

# 10

## Common Mistakes

Designers Make With

## Clients

GDB

# TEN COMMON MISTAKES



DESIGNERS MAKE  
WITH CLIENTS

[GraphicDesignBlender.com](http://GraphicDesignBlender.com) presents

# **TEN COMMON MISTAKES**

## **DESIGNERS MAKE WITH CLIENTS**

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# NOT SIGNING A CONTRACT

Working with clients can be a difficult task. With lots of training and practice designing logos or web sites and very little practice or official training on working with people, it's easy for us to make serious mistakes when working with clients.

Today, I'd like to start a new series where we discuss a number of common mistakes designers make when working with clients.

Mistake #1 will be (because it's one of the most common ones I see) not signing a contract with your clients before starting a project with them.

## **WHY IS THIS SUCH A**

## **TERRIBLE MISTAKE?**

Due to the nature of this blog, you can imagine the kinds of emails I get from designers. I love getting emails from all of you and I love helping you with your concerns as you build your design business. If I didn't enjoy it, I wouldn't blog about it all the time and I wouldn't have taken time to write a book about it.

But as I help other designers solve problems on a regular basis, I've noticed that a good majority of the problems they face could have been avoided altogether if there was a solid contract in place.

## **SIGNING A CONTRACT IS A**

## **PREEMPTIVE ATTACK**

Everyone knows it's better to avoid a problem than to try to solve it later. That's why not signing a contract is the most important mistake to avoid—because it will help you avoid so many problems in the future.

# WHAT SHOULD I INCLUDE ..... IN MY CONTRACT? .....

But signing a contract before starting a project together is only helpful if your contract actually helps you avoid trouble in the future.

So what should you include in your contract so that you can avoid as many future problems as possible?

Here's a few ideas and tips I have accumulated over the years (Please note that I am not an official legal consultant. Please consult with a legal professional when drafting official contracts and similar documents.):

- **DEFINITION OF SCOPE.**  
What will the project include? What happens if the client decides he wants more than the defined in the contract. This is perhaps the most common problem I see when I help designers with client problems: scope creep.
- **DEADLINES AND TIMING.**  
When does the project need to be done? How often does the client expect to be updated? What happens when these deadlines are not met or change. Also, be sure to include what deadlines the client has. If they don't get you assets by a certain day, you shouldn't be held responsible to still hit your deadlines.
- **MEANS OF COMMUNICATION.**  
Most designers don't know they can include this in a contract, but it's very important. How will you communicate with your client? What's their official email address and telephone number? This comes in handy in a court hearing. If you tried to communicate via the official, agreed-upon means and they didn't respond, you're less liable.

- **PAYMENT.**

How soon after (or before) delivery of the final product will your client pay you? Will there be a down-payment? Will there be a penalty for not paying on time? At what point will the payment be turned over to a collection agency?



# ALLOWING A DISCOUNT

For today's installment of *Common Mistakes Designers Make With Clients*, I'd like to tackle a controversial one: allowing a discount.

I can already here the collective outcry: "What!?! No discounts?" But I'm here to tell you that offering a discount to your clients is one of the most common and most deadly mistakes you can make.

Here's why:

## **DISCOUNTS SET A PRECEDENT**

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The first problem with discounts on your design work is that it sets a precedent for your clients.

Don't think for a moment that you can entice a client to hire you for the first time at a 25% discount and then they'll pay you full price the next time around. This might work for some designers, but it's a very risky and somewhat unlikely opportunity.

## **DISCOUNTS CHEAPEN YOUR WORK**

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Secondly, discounts make your work and your business feel cheaper. If you're always competing fully on price, then your clients will see you as a bargain designer.

Instead, try competing on value, expertise, or turn-around time. These sorts of competitive advantages give you an upper hand without cheapening your work of your brand.

## **DISCOUNTS ARE FOR GROCERY STORES**

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### **WITH ROTTING PRODUCE**

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Discounts are designed to move product. Grocery stores offer a discount on yesterday's bread, browning lettuce, and week-old cookies.

