

Briefbox: How to Deal with Difficult Clients



Have you been keeping up to date with our Briefbox Guest Author Series? Joel and James from Briefbox have already written two pieces for us—covering how to stand out when applying for jobs and tricks and tips for freelancers. This marks their third and final advice piece in which Joel shares his wisdom on the ever-awkward topic on how to deal with clients! Read on to hear what to do when a partnership just isn't working and why managing expectations is crucial.

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As soon as you get that first paid design gig... everything changes. You've taken the leap to start your freelance career or have started working at an agency, you've spent ages working with a client and created an awesome piece of design work and then.. things get difficult, how do you keep your cool and ensure the project still goes smoothly? Well, I'm going to give you the lowdown of how to deal with difficult clients, pre-plan for tuff times and make sure you stay sane!

1) First up, the customer is always right...

Or... at least help them to feel that way and show them in your opinion what is right. This is where good communication skills, understanding how people think and way more than just design comes into play. At the end of the day, design is like music and what one person likes and connects with doesn't mean other people will feel the same. If a client comes back and

says “I don’t like it”, you need to understand this and work with them until you can find a solution they do like and that you feel works creatively. Something to keep in mind is that although you are more specialised in design, your client probably knows their target audience in much more detail than you. This is where a partnership needs to be formed that combines your creative skills and their customer knowledge to create an awesome solution that is a compromise of the above.

2) Stay organised & manage your work schedule

A sure fire way of getting yourself into a tricky situation is not keeping organised during a project. One of the main things to stay on top of is file organisation, versions and rounds of revisions. Ensure that from the beginning you keep a structured format of your rounds, file naming, and keep all files in one place specific to a client’s project. That way if things do get a little messy or difficult with a client requesting many rounds of revisions, at least you can be confident and thorough in your responses.

Something that can be difficult to manage is your schedule; don’t take on too many projects at the same time. This can be tricky as often work can come in like buses—with nothing for ages then loads at the same time, but in the long run you and your client will be much happier if you reply to an enquiry with ‘I’m fully booked for the next month, but I can schedule your project in for the first two weeks in January’. Very often a client needs something urgently and it can be tempting to jump at every opportunity but, trust me honesty and schedule management is key to a successful relationship. A client will also see you as being more professional and experienced and respect you in the long run.

3) Manage expectations from the beginning

Once you've got an enquiry and you are in the initial stages of a project, something that is absolutely key to preventing your client becoming difficult, is to set the rules from the start. You'll need to ensure that all the specific deliverables are signed off and agreed before accepting that initial deposit payment. For example, if you are working on a logo, how many different concepts will you supply for an agreed amount and then how many revisions of a chosen concept is the client entitled to?

Once you begin setting up policies for different types of projects you can then use these as templates for any future projects you begin working on.

4) What to do with a nightmare client

When things do get difficult and a client is becoming tricky to work with, you need to establish the value of this client and weigh up your options because if the client has brought you in lots of revenue and will continue to do so then it's probably best to keep going and do everything you can to please them. However, if it's a small project with someone you have never worked with before and things just simply are not working then you can kindly suggest to your client that you both go your separate ways and wish them luck in their creative project.

Conclusion

Sometimes with new clients, they will promise the world and tell you they have loads of work coming your way.

Unfortunately, this often isn't true and will leave you feeling hard done by when you go the extra mile only for the client never to return. You need to weigh up your options with every client and have confidence in your own value. When things get difficult with clients and you've tried every possible route to provide a solution and to keep them happy.. you know you will have tried your hardest. If this doesn't work—just move on and keep your head held high.

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