



## The Client is Not Your Enemy (Nor a God)

by Leslie Burns-Dell'Acqua

Contrary to popular belief, creatives do not work *for* clients, at least not the most successful ones. They, instead, work *with* their clients. While many freelance creatives think that this is an “us versus them” business, it only is for those who make it so themselves. That is to say, if you choose to assume an adversarial relationship with your clients, it will be an adversarial one. But, if you choose to be a collaborator, then, usually, barring that one in a thousand pain-in-the-butt client who sees everyone as an adversary her/himself, you will build a positive and respectful, long-term working relationship.

In other words: the client is not your enemy. Make that your mantra (because there will be days when you forget).

### R-E-S-P-E-C-T

To work with clients, as opposed to for clients, the first thing you need to remember is respect. Yes, you should respect your clients, no question, but in this case I'm talking about respect for yourself. You can't be your client's equal in their eyes unless you are first their equal in your own. Thinking of yourself as the equal of your client is a lot harder for creatives than for most business people, but, for what it's worth, almost all freelancers and small businesspeople have that exact same negative feeling at some point. It's only in your head, and you can change how you think.

Clients are your lifeblood. If you don't have clients, you don't have money and you are out of business. It is very easy to be sucked into treating them with awe if that's what you have in the back of your head. But here's the trick: you are their lifeblood too. They will not stay in business if they don't have images/creative materials. Think about how many marketing and advertising pieces you see every day and for how many different businesses! Yes, there are plenty of others who could provide them images or graphics or words, but if you have a real vision in your work, something that set you apart from all the rest, then only you can provide them your kind of images.

Even if your work isn't the most vision-based (yet), that doesn't mean that you're completely toast; there are other ways to stand out from the crowd. If you are fun to work with or send really fabulous “thank you” gifts or have a great studio or, well, something, you will be the one they want to work with. Every relationship has its own reason, its own give-and-take--you just need to believe that you are giving as much as you are taking. Any good project is a collaboration of equals--a symbiotic relationship.

*Here's a little exercise to help you remember that what you bring to the relationship is just as important as what any of your clients brings.*

Take a pen and paper and write down everything you do for a project. List not only your obvious tools, but also what you bring with you in other areas, like how you know how to light the ugliest widget so it looks like a million bucks or you know a great writer or you understand typography and its history. Be honest, but be thorough. When you are done, honestly look at that list and put a checkmark next to what you think you might do better or more specially or more efficiently, etc., than most other photographers. I bet you have some checkmarked items that you never even thought of before. These things are special parts of the value that you bring to any project (they are also things you might want to consider adding to some of your marketing materials).

## **Benefits of Working WITH Your Clients**

Once you start from a mental point of being equal with your clients, you'll find that it will become easier and easier to ask for what you need (money, time, whatever) as well as to hear what your clients need (equally important). Clear, frank, up-front communications are the foundations to great relationships.

Open communications make it much easier to deflect some of the common arguments that buyers try to use to get photographers to lower their prices. For example, a popular argument you may hear is "I wish I could make \$2500 a day! That's more than I make in two weeks!" When you know that your work is of value to them you will have the confidence to answer them that you do not make \$2500 every day and that, in fact, after self-employment taxes, health insurance, retirement, and all the other benefits that they have with their jobs that you have to pay yourself, and add in all the other costs of running a business, and, well, that \$2500 you will get for this one project won't go too far.

This is a form of educating your clients. Most of the people you will work with will have traditional jobs. They get paychecks and benefits and so their mindset about the numbers is completely different from your own. However, when you talk to them about just how expensive it is to be in business, that helps them to start to get their heads around your pricing. But to do that, you need to be open and honest with your clients.

Additionally, when you feel confident in the value of your work you can tell your client that the product you will provide will not only be worth their price, you can bet that the client will actually want to relicense the work for additional use. And, you will have the confidence to prove that value to them. For example, let's say you are asked to shoot an ad that will run in a trade magazine 6 times. The total media buy for the 6 ads is \$200,000 and each edition of the ad will reach 100,000 sets of highly targeted eyeballs, for 600,000 total. If you price the shoot fee at \$2000 and the usage fee at 4% of the media buy, the total fees for the project will be \$10,000. When the client complains about the "high fees" you can tell him/her that your image will cost less than 1.7¢ per viewer. That's a bargain! Anyone who would charge less obviously doesn't value his/her work enough and that usually means a lower quality product.

