

Demystifying the 'Go-To Professional'



STEVEN PEARCE

The Results Consultancy
results@winningbusiness.net

Steven Pearce explains what makes a 'go to' professional.

Among the mass of professional advisers in a market some practitioners invariably stand out from the crowd. It was often assumed their success was down to their technical expertise, knowledge and intellectual ability. It was also assumed that they were born with a natural ability that resonated more with clients and work referrers.

A recent research project - carried out by myself and colleague John Timperley - aimed to look more deeply at the approach of these 'Go-To' superstars. Rather than revealing natural ability and a person's technical knowledge, our research found that key to a Go-To Professional's success was an acquired and definitely learned skill set. These skills had a more commercial and relationship focus and were definitely in demand by clients and firms alike.

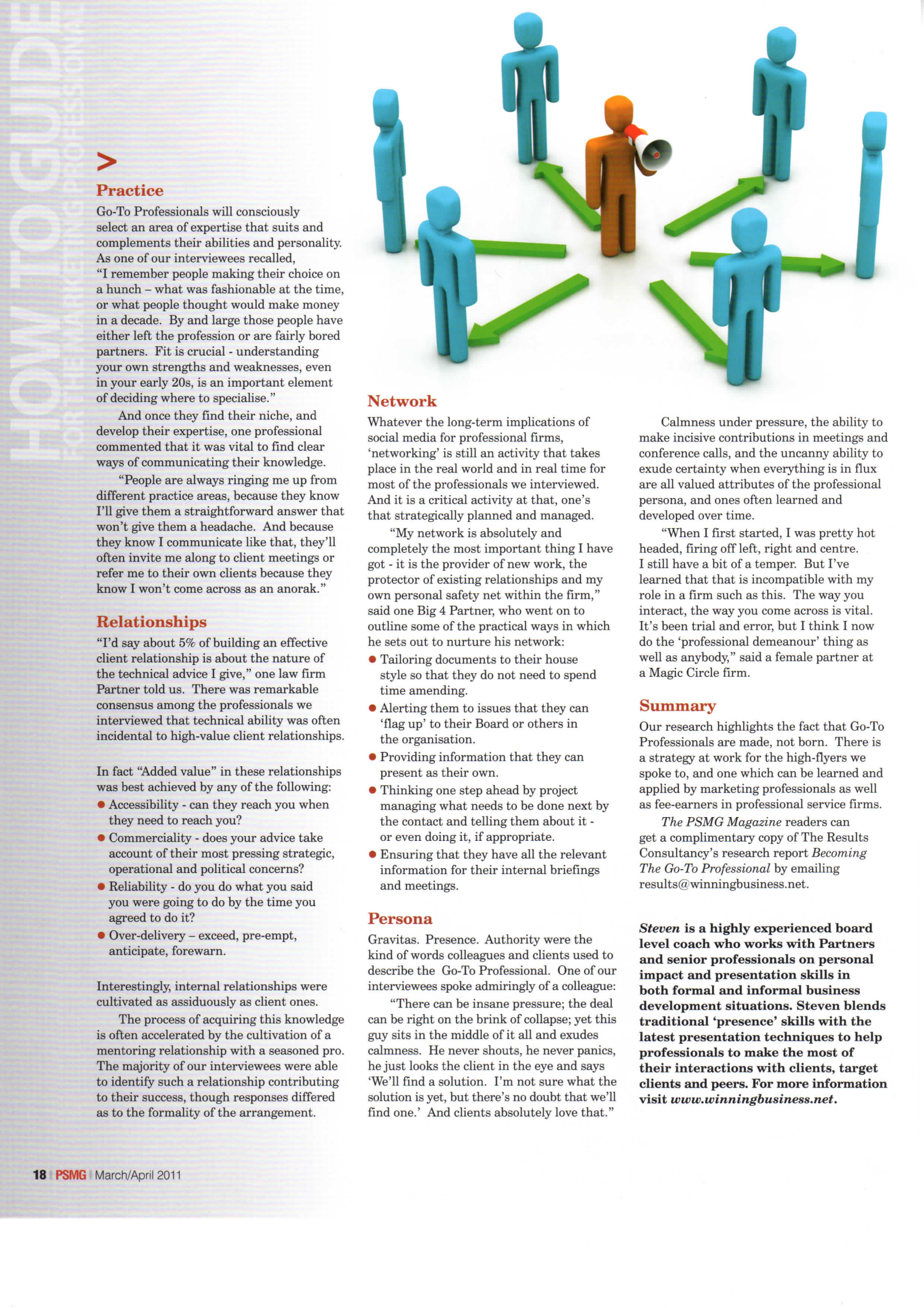
Becoming the Go-To Professional

To research the 'Becoming the Go-To Professional' report we interviewed top-performing senior professionals in the accounting, legal, consulting, real estate and financial services sectors. The results revealed that technical ability and knowledge were important to professionals, but certainly didn't give them 'Go-To' status.

