



Bring out Your Dead

Remember the scene from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* where there's a guy pushing a cart through a nasty, plague-ridden town chanting "Bring out your dead!" and ringing a bell? Someone chucks a body on the cart and the carter argues with the chucker that the body's not dead yet (and the "body" even chimes in "I'm not dead!") but the chucker is determined to get rid of the "body." Eventually the chucker and the carter work it out and the "body" is indeed carted off. Well, you need to be a chucker too. The time has come to bring out your dead, or mostly dead...clients.

I've written and talked before about firing clients, but it's still something I struggle to get through to people. The thought of giving up paying work just scared the hell out of some of you. Now, that's understandable, but it is not the best thinking for your business (holding on to "dead" clients, that is), and I'm not even close to the only one who says so.

Michael Port in his book *Book Yourself Solid* writes on page 1 "Choose your ideal clients so that you work only with people who inspire and energize you." He fleshes out how to do this and starting on page 5 goes into detail on how one must get rid of "duds." He references Tom Peters who wrote about dumping clients in his book *Reinventing Work: The Professional Service Firm 50*.

In fact, if you google the words "firing" "clients" and "creative" you'll get over 750,000 hits. This is not a new idea.

One of my favorite results from that search is a short article by Jason Fried of 37signals.com (makers of Basecamp and other software): <http://www.37signals.com/svn/archives/001053.php> where he writes that you can avoid firing clients by only "hiring" the right ones. He also talks about the importance of saying "no" and how choosing your clients is just as fundamental a business question as choosing your location or your employees. Good points, all.

What all of these people, including me, are trying to say is that working for just anyone with the money to pay is the surest way to make your professional life a meaningless hell. And if your work is hell, then you won't do it as well and you won't make as much money as you would if you loved it. And even if you do make money, is the trade-off of hating your work worth it? Ever? I say "no."

Once in a while when I make this argument someone will come back with "But I have to feed my family!" Yes, you do, and the best way to do that is to work with clients who appreciate your creative abilities and compensate you with "financial respect." A good client, even for less initial money, will want to build a long relationship with you (more money) and be your brand advocate to others (more, more money), and will collaborate with you to produce better work which will bring in more clients who appreciate strong work (more, more, more money).

On the other hand, when you work with a crappy client, even when they pay well for the project, how do you feel when you approach the project, during the process, and afterwards? Usually it's "I dread it, hate the process, and am relieved when it's over." What you are mostly hating is the fact that you chose to work with someone who is uncreative, pushy, mean, unpleasant, or whatever other fill-in-the-blank-negative fits. You can't produce great creative work with all that negative feeling in your system. The work you end up making will not be the best reflection of your abilities and will not help you in bringing in new clients (of the kind you want, at least). Yes, you'll get a check, but that's pretty much all you'll get on the positive side.

On the negative side, you'll get depressed, hate going to work, work longer hours to get the same work done (when we hate what we do we usually take longer to do it--how's that for twisted), have less time to be with family/friends/self, spend more time processing out the negative emotions (i.e., venting), and can even end up drinking or smoking or whatever too much (addictions anyone?). To top it off, you'll end up making less money in the long run. Ouch!

Besides all that, if you really were all that concerned about feeding your family, wouldn't you go out and get a "secure" job of some sort? That is, you would not have chosen a riskier profession like being a photographer or other creative professional if your very first priority was money. Feeding your family is important, but it is only one item on the list of important things about your chosen career. I'm sure that if your family really was in danger of starving, you'd dig ditches or whatever it took to put food on the table, so don't use that excuse as a rationalization for doing the wrong thing. It's like the old diet saying, "a moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips."

So do the right thing. Take some time and make a list of what you want out of a client. What makes a client a good one and what makes a client a bad one for you--write these things out. Then next time you have a client approach you, look at your lists and see where it fits. Don't take it as a client if it's clearly a crappy client. If you do take it and later it becomes clear that it is a crappy client, dump it. And cart out your current "dead" clients today.