What the Job of a Political Consultant Is Really Like

The life of political consultants during campaign season is hectic. Consultants will assist and encourage candidates on a daily basis through their ups and downs. Also, political consultants constantly supervise the designers, printers, photographers, and mail houses to ensure the timely completion of assignments consistent with the campaign schedule.

According to Rick Carpenter, political consultant, "Nobody gets to make a law unless they are elected. If you can influence elections, you can influence society. Many times the most qualified or decent people are not masters of self-promotion. They are humble and reluctant to sing their own praises. You have to explain to that candidate that he has very few opportunities to communicate with a busy voter who has his or her own real-life problems. I have to explain to many candidates that they must tell those voters who they are and what they believe briefly and efficiently."

Getting In and Moving Up

Starting off in this business is difficult. There are limited job opportunities for entry-level lobbyists or staff members for legislators, unless you have connections or a college degree. However, if, as an aspiring political consultant, you regularly volunteer for campaigns and are active in the political party, a job opening will likely become available to you with your newfound knowledge about the way voters think that you acquired by knocking on doors and attending functions. Through volunteer efforts, you can gain the experience needed in this profession without a college degree. Also, by staying current in technology, you may receive more opportunities.

Many political consultants are full-time employees of political parties. They are responsible for directing campaigns and for the administrative operation of their organization. Others are public affairs professionals and lobbyists who have actively contributed their time toward preferred campaigns. Still others have gotten their start by being involved in their political party or by working for a legislator. Any of these employment opportunities will help you become acclimated toward a full-time career as a political consultant.

Most decisions you will make as a political consultant involve strategic maneuvering for the benefit of your candidate. You should analyze recent elections and be familiar with strategies that did or did not work. By contacting the American Association for Political Consultants, aspiring political consultants can learn more about this profession and network opportunities and resources. There are even computer games and programs such as Doonesbury Election game that can help political consultants hone in on strategic skills. An education in journalism, English, literature, or marketing will be helpful as well. In order to move up in this field, you should develop a writing style that appeals to the layperson, and is direct and powerfully persuasive. You should know how to create messages and deliver them effectively to a variety of constituencies. Some universities and junior colleges have classes available that will help in these areas.

As a point of information, few universities other than George Washington University in Washington, D.C., offer degrees in political consulting. Rick Carpenter says, "You need to be able to apply a broad base of knowledge to the electoral process. Use what you know and be willing to learn and adapt. Most political consultants are well educated in several fields. In the end you have to get people elected to office. Once you do, nobody asks what your major was in college."

Employment Forecast

There are more than thousands of elections per year with anywhere from one to six candidates vying for the positions. This means that there are on the average one million possible clients for political consultants annually. The recognition of political consulting as a career is growing even though it has been a profession throughout our history. More than a billion dollars is spent each year on campaign advertising. Indeed, this business is growing rapidly as political consultants organize.

A growing number of corporations and other public interest groups interested in public policy are hiring political consultants as members of their public relations and public affairs departments. Political consultants are a very specialized niche of marketing and public relations professionals. Their perceived value to companies and candidates is increasing every year.

As democracy expands and more and more foreign governments adopt political processes similar to our own, U.S. political consultants are entering the international market for candidates. With democracy
spreading around the globe, so are professional politics. Some say Gary Nordlinger, the former Executive Officer of the American Association of Political Consultants, now has a bigger reputation south of the border than he does in the United States.

**Earnings**

The income potential for political consultants is lucrative. Top consultants in a presidential race earn millions. In the beginning, you will probably have to do volunteer work without pay to learn the process and network with other politically minded people. You must build a reputation and acquire clients before you can earn any income. Your income will vary dramatically, depending on whether you are able to generate clients and what commission you negotiate with advertising service providers.

**A Few Key Points to Remember**

- Before working as a political consultant, you should volunteer to work on campaigns and network with others in order to learn how the process works. You will probably have to do this before landing employment, unless you know someone or have extensive education.

- You should work as a staff member for an elected official, issue interest group, or political party before assuming the financial risk of political consulting, especially if you plan to work independently.

- Make sure you keep abreast of new technology available for campaigns and continue education efforts through membership in organizations such as the American Association of Political Consultants.

- Many career opportunities are there working for issue interest groups.

- More and more political consultants are entering the international market for candidates.

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