

Consulting With A Heraldic Client

by Modar Neznanich & Briana Etain MacKorkhill

There is no **One True Way**™ to do heraldic consulting, but there are certain aspects that heralds should keep in mind which will make doing heraldic consulting more rewarding for both clients and the heralds.

Listen. The single greatest key to successfully consulting with someone is listening. By listening then asking the right questions, you will be able to determine how to best approach assisting your clients.

Be diplomatic. How you present information is very important. Inform but don't talk down to a client. Diplomacy helps make for a good rapport with the client which in turn allows you to more easily get information from them. It also makes you (and heralds in general) look good plus if it becomes necessary to inform the client they cannot have something they want, it makes it easier for them to accept the news. When giving bad news about a name or armory concept, do so in a manner that is gentle so you do not offend or hurt anyone. Many times people have a lot of themselves wrapped up in a name or armory element, especially if they've been using it for some time. Explain why something has a problem; never just tell a client something won't work with no reason as to why. Try to offer solutions to the problem, if at all possible.

Be honest. If you don't know an answer or aren't sure about something, let the client know. Offer to find the answer (talking with other heralds, research for information, etc). No one knows everything and clients understand this. But if you let them know that you'll find the answer to their question and get back to them, they will be grateful. Likewise, if you need to refer them to a more experienced herald or one with knowledge in a specific area, don't hesitate to let them know that. Your candor will be appreciated.

Be timely. If you do have to seek out answers to client questions or have promised to complete submission forms, etc...make sure that you complete the tasks in a reasonable time frame.

Be open-minded. Remember that everyone has different tastes. That includes preference on name types/cultures and styles of heraldic designs. For example, you might favor early period Saxon culture and very simple heraldic devices but if a client comes to you and wants a late period name and/or a complex design for their coat-of-arms, then you should be sure to set aside your preferences and work to get the client the time period and style of name/heraldry they want. Realize that different folks are interested in different levels of authenticity. While it's fine to suggest period style in names and armory, if the client prefers a style that meets the rules but is less authentic, they are within their rights to choose such. There's room for all.

Avoid being pushy. Always remember that choosing a name to be called by or selecting a heraldic design to be associated with is a major choice. For many folk this can take some mulling over. Never get impatient with a client and try to force them to make up their minds about a choice. If they need it, allow them to go away from a consult to think things over and return at a later time to continue a consultation. Realize that for some people, this may occur several times before they feel comfortable with the fit of a name or a design. Another area that heralds have to be careful about is promoting favorite ideas. As researchers and designers we often will come across a name or a design that we think is very wonderful and will of course offer it as a suggestion to a client during our consultation. This is fine...IF the choice is then left up to the client to say whether they like it or not. A herald should not pressure a client to accept any particular name or motif.

Don't be overly sensitive. When working with clients a herald will offer many suggestions that the client will reject. If a client states they don't like a suggestion, it should not be taken as a personal affront. The client is merely trying to find a proposal that fits with the image they are developing for themselves. Because many times the client is developing the image during the consultation, it may take some time and effort to hit upon the imagery the client can associate with. Don't think that because a consultation takes a long while, that it means the herald is not doing a good job...it's quite the opposite. A long consult means the herald has taken as much time as needed to supply the client with an opportunity to define and refine the image they want to develop for themselves via name and/or heraldic device. Another thing to remember is that sometimes a client will go and talk with other heralds after an initial consult. This is not a bad reflection on the original consulting herald, but merely the client getting comfortable with their choices and seeking information. The client may seek out other heralds because the original herald is not around when a question comes to their mind. It may be because they are hoping another herald might think of an alternative concept. All heralds are part of the same team; one working to assist folk in selecting names and armory for themselves. Whoever assists a client, whether it's a single herald or several heralds along the way, has helped enrich the Society.

Be professional. There are several parts to this, the first of which is to be welcoming. The manner in which you serve clients reflects not only on you but all heralds. Clients should know that you are happy to be helping them. Remember to treat all clients equally and that it should be first come, first served. Nothing is more insulting to a client than to be patiently waiting their turn and have someone jumped ahead of them merely because the other person is a friend of the herald or because the other person has a higher rank. Additionally, make sure to avoid making derogatory comments (either verbal or non-verbal) concerning name suggestions, device ideas, etc. that the client may present. Just because your interest and knowledge as a herald lies in the onomastic and heraldic arts, it does not mean that a client will be aware of the intricacies of the genre, or even the basics. That is why they are coming to you for assistance. Realize that even if an offered suggestion is truly awful that actions such as eye-rolling, sighing, smirking or laughing presents a negative image of you and other heralds to a client and will cause them to be less open to helpful suggestions. A good line to begin with, when you are presented with a suggestion with major flaws, is something like: "We can certainly use aspects of this, but we'll need to do some changing to meet current rules." This lets the client know you are going to help them meet the guidelines needed and are not totally rejecting their ideas. Remember, as a consulting herald, you are there to serve.

Ask questions. When doing consulting, asking certain questions can help steer you toward suggestions to present to the client. Be sure to take notes as you get answers to your questions, so you can refer back to the information. If it's name consulting that you're doing, find out if the client has a particular name in mind or a particular culture in mind. If it's just a particular culture, you can direct them toward books and articles with names on that culture. If it's a particular name, you can assist them with finding which cultures have the name elements. Additionally, ask if they are interested in a particular time period, so you can help them determine if a name was used during that age. As you are looking up potential names, ask the client why they've selected a particular name element or a particular culture. Sometimes the response will entail the client talking about their persona story. While a persona story cannot be used for documentation purposes, it can give insight into cultures they are interested in and knowledge of what level of authenticity they are seeking.

When doing armory consulting, if the client already has some ideas, ask why they chose the colors they did and why they chose the objects they did. This helps you determine what they are trying to represent for themselves. If the client does not have any beginning ideas, some good starting questions to ask are:

Of the five heraldic colors (red, blue, green, black, purple), what is the client's favorite?
Of the five heraldic colors (red, blue, green, black, purple), what is the client's second favorite?
Of the two heraldic metals (yellow/gold, white/silver), what is the client's favorite?
Does the client like either of the fur types (ermine, vair)?
What are the client's favorite critters (animal, monster, bird)?
What are the client's favorite medieval objects (bell, ship, castle, star, plant, etc.)?
Does the client like any of the fancy/complex lines of division (embattled, wavy, indented, etc.)?
Does the client like any sort of field division (per fess, per chevron, etc.) or ordinary (pale, fess, chief, etc.)?
What areas of history does the client find interesting?
What got the client interested in joining the SCA and what activities are they involved in?
Does the client collect anything?

Be sure to listen carefully to the answers given. Ask what the tinctures and objects represent to the client. Sometimes a client will mention that "long ago they wanted X but were told they couldn't have it". And while it's possible that X specifically would not be registerable, it might be possible to modify that X into something that would be registerable. All the information gathered from asking questions can be used by the herald to puzzle out design ideas to suggest to the client. When an idea is rejected, ask if there's a particular part the client didn't like or a part they did like. These clues let the herald further refine the pool of ideas to get closer and closer to a design the client will like.

Also, when consulting feel free to utilize forms, hand-outs and articles (such as found in this handbook) to show to clients to help them understand various heraldic aspects, particularly concerning names and armory.

Copyright © Ron Knight and Sheryl Knight. Permission given for members and groups of the Society of Creative Anachronism, Inc. to use physical copies to be passed out for heraldic consultation or educational purposes, or on SCA-related websites provided they are presented in their entirety and credit is given.