "Under PPAI's new MAS/CAS program, you can pick the topics you want or need to learn. Through professional development, you can be a better person for your clients. Plus, there is an opportunity to build industry contacts and ask those questions you have been wondering about."

HIGH-TOUCH SUCCESS

Beam and Kiewiet agree that a promotional consultant should never underestimate the value of the personal touch.

Contact your clients often or someone else will—add your own personal touch, she says. "Do what you say you are going to do and more."

Kiewiet advises promotional consultants to work from a belief in abundance rather than scarcity. "There are as many opportunities out there as you choose to create. Create them." **PC**

As a successful Dallas-based freelance journalist, Brittany Glenn knows how to go with the flow. She is a former associate editor for PPB magazine.

