For many customers, the world of aviation completions is new and complicated. But with the right guidance and advice, it can be easy. We speak to Chris Blumenthal of Elephants & monkeys Consulting LLC about the role of an aviation consultant, and how they act for both client and completion center.

What is the role of an aviation consultant?

Chris Blumenthal: My primary responsibility is to my client; to provide him/her unbiased and independent advice about issues related to his/her aircraft. I take the client through the whole process from green aircraft purchase until completed redelivery with a VVIP interior. Most of my clients have no aviation experience. They depend on my advice for all aspects, from airframe/engine performance analysis, to review of the interior design and maintainability and reliability of the interior.

How did you come into the role?

CB: I spent 20 years working for Boeing as an electrical engineer, field service rep and BBJ sales director. I found that my broad range of technical experience combined with my business experience and eye for detail were a good fit to help clients who want to purchase a transport category aircraft and turn it into a flying apartment.

Can you briefly explain the process of your involvement? For example, what stage do you usually come into a project, and where are you based?

CB: I prefer to get involved with the project as early in the process as possible. Recently this has happened during evaluation and negotiation for the aircraft purchase with the manufacturer. However, on past projects I’ve occasionally been called-in when things weren’t going well. That’s much more difficult. In one case, I had to inform the client that the aircraft that he bought wasn’t going to have the performance that the manufacturer promised him.

I started Elephants & Monkeys Consulting LLC when I was living in Amsterdam in 2004. In 2009 my wife and I relocated to Portland, Oregon. Since most of my work is project based, it doesn’t really matter where my home base is located. My clients are a very international group with owners based in Asia, Russia and the Middle East. So far I haven’t had any clients based in North America.

What are the most common queries and concerns of potential customers?

CB: Client questions run the full spectrum — from performance to design to operation. Often the questions...
result in discussions about compromise. I spend a good deal of time in the early stages talking about payload and range. While not very glamorous, it’s important for the client to understand from the start that the fantastic marble floor that he wants may mean that he can’t fly non-stop from Hong Kong to London (something that he also wants).

When they use a consultant, how involved are customers?

CB: I’ve had a few clients who are very involved with the design and then are hands-off until the redelivery. I’ve had others who want to be involved in every single decision. Over time, I develop a rhythm and level of understanding with each customer, where I know what they want to be involved with and what I can decide on my own.

How closely are you involved with the work of the completions center?

CB: On most of my projects, I’m responsible for writing the interior completion specification, so I naturally become very involved with the work of the completion center. Contact with the completion center usually starts with answering questions about the specification and interpreting the design. It then continues through all of the design reviews (PDR, CDR, FDR). Once the green aircraft arrives at the completion center, I’m a frequent visitor to observe and review the engineering, fabrication and installation. Towards the end of the completion, typically the last 6-8 months, I’m on-site full-time reviewing the work, helping with unexpected events and verifying what is being built is in agreement with the specification and what the client is expecting.

And what key attributes do you look for in the center?

CB: I’m looking for a completion center who can realize the client’s design expectations and also meet the schedule and price expectations. This target is often different for each project. Simpler projects provide more options when selecting the completion center. Complicated VVIP projects with a lot of customization and a very high level of detail require much more expertise and the field is much smaller. Jet Aviation excels at complicated VVIP interiors.

How do you recommend an airframe, designer or completions location to a client – what factors come into play?

CB: Finding a designer, completion manager or completion center is a bit like finding a doctor or lawyer. You want somebody who is an expert but also somebody who you can relate to and who has a similar philosophy and empathy to the situation. There’s also an element of personal trust based on past experience that I can impart to my clients. Completion centers and vendors who have demonstrated high quality and on-time performance tend to be the ones that I recommend to my clients.

What do you think makes a successful completion?

CB: I think that the key is communication and understanding. The completion manager and designer really need to understand what the client wants and need to communicate that to the completion center; initially in the form of the design package and specification, but later in detailed discussions and conversations. It is important for the completion center to focus on the end-use of what they’re building — even if the client, as a passenger, will never see or touch that specific item. Engineering should consider things like maintenance access, reliability, interchangeability and ease of operation. When in doubt, ask questions!

What are the main challenges of your position and how do you manage them?

CB: Communication can be a challenge. There are cultural issues, language issues, time zone differences and personalities that can make communicating difficult. Although I’m not a linguist, I often find myself translating from English to English when I see that my client and colleagues may not be understanding each other. I find that rephrasing and reinterpreting something that one party may think is clear often helps the other party truly understand.

How has the industry changed over the time you have been involved?
CB: I’ve been involved with business aviation for 18 years. During that time, I think that the biggest transformation has been the success of the ultra-large-cabin business jet. The Boeing Business Jet and the Airbus Corporate Jet have created a whole new segment of the industry. It’s a segment that continues to grow and will likely keep me employed until I’m ready to retire.

Are there any new trends in design or requirements and technologies (e.g. weight and range) that you are seeing?

CB: Over the years I’ve seen significant improvements in LED lighting, tankless water heater technology and satellite communications. Lighter and more interesting materials (i.e. metal composites, stone veneers, unique fabrics) will likely be the new trends in design. I think that global high-speed connectivity (Ka band Satcom) is going to be the new standard for all private jets. 8k ultra-high-definition monitors with streaming content and power over ethernet (PoE) will likely be in the aircraft specification that I am currently writing.

How has the process and design developed during your career in private aviation?

CB: For my clients, the desire to have something new and unique continues to drive the design. The residential feel of the recent BBJ completed at Jet Aviation was unlike anything that I’ve ever been involved with before. My next project (a BBJ2) has an innovative modern design with high-gloss black and white lacquer finishes with glass walls and carbon fiber accents.

Do you have a favourite airframe?

CB: It’s a toss-up between the Cirrus SR22 and the Boeing 757. Both are aesthetically pleasing aircraft. I’m part owner of a 2014 SR22T. The 757 was an aircraft that I spent a lot of time on during the early days of my Boeing career.

Are you able to mention any favourite projects?

CB: Every one of my projects is better than the one before. At the time I’m working on them, they’re all challenging and I learn something from each one, as well as from my customers and the team at the completion center. Two of my favourites from an aesthetic point of view were BBJs with design concepts by Winch Design and completed at Jet Aviation.

And finally, why Elephants and Monkeys?

CB: Much of my aviation expertise comes from working with a diverse range of clients in the former Soviet Union. On the tarmac and inside the hangars in this part of the world, aviation maintenance personnel are nicknamed “Elephants” or “Monkeys”, depending on their areas of specialization: Airframe and powerplant engineers are “elephants” and electrical and avionics technicians are “monkeys.” It’s a subtle aviation reference and a company name that people tend to remember.