Your design isn't old. It isn't rotting. It isn't yesterday's hot item.

At least it shouldn't be.

If it is, then we have a whole different problem on our hands. Offering discounts makes you seem like you're trying to push product like a grocery store. It tells your customers that you are not in high demand and you are desperate for some business.

If you're pushing a product, maybe the story is different, but since we're talking about services here, I say avoid discounts like rotting tomatoes.

## **DISCOUNTS CAN KILL YOUR INCOME AND PROFITS**

Lastly, discounts can kill your income and your profits. Running a successful design business is all about making enough money to live comfortably while doing what you love to do.

Your income and profit are what keep your design business alive.

By offering discounts you are slowly killing it.

## **REALLY? I CAN'T OFFER DISCOUNTS?**

Since I know there are a lot of you probably asking this even after this post, I'd like to offer one possible way you could offer a discount if you still think it's the best option for your business (which I still don't think it is, but I know some of you will).

Overprice your services and then offer a discount so you're at least still making the amount of money you need to on a project to make ends meet and build your business. Discounts like these still set a precedent, they still cheapen your work, but at least you're not sacrificing as many profits and income.

Here's a little secret: most discounts at the store do just that. They're still making money (meaning they bought the product for less money than they are selling it for at a discount) when you make a discounted purchase.



# BURNING BRIDGES

For today's addition to the *Common Mistakes Designers Make* series, I'd like to discuss one that I had a personal experience with recently.

In case you didn't know, recently I got an office job.

I still freelance design on the side, so don't sue me, okay? But with my new job came the responsibility to hire designers for certain projects which has been very insightful.

I've been able to experience the design process from the perspective of a client which has allowed me to write some really great content here at GDB – stuff I never would have understood without this new job.

## **SOMEONE TORCHED BY BRIDGE**

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As I was looking for a designer, I sent out a request via twitter (which I do all the time. Follow me if you're interested) and got back a whole bunch of great responses.

I sorted through them and then sent an email to the top 4 designers that I though best fit the project.

As I talked with each designer about timeline, rates, and availability, I finally decided on one.

Then I notified the other designers to which I got the following response from one of them:

"Fine. Thanks a lot for wasting my time. Can I bill you for 20 minutes of my precious time?"

## **THE IRONY OF IT ALL**

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The irony of it all is that I was planning on keeping this designer on a very short list of designers I might be able to hire in the near future.

But guess what I did after he was so rude to me...

That's right. I scratched his name right off the list. I'll never contact him for work again.

He burned a bridge.

## **YOU NEVER KNOW**

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The truth of the matter is, you never know when and where you might bump into old clients or potential clients again. You never know what their plans are or if they plan to hire you again.

Never...let me emphasize... **NEVER** burn bridges with clients. You'll miss out on all sorts of opportunities in the future.

I know it's hard to keep your cool sometimes, but it's never worth losing your temper in the heat of the moment. If you're tempted to fall into the "Clients from Hell" mentality that many designers in the community have adopted, resist it.

I guarantee it will pay off in the future. If nothing else, you'll feel better about yourself as a human being.

Don't burn bridges with clients.



# WORKING FOR FAMILY

Today I'd like to talk about a common mistake designers make with clients that almost all new designers fall prey to: working with family.

Why is this such a common mistake? Because it seems harmless. We love our families. We know our families. And our families know and love us.

And that's the problem.

## **RUNNING A BUSINESS IS ALL ABOUT...**

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You can talk all you want about how much you love your job as a designer and how much you love working for yourself as a freelancer, but at the end of the day, running a business is all about profitability.

If you aren't making more money than you spend, you aren't profitable and you won't stay in business for long.

If you can't put food on the table, you can't afford to run your own business and won't survive for more than a few months.

And more often than not, when you work with family, you end up losing money. Many times family members ask for a discount (ironically, they should be paying you full price if they really understand how much you and your business depend on cash flow). They ask for cheap labor, a discount on printing, or an exchange – "If you design this for me, I'll wash your car".

