PWA -- Customer Service for Negative Clients   By Claudia Cesarotti | November 19, 2018

When dealing with clients, everyone starts off as a "Neutral" unknown. Most will grow into "Positive" clients, as I discussed last week. However, a few will end up on the 'Negative' side of our spectrum, and handling those clients is what we'll talk about now.

Learning to deal with difficult clients is important… possibly even more important than learning to deal with positive clients. Knowing how to handle hard-to-please, picky clients will make a huge difference in your mindset about the project itself and your confidence as you complete it.

At my shop, when new clients come through the door for the first time, we always smile, greet them enthusiastically and listen to what they would like us to do. In your freelance business, it's crucial to give your clients that same level of patient listening up front … it's a great way of getting to know them and get valuable information on the job they're hiring you to do.

This also allows you to gauge their attitude and demeanor when giving suggestions. If the client is acting defensive or even hostile at the beginning of the relationship, this could be a tip-off you may be dealing with a 'Negative' client.

The 3 Types of "Negative" Clients

I've found there are 3 levels within the 'Negative' category that incorporates most clients, situations and conversations you're going to have. These are:

- Friendly (negative)
- I don't go out of my way   (meaning you, the copywriter)

FRIENDLY (Negative)

- Client seems distant and unfriendly. But don't assume, you don't know their situation.
- Be polite & friendly, but not personal & familiar… yet.
- Give the client some space… the relationship could turn around.

- You're fired, don't come back   (meaning them, the client)

When you're in the 'Friendly' (negative) stage, you may have worked with your client a few times so far… but each time was a not-so-great experience.   They may seem distant, almost unfriendly, and may have been difficult to work with and somewhat uncooperative.

Don't give up on them just yet… you don't know their situation. There may be a painful or challenging personal issues they're dealing with or their job position in the company they're working for may be on shaky ground at the moment. As long as you're able to get the information you need for your part of the job at hand, the relationship may be worth saving.

One way to try and save a business relationship like this one is to give the client a little slack. Be polite and friendly in your conversations, and make sure any assignments that are your responsibility are completed on time and to the best of your abilities.

Being too personal or too familiar may turn them off to you at this point… and that can impede the progression of the project at hand. It may seem like a slow process, but it's worth the effort to engage them and keep the lines of communication open.   Yes… it may take some time, but the relationship could definitely turn around and they may end up being one of your best clients. You never know!

Progressing down to the next level… the "I don't go out of my way" stage doesn't mean all hope

of continuing this business relationship is lost. Unfortunately, those several projects you have completed with them by now may have seemed like pulling teeth… they haven't really warmed up to you yet and may have been slow to pay. They may have made some unreasonable demands or changed the scope of the project mid-way through without your okay.

At this point, you can decide if and when you would ever want to work with them again. Maybe it will be only on a project-by-project basis… if the money is good or the job is really easy for you. Perhaps if they called you and you were between jobs you would consider taking on a project from them. There is no shame or dishonor in your decision not to work with them again… sometimes, through no fault of your own, people just don't get along.

This is an area where most freelancers and self-employed people may start to panic. You may start to question yourself about why you're doing this kind of work and what if these are the only type of people you are ever going to encounter… STOP!! Take a deep breath… and realize why it's so important to cultivate relationships with the people you've already enjoyed working with.

Let the difficult ones go… you'll find it's just not worth your time and effort to continually do battle with them.

This doubly true if they've crossed a line and ended up in our final level, "You're fired, don't

come back".

When a client is "fired" in your mind, you've come to understand that a particular client is just too difficult to work with. They haven't come around to even a cordial way of communication and every interaction with them is stressful and unproductive.   It's not worth your time or effort at this point to continue the working relationship. Throw in a history of non-payment or unreasonable demands of your time and resources and you are just done.

Fortunately, this is not the norm. Very rarely in your career will you come across a person (or company) that you have to 'fire'… but it can (and does) happen on occasion and it's good to have a bit of preparation.

When you have to 'fire' a client, there doesn't need to be a confrontation or heavy discussion of why you no longer want to work with them. It may just work out that you'll be 'too busy' to take on any of their new projects and after 2 or 3 polite (on your part) refusals, they will not call back anymore.

 Or… after 2 or 3 of your polite refusals, they may want to know why you're not taking their projects anymore. The conversation needn't be adversarial or confrontational. If telling them that you're 'too busy' is not cutting it with them, you could go a bit further and say (again, politely) that you don't think it's a productive working relationship or you (the copywriter) aren't the right fit for their company.

These 3 levels of 'Negative' client customer service describe the most common types of less positive business relationships you'll experience. Even through it's very important to learn how to properly and professionally deal with a negative client, you probably won't have to deal with these types of situations very often. While many freelancers have anxiety around encountering such clients, they truly are rare. Plus, most people tend to gravitate towards people and business relationships they enjoy… and that are mutually productive and satisfying. As your copywriting career progresses, you'll find this will be your experience as well.