Get Picky With Your Clients – How to Identify and Attract Your Ideal Customer



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Without clients, you don’t have a business. Fair enough.

But I believe there are three types of clients: ideal clients, clients who help pay the bills and those you need to send packing. I know what you are thinking. It is hard to be picky as a start-up or even an established business facing tough times. I agree, but with a little effort and thoughtful planning, you can get more of those ideal ones and spend less time doing work that does not align with your business goals.

When I first started in entrepreneurship, I made the classic mistake of taking almost every client that came through the door. There were a few that I sent away because the projects

were unsavory, had budgets that were like giving away the work, or people did not seem trustworthy. I regret taking projects like cheesy car commercials or ballet recitals.

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Don’t get me wrong, those projects were important to the client; they just did not fit into the type of business I was trying to build. And here is the big takeaway. The type of work you perform begins to define you. You end up attracting more of what you already have because that is what people see and what you are known for.

How do you get started to find ideal clients when you are on a budget? Can you do this on your own or do you need assistance? How long does it take to weed out the clients that don’t fit your ideal profile?

Here is some practical down-in-the-trenches advice to guide your efforts.

Get “picky”

The first step is to clarify who you don’t want to serve. In my case, the smaller one-off opportunities did not have the potential to turn into a long-term business. Look at your client list and see if there are organizations or individuals that you just don’t love working with.

Maybe it is the actual work that does not fit into your portfolio. Is it a financial issue? Are clients unwilling to pay a reasonable rate for the product or service? It takes time and money to serve clients. If the reward is not there, it is time to figure out how to make it worth your time or gracefully send clients away.

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How to identify your ideal client

There are lots of different approaches to define your ideal client. You can create a checklist that includes the industry, number of employees, location and other demographics or psychographics. I think an easier way is to pick three of your best customers – the ones you serve at the deepest level. This puts a "face" to this process and helps you visualize the great relationship you want to build. Now ask yourself:

- What is their industry or business?
- What problem or need do I fill for this client?
- What do they like about doing business with us? What do I like about working with them?
- Why is the relationship a good one? Is there trust? Good communication? Mutual respect?
- What are some of the tactics that we use to "sell" them? What do they respond to?

Now you have a picture of your ideal client and what they expect. It is unrealistic that all of your clients will be ideal, but if you create a checklist based on what you have learned and a potential client has a lot of the attributes, then they are a good target.

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Can you create an ideal list on your own?

There are varying thoughts about this. Professional marketers have tools that can help you move through this process quickly and efficiently. They have templates and, frankly, the time to accomplish the work. They know what works and what does not. However, I think no one knows business like those on the front lines. Much of the upfront work can be done by a disciplined

internal team. When I have used outside resources, it has been to help us refine our work and fill gaps where we need help, such as a social media strategy or SEO.

Another benefit of doing this work is that you can ask clients directly why they do business with you and what they want to see in the future. You learn a lot when you include them in this research, and they feel appreciated. And don't miss the opportunity to ask them who else might benefit from working with you. Referrals have been our best source of new, ideal customers. That's because great companies generally work with other great companies. Most of my ideal customers have come as referrals from people who have been customers for many years and consider us part of their team.

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A constant effort

As you start to work toward a portfolio of ideal clients, the reality is that to add new clients and do the work that excites you; you may need to send away clients that no longer fit your profile. This is always difficult, especially if they have been with you for a long time – power through it. Start to discuss with them and have a generous timetable for when you plan to be done serving them. Be direct but kind and help them transition to new suppliers.

Don't be surprised if this gets tense and turns downright ugly. When a client wants to fire you, it is one thing. When you want to fire them, it is an entirely different scenario. Don't shrink away from the task. Remember what you are trying to do: get the best possible client list. And even ideal clients can become less than perfect when circumstances change. Be vigilant. Go back and review your ideal client checklist regularly. Perhaps your profile has changed or expanded. You will need to adjust. One thing is sure: looking

for your ideal customer is a constant effort throughout the life cycle of your business.

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