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## Cover Story

### Take it from someone who knows

#### Lean times may be the best times to hire a consultant.

By Jerry Hicks

When Irvine-based [local.com](http://local.com) began doubling and tripling business in recent years, founder Heath Clarke wanted to make sure he knew how to optimize a growing sales force. He hired a consultant.

Successful Irvine developer Brandon Birtcher wanted to make sure he was getting the maximum from his real estate strategies during these recessionary times. He hired a consultant.

In a few weeks, Cal State Fullerton's School of Business and Economics will move into a shiny, new \$88 million facility. But bigger and better means getting more money from the state, and its dean, Anil Puri, had to prove to the Legislature that a growing number of students would require more dollars, despite a time of tight budgets. He hired a consultant to crunch the numbers for him.

Consultants are one way to help during a recession. And in some fields, the number of consultants is booming. Billy T. Chen, president of Land Co., based in Irvine, provides consultants for financial institutions that are buying up land at cheap prices in expectation that the recession will end, and the economy will take an upswing. He's hiring consultants faster than he can provide office space for them.

"Banks and other investors are buying up land, without a clue (about) just what they plan to do with it," Chen says. "Our consultants let them see what will work and what won't work."

Many of Land Co.'s consultants are former executives or project managers with major builders and developers who left when the housing market crashed.

But, Chen says, some institutions hire consultants too late. "We are most successful when we can get involved right at the time of acquisition," he says. "Some companies buying land without consultants early on wind up losing up to 20 percent of their profit."

Land-buying consultants, he says, can help financial institutions in such areas as financing, construction and jurisdiction. Too often, Chen says, these buyers have no idea what state and local regulations must be dealt with. Mainly, he says, they need help understanding the California Environmental Quality Act, which dictates what can be done with a piece of land.

"We also help with local politicians," says Chen. "In these major purchases, there is always a power struggle going on among the politicians."

Most businesses hire consultants because "it's hard to do something you don't understand," says Steve O'Leary, a business author, and economics and advertising consultant. "Consultants help you understand areas where you simply don't have expertise."

John Moorlach, chairman of the Orange County Board of Supervisors and a former county treasurer, recommends consultants. But, he says, only use these experts for their own field. Don't let them multi-task. Also, points out Birtcher, double-check a consultant's reputation and whether his or her advice has brought about success.

"You're not paying for just any advice," O'Leary states. "It's the quality of that advice."

What's the biggest problem in hiring consultants? "Too often," Puri says, "businesses ignore the very consultant advice they paid for." OCMB