



## Creativity and Self-Loathing

To tell you the truth, I wanted to call this Manual “Stop Being Your Clients’ Bitch” but that sounded a bit harsher than I wanted. The basic idea, however, is the same and, frankly, I’m feeling a bit harsh about this topic today. I’ve been faced with it a lot and it breaks my heart every time.

I see, far too often in my client base, creatives who will put up with incredible rudeness, cruelty, and financial crap, all in the name of “keeping the client happy.” This is, in my mind, tantamount to staying with an abusive partner.

Now, before you get all huffy at me for making that comparison, you should be aware that I know whereof I speak on that topic and I don’t make the comparison lightly. That does mean, however, that I understand how seductive that mindset is--how easy it is to fall into it, and how getting out of it is one of the best things you can ever do.

It’s very difficult to see that one is in an abusive relationship when one is in it. Humans are really great at inventing excuses and rationalizing behavior that, from the outside, is clearly unacceptable. We’ve all heard about (usually) women who will stay with an abusive partner and who rationalize the bruises and/or humiliations by saying things like “He doesn’t mean to hit me” or “I don’t have a choice” or, worst of all, “He really loves me” and “I make him do it.” From the outside we all say “What is she thinking?! Why doesn’t she get out?!” But from within, it’s hard to say to yourself “This relationship is not good for me and though getting out is hard, I have to do it.” We prefer denial to the risk of change.

In our industries, the abusive client/creative relationship is similar in its denial and our fear of losing a client. But working with people who take advantage of you is emotionally and financially terrible for you and your business. We all need to take long looks at our clients to make sure the relationships are healthy ones.

Take a look at the list below and see if you have any clients (including stock houses!) who fit any (not even all--just ANY) of these descriptions:

- will only pay extremely low fees
- will not negotiate
- will not “deal with” usage
- demand receipts
- demand “buyouts” or copyrights
- cancel at the last minute without paying fees
- refuses to pay advances
- holds payments for 45+ days
- always says “well Photographer X will do it for half that”
- will bring photo comps they insist you duplicate *exactly*
- will not pay for needed crew or other production costs
- will not pay for pre-production

will not pay for digital charges  
sexually harasses you, your talent, employees, or crew during a shoot  
asks for kickbacks  
says “do this one for less and the next one will be a big job”  
will not sign paperwork and/or tries to slip a WFH past you on the PO

If you have any clients who do any of these things, you are in an abusive client/creative relationship and you have to change it. In most cases, that will mean firing the client, but I believe in trying to make things better, first--yes, even in an abusive relationship.

Now, to make things better, you need to set down your boundaries with your client. It may be that s/he doesn't know that the behavior is insulting at best, actively harmful to you and your business at the worst. You need to tell the client that the behavior must change. For example, if you have a client who won't sign paperwork, you need to say, “I can't work without signed paperwork any more. I'm willing to negotiate the terms, of course, but if you won't sign in the end, I'm afraid we can't work together.” Then shut up and stick to it.

You're sure to hear “But just this once,” some sort of pleading to help them, or “I can't believe you are being such a jerk!” but you have to stick to your guns. Bullies don't like to be told they can't have their way, but when you stand up to them, more often than not, they back down. When they don't, you just get away from them--in this context, you fire 'em as clients.

I'm not going to lie to you--the first time you do this you will probably be shaking in your boots. It's damn difficult the first time. But, even when it goes the worst way and you fire the client, you'll find afterwards that you feel some relief. That's you taking back a bit of your power. The next time will be a bit easier, and the next easier still.

Before you know it, you'll find you're walking with your head up and you won't have any problem standing up for your rights and needs in the first place. You'll meet with a new client and lay out your terms without apology and with confidence, and that relationship will be one of mutual respect and benefit.

And, fiscally you'll be better off as well. You'll dump the dead weight and end up with fewer (at first) but better clients and have the time and energy to go after even more lucrative ones. Plus, the improvement in your attitude and mindset will be reflected in your work. That will result in better work, which will appeal to new clients, etc. So, even if you take a temporary hit in income as you dump the losers, over the long-term you will most definitely be better off.

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