



FREELANCE

## MANAGING YOUR CLIENTS

Do your clients boss you around? If they do, it's because you let them. These two skills will put you back in the driver's seat in your client relationships.

You run your own freelance business so you can make a living doing something you love with people who won't make your life miserable. Right?

Even if that's not your current reality, it could be—if you decide to be the boss. That means taking charge of the way you run your business, rather than letting your clients boss you around.

Isn't the customer always right? To an extent.

Two skills can help you retain control of your work, your schedule and your sanity: No. 1, choosing the right clients and No. 2, managing their expectations. You need both of those capabilities, because if you choose the wrong clients, all your excellent client-management skills will have little effect. And if you manage the right clients poorly, you'll create avoidable problems for yourself and for them.

## SKILL NO. 1: CHOOSING THE RIGHT CLIENTS

Start by accepting the fact that not every client who comes your way is a good fit.

Who is a good fit? That's up to you to decide, and the definition changes over time. But we can say that clients who respect and value your work and are willing—and able—to pay for it in a timely manner are most likely to be your ideal customers.

Often, it's easier to spot those prospects who aren't right for you than it is to identify those who are. These red flags seem obvious, but if you're feeling desperate or unsure about where the next job is coming from, you'll probably ignore them.

Watch for these warning signs:

- Their first question is, "How much does it cost?"
- They want it yesterday.
- They don't answer your questions completely—or at all.
- They don't know what they want or keep changing their mind.
- They don't want to pay your rates, or they keep trying to renegotiate the project fee.

Being the boss of your business means you stop ignoring those ominous signals and politely decline the clients who don't fit, so you can find clients who do and then get busy managing them.

## SKILL NO. 2: MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Although you can't control your clients, you can manage their expectations. But you have to train them first—which you're actually already doing, whether you're aware of it or not. With every action, you set precedents, which are very hard to change once they're in place. Respond to their first e-mail right away, and your client will think that's normal for you and come to expect it. Turn a project around in a day because you happen to have the time, and from now on they'll assume that's your style.

If you want more control over your time, you must train your clients to work on *your* schedule. Veteran Los Angeles-area solopreneur Luke Mysse suggests dedicating one day per week to focus on your business, with no client work or contact. "This may seem impossible at first," he acknowledges. "How will they wait a whole day when they can barely stand to wait an hour for you to return their call?"

"They will," Mysse affirms. "If you set aside one day a week, or even one morning a week to start, they will eventually get used to your new schedule, especially if you give them some warning so they can prepare."

What else can you do to manage your clients' expectations? Here are several strategies:

**Put absolutely everything in writing, in detail.** That's what Kristin Maija Peterson of Grand Ciel Design in St. Paul, MN, does. "In our first meeting, I outline the process so they know what to expect," she says. "Once they sign off on a proposal, I back up my verbal process with written phases of the project and timeline. I include what needs to happen at the end of each phase. I adjust my level of communication to accom-

## FREELANCE SPOTLIGHT

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I'm learning that the most important antidote for client confusion or disillusionment is simply communication. It's also important to be aware of your client's communication style and preferences. The challenge lies in being perceptive enough to understand the way our clients communicate best. One of my clients is incredibly busy and fast-paced. I imagine him receiving a large number of e-mails per day, so I try to ensure that all of my communication to him is brief and to the point. Another client is painstakingly detail-oriented and organized. Repeating expectations, asking questions and clarifying with this man is hard to overdo.

We should ask a few questions up front that will aid us in wisely communicating with our client throughout the duration of a project (i.e., "How do you prefer to communicate—in person/telephone/e-mail?"; "Do you welcome frequent updates and appreciate keeping tabs on small changes to the project, or do you prefer I work in the background until your input is mandatory for progress?"). When in doubt, err on the side of over-communicating.

modate their style and schedule—they know I'm there for them. In return, they're equally respectful of my time and schedule."

**Recap key information verbally.** Sometimes, putting it in writing isn't enough, because clients often don't read a detailed agreement. So Heather Parlato, of Parlato Design Studio in Los Angeles, has learned to preempt potential problems by verbally highlighting certain details. "I've learned to tell clients everything up front," Parlato says. "I tell them what my process involves, what a typical timeline will look like for the project in question and the limitations. I'll say, 'We do two rounds of revisions to refine the content, and that is included in the price. But if there are additional revisions that cannot be avoided, those will be extra, so anything we can do to revise as completely as possible in those two rounds is best.'"

Most important, address the questions your clients may not know to ask. Parlato outlines the points in her contract that are most often misunderstood, especially regarding payments, usage rights and ownership. "Clients don't read the fine print, and they react much better to what's in the contract when it's explained verbally," she says.

**Make sure their expectations are realistic.** Parlato also asks up front about the client's expected results for the project. "Often, my clients don't have a firm success metric they're looking for, so I define what I think we

## GET COMFORTABLE WITH DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

By Luke Mysse; [www.lukemysse.com](http://www.lukemysse.com)

People are always surprised when I dive right into an awkward conversation with little or no fear. The truth is, nobody (myself included) likes awkward conversations. But I would much rather talk about the elephant in the room when there's still hope of getting him through the door instead of waiting until he grows so big that he punches the roof off the house.

Here are a few things that I've found helpful when approaching a tough subject with anyone, including a client:

### RESPECT

Regardless of how awkward or hurt you feel, a little respect for others can go a long way. You blow your top and nobody wins. Be mad at the situation, yes, but not at the person. This takes humility, but everyone wins when people are humble.

### CLARITY

Being clear about how you feel and defining the desired outcome will help you keep some of the emotion out of it. Being passionate is fine, but if your emotions get the best of you, that's when the false accusations start to fly. If the situation warrants, you may also want to put together a list of things to cover or solve in order to keep the conversation on target. In some situations, this list can be e-mailed in advance to prepare everyone for some elephant herding.

### COURAGE

It takes courage, but approach the situation with the end in mind. How much energy and time is wasted avoiding awkward conversations? The truth is that some things just won't go away on their own. You can wish all you want, but at some point that conversation needs to happen. The sooner you dive in, the sooner it will be over, no matter the outcome.

can achieve," she says. "I make sure clients know that the final piece alone won't double their sales. Discussing this also helps me know if a client's expectations are putting too much pressure on the outcome of this one project."

Copywriter Deidre Rienzo, of Connect with Copy in Tappan, NY, also makes a point of determining the client's goals at the outset. "If they start out with expectations that aren't realistic, or that I'm not capable of meeting, then these expectations will be nearly impossible to manage," she says. "So I start by talking frankly about their goals. I want to make sure I'm equipped to give them what they want. If clients expect magic, I don't work with them (unless I can make magic for them)."

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**Keep them in the loop.** Constant communication is a key to managing expectations. You can't read your clients' minds and they can't read yours. That's why keeping clients in the loop is worth the extra effort and attention. Sometimes all it takes is a quick phone call or an e-mail update. Rienzo sends a lot of messages saying, "Your bio is 75% ready. I'm putting on the finishing touches and will send it over for your review on Friday."

Parlato also sends little reminders or check-ins about a project's progress, especially if a problem crops up, as often happens. "I contact them as soon as I know I might have to reschedule something," she says. "That way, even if a milestone isn't on the exact date we'd planned, they know I care about their work and won't leave them with any surprises."

Being the boss with your clients isn't about being a bully or getting your own way. "To me, it boils down to being a professional," Mysse says. "Take control and lead others to greater prosperity and understanding. A bully sticks around and tries to force his way, no matter how bad the fit. Be a professional and know when things don't fit. A pro knows when he's a bad match and when to bow out." **HOW**

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