## **DON'T RUN THE RISK OF...**

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A couple days ago, we talked about burning bridges with clients. Imagine if the clients who you end on bad terms with are your family.

Imagine family get-togethers and the awkward feeling that will accompany you if the project turns out poorly. There's an added level of stress when working for family because it has to end well. There's no wiggle room, you

can't voice your opinion for fear of offending them, and if it ends sourly, you have to live with the consequences for the rest of your life.

## **SOME DESIGNERS MAY BE ABLE ..... TO PULL IT OFF... .....**

Some designers may be able to pull off working for family and do it successfully. But I know that when I get emails about problems designers are facing, many times those emails start with a sentence like "My sister asked me to design something for her business..." and it usually ends with something like "...and since we don't have a contract, I don't know what to tell her".

If you're new to running a design business, try to avoid working for your family as much as possible. Spend time trying to find other clients that you can be comfortable working with.



# MISSING DEADLINES

There are a small number of things you can do that will completely ruin your relationship with a client.

After all, most clients are human too (notice I say most) and they understand if you get sick, get stuck in traffic, or have a strong opinion about something and want to voice your opinion. (Please note that most clients are tolerant to a point, but don't push it, or you're likely to be replaced.)

But if there's one thing most clients won't put up with, it's missing deadlines.

That's why today, 'missing deadlines' merits a post in our series *Common Mistakes Designers Make With Clients*.

## **WHY MISSING DEADLINES IS ..... SO TERRIBLE .....**

As creatives and artists, we designers often think to ourselves, "What's the big deal if I get this project to my client today or first thing tomorrow? I'll polish it up tonight and it will be worth the wait!"

But many times our clients have strict deadlines (whether they have created their own schedule or are managed by someone else) that they have to meet and when designers disregard those deadlines, it can throw the scheduling of the entire project offline.

## **HOW TO HIT YOUR DEADLINES ..... EVERY TIME .....**

So how can you make sure you hit your deadlines every time? Let me offer a few suggestions. Here's how I do it:

- **SET A DEADLINE TOGETHER.**

Just because you have been hired by the client doesn't mean that you have no say in when the deadlines are. Any client who can't be flexible with your schedule, preexisting projects, and other scheduling elements might not be worth working with in the first place.

(Yes, I'm talking about the client who calls you wanting a web site designed by the end of the week and only wants to pay a minimal fee. Just say 'no'.)

Decide on a deadline together as partners working together. Help your client understand how long it will take to produce a quality design. Both of you should be flexible when finding a deadline that works for everyone.

- **SET MINI-DEADLINES (OR DESIGN MILESTONES).**

After you and your client agree on a final deadline upon which the final project will be completed, create a list of mini-deadlines or design milestones.

These sorts of mini-deadlines should be reasonable and clear and will help both you and your client stay on task. Set mini-deadlines for both parties. For example, set a deadline for when you, as a designer, will have a preliminary design finished. But then set a deadline for when your client will have collected all the feedback and emailed it to you. (Or whatever deadlines you need to set in order for it to all work smoothly.)

The day I started setting mini-deadlines was the day I started hitting my final deadlines every time. Give it a try, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised with what you find.

- **UNDER PROMISE, OVER DELIVER.**

Offer deadlines that make your clients comfortable, but always give yourself a little extra time for those little issues that come up. Because things always come up. Whether you have a family issue, problems

with another client, computer mishaps, or any number of surprises along the way – you should always be prepared for them. If you set a date that's further out than when you truly expect to have the project completed, when these issues arise, you can still hit your deadline. If no issues arise you can deliver early. It's a win-win.



# **NOT ASKING FOR REFERRALS**

Today, we continue our series: *Common Mistakes Designers Make With Clients*. Today's addition is one that I have always felt very strongly about. It's a tactic that has built my design business quickly over the last years: asking for referrals.

## WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

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So what's the problem with not asking your current clients for referrals? Here's why it's a critical mistake that any designer should avoid:

- **ASKING FOR REFERRALS IS THE EASIEST WAY TO FIND NEW CLIENTS.** Of all the different ways I have tried to find new design clients (and believe me, I have tried a lot of them), asking for referrals is perhaps the easiest way to get great new clients.

Why?

Because in asking for referrals from your current clients, you're showing that you are proactive and value their opinion. If you time it right (See the 'when and how' section below), you can take advantage of the great work you've done for your client and get more than just a paycheck out of the deal.

I say it's the easiest way to find new clients because even if only 1 out of every 5 clients gives you a decent referral, that's still a much higher rate than cold calling, maximizing SEO on your portfolio site, or any other common way of finding new clients.

- **A REFERRAL GIVES YOU A FOOT IN THE DOOR.** Secondly, a referrals gives you a starting place with your potential new client. Instead of starting from scratch and making up some reason why you're contacting them, it's easy to say something like "Your friend Larry from Larry's Construction mentioned you've been looking for a designer to help you get your business off the ground."

This gives you an immediate ‘in’ with your potential client and breaks the ice quickly and easily. Of course, you’ll want to make sure ‘Larry’ knows that you plan to use his name when contacting a referral. Otherwise you’re as bad as those door-to-door salesmen who won’t leave you alone until you give them the name and house number of someone else who they can go torment.

- **REFERRALS ARE A GREAT WAY TO STAY IN TOUCH WITH FORMER CLIENTS.**

Lastly, (but I’m sure there are more reasons, please share your reasons in the comments) referrals are a great way to follow up with old clients.

Imagine, for example, that Larry (remember him?) gives you a referral and says that his dentist Susan is looking for a nice new web site.

After contacting Susan and moving forward with a project, call Larry back to thank him for the referral. He’ll likely be happy it worked out for you both and such excitement may even encourage him to refer you to future opportunities.

Staying in touch with past clients is a great way to bring in steady business and referrals give you a great excuse to send an email or make a quick phone call to any of your previous clients who offered successful referrals.

## **WHEN AND HOW TO ASK**

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## **FOR REFERRALS**

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Okay, so I’ve explained why it’s important to ask for referrals, but when and how should you go about doing it?

Each designer should find their own way of doing it successfully, but here’s how I usually do it:

Once a project is completed, take every precaution to make sure your client is happy with the outcome of the project. An angry client will never give you a referral.

(PS – this is why it's important to not burn bridges as we mentioned in part 3 of this book. My favorite comment on Part 3 post came from Laura who said: "That client might have been a bear to work with, but they may have five really nice friends that aren't." Genius, Laura.)

After you've made sure they are pleased with the outcome of the project, then is the moment to ask for a referral. About 25% of the time, when I ask at that moment of the project, clients are willing to offer a referral and I gladly take it. The timing also happens to work out perfectly because just as one project is being finished up is the time I start looking for another project to fill the void.



# NEGLECTING TO FOLLOW UP

I've had a lot of great feedback lately about this series and I wanted to make sure that I was covering the sorts of topics that you, the GDB community, really care about. So I posted the question on the GDB facebook page and got a couple responses (I would love more opinions if there's something you'd like to see this series cover before it comes to an end).

One response was from Lisa who asked:

*"After you present a proposal what followup steps do you make? How often, etc? Is there standard steps you can go through?"*

So today, I'd like to talk about a common mistake designers make with clients: neglecting to follow up as often as they should.

## **WHY IS NEGLECTING TO FOLLOW UP ..... SUCH A CRITICAL MISTAKE? .....**

Neglecting to follow up could potentially ruin your design business if you're not careful. Why? Because neglecting to follow up allows potential clients to slip through the cracks. And every time a potential client gets away from you, a few more slip away in the referrals that you miss out on.

So following up (especially on proposals) is one of the most important things you can do.

