

cheat sheet for Client Red Flags

(Based on Ilise Benun's presentation
at the Ad Age's 2014 Small
Agency Conference)

Battling big egos and unfair deadlines? You're not alone.

For small agencies and solopreneurs especially, one bad client can mean big problems, draining your resources and even harming your carefully built culture. This cheat sheet will help you spot the 4 red flags you should be watching for, plus suggest 3 actions you can take for each.

We all have problem clients, but some of us have more than others. And often, we also play a role in creating the problems. So no matter where you and your clients are on the spectrum, here are some tips for dealing with them.

First, distinguish between bad clients (the ones Rick Webb, author of, "Agency: Starting a Creative Firm That Succeeds in the Age of Digital Marketing," called "sociopathically grumpy people") and clients simply behaving badly.

You will, of course, steer clear of those abusive, mean and dysfunctional people who drain your resources, destroy the culture you work in and cost more in problems than what they pay in fees. You know who they are.

For the rest—clients behaving badly—know that it's often due to factors they can't control.

The essence of this presentation distilled into a tweet by John Ellett, CEO of award-winning agency, nFusion:

"Antidote for cluelessness—education; "no budget"—explanation; chaos—structure; disrespect—empathy."

🐦 @nfusion

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Red Flag #1: Chaos

Watch for:

- Last minute requests with unreasonable deadlines.
- Sloppy communication and conflicting messages from different people on a project.
- Prospects or clients who vanish in the middle of a project or negotiation.

Why:

- They have a chaotic corporate culture and your contact is doing their best, to little avail!
- They have no self discipline and are in reaction mode at all times.
- No one (including you) has called them on this bad behavior so they have no reason to change.

What to do:

1. Give them structure, timeframes, deadlines and consequences.
2. Have a process and enforce it. They will respect you and they might even relax a bit.
3. Accommodate when possible, but don't be a doormat. Say, "Yes, but..."



Red Flag #2: No Budget

Watch for:

- "We have no budget" = "We have no idea what this should cost."
- "We have no budget" = "We know it costs money but we don't have it now. We will have future projects though."
- "We have no budget" = "We won't tell you our budget."

Why:

- "We have no idea what it should cost." = They don't understand what's involved and can't justify the price—to themselves or their superiors.
- "We don't have the budget this time." = They're under pressure to do more with less.
- "They won't tell you" = They don't trust that you'll quote a fair price based on their budget.

What to do:

1. Demonstrate the complexity of what's involved through your marketing, in your proposal and especially during your pitch.
2. Don't just drop the price. Adjust the scope of work to the budget they have.
3. Once you're involved, lobby for "extra budget"—there's usually money that can be moved around or "reallocated."



Red Flag #3: Cluelessness

Watch for:

- A young “marketing coordinator” who doesn’t have the experience to understand what’s required.
- An older marketing director who is burnt out and hasn’t kept up with the modern marketing world.
- A new marketing director who suddenly has marketing responsibilities but knows next to nothing about marketing.

Why:

- The workforce is getting younger and younger.
- Older workers can’t afford to retire but don’t want to be working.
- Experienced people are being laid off and not replaced.

What to do:

1. Gently insist that decision-makers be involved, especially in the first meeting to set strategy.
2. Make them your best friend, especially the young ones, who will bring you along as they climb the ladder.
3. Educate them. Share what you know.



Red Flag #4: Disrespect

Watch for:

- Unresponsiveness: Ignoring your calls and emails unless they need something from you.
- Pushing to see how far you’ll go.
- Treating you and your employees like a pair of hands.

Why:

- They lack the power to make the decisions or don’t know what to do.
- They are the victim of office politics and other job frustrations.
- You are getting the brunt of personal problems.

What to do:

1. Don’t take it personally—no matter what, it has nothing to do with you.
2. Don’t react emotionally. Respond with, “I’ll get back to you about that.”
3. Don’t jump to conclusions—easier said than done! Step into their shoes and imagine what could be happening on their end.

The Upshot

Watch for these red flags—chaos, no budget, cluelessness and disrespect—so you can assess whether you should take on or politely decline each new prospect.

Have a special situation you need coaching on? Need accountability for your own marketing?

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