As mentioned earlier, when you listen to and speak openly with your clients you will learn what they really need, which is quite often not what they originally say. For example, a client calls up a photographer and says she needs a "buyout" and the budget is \$5000. This obviously isn't going to work at first glance. But if you tell the client that, flat out, you're not even going to get a shot at the project. However, if you tell her that you're concerned that she may be asking for much more than she really needs, and, "what does your company really need?" you open a dialogue. Often this will result in your client saying she they don't want to have to contact the photographer again later if they want to do something else with the image. Again, tell them that you want to make sure you provide them with what they need "so let's figure out what that really is."

Sometimes you'll have to start from the other side, by asking specific questions like "do they need usage outside of the metro area" or "do they envision running the image on billboards" or "are they going to do web ads or just use it on their site" and the like. Every time they say "no"

respond with something like “well that will help keep the fee down.” This often helps the buyer see that you really are trying to work with her by being concerned about keeping the fee in their budget. This builds trust and with trust comes relationships.

And every successful business is built on relationships.

### **When All Else Fails**

Most of the time, using open communication, asking questions, and listening to your clients will result in you either getting the project or, at least, not getting the project for the right reason (there was someone “more perfect” for the job). Often, if you don’t get this project for the right reasons, you’ll get offered another project down the road. But sometimes, unfortunately, no matter how hard you try, you just can’t come to terms.

When you reach a point in the discussion where you know the project doesn’t have the kind of fees you need to get or the client won’t agree to your terms and conditions or whatever it is that lets you know it’s not right, you have to walk away from it. This is one of the hardest things for a creative to do, but it is a skill you must learn:

Say “No.” Really. Right now, out loud, say it.

Say “No” again.

Say “No” one more time, but this time, refuse to feel guilty while you are saying it.

Keep practicing.

The above may seem silly, but saying “no” is actually a vital part of your business toolbox. You must learn to say “no” with grace but with commitment. If a client wants you to do a project but the fees are too low and you cannot negotiate a fair deal, you must say “no.” This protects your business because once you work for a client for too little money, you will never be able to get more money for the same value work. It also protects the industry because if a client has to call 20 creatives to find a lowballer to do something for a too low budget, that will take up too much of her/his time. Time is money, as they say.

This point is particularly important when you run across that old saw, “If you do this project at this low rate now, we can promise that we’ll give you 5 more projects like this!” or “We’ll make up for it on our next project with you!” Just say “no” to these lines. Always. You can try to negotiate by saying something like “Let’s do this one at my usual rate and that 5th project I’ll do for half” but I have never seen that actually work.

Now, when you say “no” you should try to do it with grace. There is no reason to be nasty. Try things like “I really wish we could figure out a way to work together, but the numbers just aren’t what my business needs them to be. If you get a budget increase, please give me a call as I’d love to work with you on this,” you have made it clear that it is not you who is saying “no” but rather it is your business that is. And, you are saying “no” in such a way as to keep the lines of communication open.

### **Three Simple Steps**

First, take the time to remind yourself that you are your client’s equal. You **both** bring things to the table. A project is not a gift that a client bestows upon you but rather it is something that

needs to be done and done well, and by collaborating with your client you can achieve that goal.

Secondly, try to work with your client to make it possible to achieve your shared goal. Your client wants to work with you and you want to work with them; ask questions and listen to try and find a way to make that happen for everyone. As creative and business partners, rather than adversaries or unequal participants, you are much more likely to produce better work for that client and to build a long-term relationship with that client that will result in good things for everyone involved.

Finally, if you can't get to a point where both you and your client are served by the project, its terms, and its budget, gracefully decline the project. It's the best thing you can do for your business (in that situation). Sometimes, your client will even thank you for it, especially when they are aware that the budget was set too low (yes, that really does happen). Your saying "no" gives them ammo to go to their client and to get the budget increased. This helps them to set more reasonable budgets in the future and you will be remembered (positively) for that.

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