## **WHEN TO FOLLOW UP (AND HOW) .....**

So the big question is "When and how should I follow up with my potential clients?"

Here's what I do.

- **FIRST, I SEND THE PROPOSAL.** (duh)
- **FOLLOW UP #1**  
Right after emailing or faxing the proposal, I call the client to "make sure they got it". The truth is, although this seems like a harmless phone call, it's actually my first (and sometimes best) follow-up opportunity. It allows me to elaborate a little on the proposal and sell my services a little more.
- **FOLLOW UP #2**  
After I know they've received the proposal, I usually give them 1.5 business days – meaning, I send the proposal and then let a full day pass and call them the following morning. That way, I'm not calling the very next day, but I'm also not letting too much time pass before I do call.
- **FOLLOW UP #3**  
If I still haven't gotten the project after the second call, I call again in 4-7 days depending on the client. Usually, if I haven't heard back from them, it means they aren't hiring me, but it's always good to follow up one more time.

Some designers recommend following up each month or each year, but I prefer to spend my time on tasks that bring in money. I used to follow up each month, but just got depressed with the growing list of people who rejected me each month.

It's not worth my time to continuously call people who aren't interested in working with me.

## A WORD OF WARNING

.....

Every client is different. While these are the steps I usually take during a follow up, I also treat each case differently. Clients are people, they are all different, and they deserve different attention. So don't fall into a routine just for routine's sake. Evaluate each case individually.



# LETTING YOUR CLIENT POOL DIE

A little while ago, as I anticipated this series coming to an end soon, I visited [GDB's facebook page](#) and asked what topics you'd like covered before this series is through. We covered one of them last time (when and how to follow up with clients) and today, I'd like to address one other question.

This installment was encouraged by a question asked by Pishon-Boboye Olayiwola. In essence the question is, "What should I do when I have no project to work on."

There are really two answers to this question. The first answer is, use passive income ([here are 9 ways designers can generate passive income](#)) as a way to stay afloat during [client dry spells](#).

But the real answer is: DON'T LET YOUR CLIENT POOL DIE.

## **A VERY COMMON MISTAKE**

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### **FOR ALL DESIGNERS**

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I bring this up because I think it's a very common mistake designers make. We get caught up in a project, get excited about completing it a getting paid, and somehow forget to look for a new client until we get the check from our current client.

This system leaves gaping holes in our work flow and, subsequently, our cash flow.

## **THE KEY TO KEEPING YOUR**

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### **CLIENT POOL FULL?**

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So how can you keep your client pool full all the time? Keep this in mind:

You are a business person as much as you are a designer. Don't forget that creating beautiful designs and billing your clients is only half of your job.

The other half is being an entrepreneur and a marketer.

Here are a two solid ways you can make sure your client pools stays full all the time:

- **TAKE TIME EACH DAY TO DEVOTE TO MARKETING YOUR BUSINESS.** Whether you're making cold calls, asking for referrals, or doing paid advertising, you need to dedicate even just an hour each day to marketing your design business. Leave a comment and tell me how you market your business.
- **NEVER BE SATISFIED WITH THE NUMBER OF CLIENTS YOU HAVE.** Always be on the hunt for quality clients. Even if you're currently over-booked, if a quality client comes along schedule them out for next month, or even the month after. I know a few designers who schedule out their clients 6-8 months in advance because they are so popular. The clients are willing to wait and it gives the designers some great job security!



# SAYING "YES"

We're coming near the end of this 10-part series about *Common Mistakes Designers Make With Clients*. Today, I want to dispell a myth many designers fall prey to:

## **YOUR CLIENT IS NOT ALWAYS RIGHT.**

.....

In fact, thinking that your client is always right (because the 'customer is always right') is a huge mistake that designers frequently make. In fact, I'd dare say (because I have) that the idea that a client is always right may be the biggest myth in graphic and web design.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make for yourself and ultimately for your client (if they know what's good for themselves) is to simply say "yes" to any request or opinion they might have.

Don't start down that road!