Instead the skills and techniques that played a fundamental role in shaping the success and continual progression of these professionals covered other aspects. Attributes and competencies such as emotional and social intelligence, self awareness and the ability to communicate effectively and with impact amongst clients, referrers and colleagues propelled the professionals into the 'Go-To' arena.

The research uncovered some striking commonalities among the top professionals we interviewed; indeed, the DNA of the Go-To Professional seems to consist of four key strands: Practice, Relationships, Network and Persona. >

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Practice

Go-To Professionals will consciously select an area of expertise that suits and complements their abilities and personality. As one of our interviewees recalled, "I remember people making their choice on a hunch – what was fashionable at the time, or what people thought would make money in a decade. By and large those people have either left the profession or are fairly bored partners. Fit is crucial - understanding your own strengths and weaknesses, even in your early 20s, is an important element of deciding where to specialise."

And once they find their niche, and develop their expertise, one professional commented that it was vital to find clear ways of communicating their knowledge.

"People are always ringing me up from different practice areas, because they know I'll give them a straightforward answer that won't give them a headache. And because they know I communicate like that, they'll often invite me along to client meetings or refer me to their own clients because they know I won't come across as an anorak."

Relationships

"I'd say about 5% of building an effective client relationship is about the nature of the technical advice I give," one law firm Partner told us. There was remarkable consensus among the professionals we interviewed that technical ability was often incidental to high-value client relationships.

In fact "Added value" in these relationships was best achieved by any of the following:

- Accessibility - can they reach you when they need to reach you?
- Commerciality - does your advice take account of their most pressing strategic, operational and political concerns?
- Reliability - do you do what you said you were going to do by the time you agreed to do it?
- Over-delivery – exceed, pre-empt, anticipate, forewarn.

Interestingly, internal relationships were cultivated as assiduously as client ones.

The process of acquiring this knowledge is often accelerated by the cultivation of a mentoring relationship with a seasoned pro. The majority of our interviewees were able to identify such a relationship contributing to their success, though responses differed as to the formality of the arrangement.

Network

Whatever the long-term implications of social media for professional firms, 'networking' is still an activity that takes place in the real world and in real time for most of the professionals we interviewed. And it is a critical activity at that, one's that strategically planned and managed.

"My network is absolutely and completely the most important thing I have got - it is the provider of new work, the protector of existing relationships and my own personal safety net within the firm," said one Big 4 Partner, who went on to outline some of the practical ways in which he sets out to nurture his network:

- Tailoring documents to their house style so that they do not need to spend time amending.
- Alerting them to issues that they can 'flag up' to their Board or others in the organisation.
- Providing information that they can present as their own.
- Thinking one step ahead by project managing what needs to be done next by the contact and telling them about it - or even doing it, if appropriate.
- Ensuring that they have all the relevant information for their internal briefings and meetings.

Persona

Gravitas. Presence. Authority were the kind of words colleagues and clients used to describe the Go-To Professional. One of our interviewees spoke admiringly of a colleague:

"There can be insane pressure; the deal can be right on the brink of collapse; yet this guy sits in the middle of it all and exudes calmness. He never shouts, he never panics, he just looks the client in the eye and says 'We'll find a solution. I'm not sure what the solution is yet, but there's no doubt that we'll find one.' And clients absolutely love that."

Calmness under pressure, the ability to make incisive contributions in meetings and conference calls, and the uncanny ability to exude certainty when everything is in flux are all valued attributes of the professional persona, and ones often learned and developed over time.

"When I first started, I was pretty hot headed, firing off left, right and centre. I still have a bit of a temper. But I've learned that that is incompatible with my role in a firm such as this. The way you interact, the way you come across is vital. It's been trial and error, but I think I now do the 'professional demeanour' thing as well as anybody," said a female partner at a Magic Circle firm.

Summary

Our research highlights the fact that Go-To Professionals are made, not born. There is a strategy at work for the high-flyers we spoke to, and one which can be learned and applied by marketing professionals as well as fee-earners in professional service firms.

The PSMG Magazine readers can get a complimentary copy of The Results Consultancy's research report *Becoming The Go-To Professional* by emailing results@winningbusiness.net.

Steven is a highly experienced board level coach who works with Partners and senior professionals on personal impact and presentation skills in both formal and informal business development situations. Steven blends traditional 'presence' skills with the latest presentation techniques to help professionals to make the most of their interactions with clients, target clients and peers. For more information visit www.winningbusiness.net.