Imagine the terrible situation you might find yourself in if you're simply a "yes" kind of designer:

- "Can you get it done in a week instead of a month?"  
"Yes." (We all know that you actually can't.)
- "Wouldn't this look better with my logo bigger and a photo of my baby?"  
"Yes." (You know that will ruin the design.)
- "Can you send me a few options first and then I'll decide if I want to hire and pay you?"  
"Yes." (Oh, come one now.)

You get the idea.

Now while these examples might be slightly extreme, they aren't far off. Becoming a designer who always says "yes" to any request your clients bring to you can be a slippery slope that's hard to stop traveling down.

## A SLIPPERY SLOPE

.....

Imagine if you say to yourself “This client wants to pay me too little on this project, but it means steady income for a few months because he has more project coming up. So it’s worth it.”

Wrong.

Do you think that a client who has already heard you say “yes” to a discount one time will actually pay full price the next time around? No way! You’re stuck giving them a discount (or whatever you gave in on) for the rest of your relationship.

Saying “yes” to clients is a slippery slope you just don’t want to start down.

## WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD OF “YES”

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So what can you say instead of “yes”? Here’s what I suggest:

When you first meet with a client, explain to them that you are not only a designer, but also a design consultant (and then have the knowledge and experience to back that claim up). Explain that you want to help them achieve their business goals through effective design. Establish your credibility as much as possible and let them know that you will be offering design solutions based on the years of study and experience you’ve accrued.

Once you have this frank (and sometimes slightly awkward; but don’t worry it’s worth it) conversation with your clients, they will not expect you to say “yes” to everything they throw at you.

They will ask for your professional and genuine opinion more often and are more likely to respect you when you tell them that an idea may not be worth exploring.

Never be rude when you don't say "yes", but never ever give in to ideas or practices that will hurt your reputation, your design business, or your emotional health.

Find a way to avoid saying "yes" to every suggestion, negotiation, or question that comes from your clients. And if they can't handle having a designer who won't just always say "yes", maybe it's time to fire them and find a better client.



**COMMIT  
TO MAKE A  
CHANGE!**

For the last few weeks I've written posts about common client mistakes that I see designers make – and many mistakes that I have also made myself as a designer.

Today, we reach part 10 of this series and now it's time to act!

There's no point in reading (or writing) these blog posts if we can't all benefit from it. So today is a day of action.

I dare you to make a difference in your design career starting today!

## HERE'S WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO:

.....

Today, I'd like to do an exercise that we all should take part in. I'm even going to do it:

- **FIRST:**  
Identify a client mistake that you commit frequently. It can be something from the list of common client mistakes we've covered over the last few weeks, or it can be a completely different one.
- **SECOND:**  
Write down (or make it your computer desktop or something) "I will not \_\_\_\_\_ anymore." Make a commitment to yourself and your future clients that you will no longer commit the mistake you've identified in step one.
- **THIRD:**  
Share with me and the rest of the GDB community what your goal is by leaving a posting on our facebook wall at [facebook.com/graphicdesignblender](https://www.facebook.com/graphicdesignblender).

What do you commit to stop doing?

By sharing our goals with each other, we can help each other be better. We're here to support each other. If you have any questions about

how to kick your habit, we want to help. If you have a success story, share it! I want to hear what you've got to say.

## **HERE'S MINE**

.....

And I would be a complete loser if I didn't share my goal with all of you, so here we go:

**I WILL NOT LOSE MY COOL WHEN CLIENTS  
DEMAND UNREASONABLE CHANGES.**

Why did I choose this goal? Because I'm way too proud. That's right, I can't seem to set my pride aside when it comes to discussing design changes with my clients.

And it has gotten me in trouble with clients, burned bridges, and ruined relationships many times.

So today, I commit to stop.

This doesn't mean I'm going to be a pushover. This doesn't mean I'll give in to any change a client asks for. But I'm going to set aside my personal pride and personal feelings about a project and maintain a completely professional face when discussing changes.



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