

NIGHTMARE CLIENTS... AND HOW TO TAME THEM

We've probably all had at least one client from hell, but how do you spot them from afar, and how do you keep them under control? **Laura Snoad** finds out



From individuals that simply don't pay, to those who are professional backseat designers, who try to seduce your staff or have such inhibiting speech impediments that you end up misspelling their brand name – you really will have to deal with all sorts in the wide world of client relationships.

"It sometimes feels like you need an MA in psychology to handle a difficult client," laughs Plan B Studio creative director Steve Price (plan-bstudio.com). One of his worst experiences happened recently with a client in Germany, who managed to transform every conference call into a brawl out of *EastEnders*.

"We were barked at constantly, and it was very easy to get sucked in and

start shouting back," Steve says. "I'd just have to end the call as it would quickly get out of hand. It became a running joke that every time we took a call from her we looked drained, it was so all-consuming."

Taking his mother's advice – to "breathe" – Steve mitigated the situation with Oprah-like empathy. "We soon realised that she was getting so angry because she'd only recently moved to Germany, was doing the job of eight people and wasn't getting any support from her employer, all 3,000 miles from home. The only people she could take it out on was us."

Zen-like patience and a School of Life psychiatry qualification might have succeeded in managing that client's stress, but what happens when



Simon Manchipp

"In a way, there's no such thing as a bad client, just a poorly structured and managed project. If you start well, you can cope with any client"



PROBLEM CLIENTS – THE EARLY WARNING SIGNS

- The client can't answer straightforward, basic questions about the nature of their business
- The client doesn't like talking about money
- The client is rude or evasive during initial meetings
- The client doesn't have time or isn't interested in listening to your ideas
- The decisions will be made by the CEO but you're told you will never meet him or her



Spencer Wilson

"Adding humour to illustrations is not a good thing for the client to ask for if the piece is about health-and-safety malpractice or heart disease"

Above Some clients' promises turn out to be lies – so look out for warning signs (illustration by Spencer Wilson)

Left Cure Studio avoid getting entangled in payment problems by sending a test invoice early on to weed out any issues

Left, over Clients can be some of the strangest creatures you'll ever let into your studio (photos from a workshop by Pencil)

you have a client who is simply inept?

London-based Spencer Wilson (spencerwilson.co.uk) repeatedly gets asked to add humour to editorial illustrations by clients who clearly haven't read the accompanying copy – "not so good if the piece is about health-and-safety malpractice or heart disease", he sighs.

The fussiest – in the worst sense – client that the London studio Sawdust (madebysawdust.co.uk) ever encountered was when the studio was appointed to redesign a menu for a relatively well-known fast-food chain. Asked to use drop shadows on lettering, bevelled effects on headlines and glowing boxes for prices, the studio soon realised the client was just not interested in good design. "If there was a Photoshop filter, they wanted

to use it," says Sawdust founder Rob Gonzalez. "I'm not sure if you've ever been asked to design *beneath* your usual standards, but let me tell you, it's an art in itself – and something we'll never attempt again."

For Simon Manchipp, creative director at branding consultancy Someone (someoneinlondon.com), the funniest bad clients are the truly dysfunctional ones. His worst client experience to date was when a high-powered businessman turned up for a crucial meeting absolutely smashed. Buying time to prepare the team for the situation, Manchipp suggested the client go freshen up while pointing out the boardroom for his return.

"We sat there waiting and I started to think he must have passed out in the washrooms," Manchipp says. ➤



Above It pays to acquire strategies to deal with the heavy burdens awkward clients can impose (illustration by Spencer Wilson)

“Just as I was losing faith, his head popped up in the window in the meeting-room door. Unfortunately, the fellow had forgotten to ‘tuck himself in’ as both his cock and balls were prominently protruding from his trousers.”

Ever professional, the team managed to stifle laughter and carry on with the meeting as though nothing were amiss. They were spared a second exposure as the client was only ‘flying low’ when he stood up to present the brand vision – luckily not a euphemism this time around.

Although the tightest contract can’t protect against screaming Skype calls or stray genitals, both Steve and Simon emphasise the importance of investing time in drawing up and signing paperwork. “A client who changes their mind all the time can make you rich – if you have the right contract,” Manchipp says.

Contracts can be changed

Luke Manning, creative director of Pencil (penciluk.co.uk), a design agency in Frome in Somerset, agrees. When working on a literary project for a client who kept on adding material, Luke made sure to keep amending the contract. “When the text turned up it was horrendous,” he sighs. “Every page that they thought was going to be 300 to 400 words was about four pages of A4.”

But Luke still tried to find ways to keep costs down so that they could complete the work – only to find that

the client had hired another designer and hadn’t had the courtesy to tell him. Although Pencil lost out on a considerable amount, their solid contract meant that they got paid for what they had delivered.

Problem payments are, of course, the bane of most designers’ lives. After encountering a series of poor payers, James Hurst, creative director of London-based Cure Studio (curestudio.com), has developed a nifty way of testing the financial waters at the beginning of a project. “For every big project we send a retainer invoice,” James explains. “The value is not the important thing, although it’s nice to have the cash flow. [The invoice] flags up any potential accounting problems early on and avoids argument about ‘not being set’ up on their system.”

Both he and Luke avoid snowballing workloads and ‘mission creep’ by running initial workshops and collaboratively developing briefs, so that they and the client are in theory both working towards the same goals. David Kimpton, who founded Kimpton Creative in west London (kimptoncreative.com), agrees with that strategy. “If [the client] doesn’t like the idea of working collaboratively or if they just want to dump something on you and run away, then the alarm bells should start ringing.”

“In a way, there’s no such thing as a bad client, just a poorly structured and managed project, Simon says. “Truthfully, if you start a project well you can cope with any client.” ■



Rob Gonzalez

“I’m not sure if you’ve ever been asked to design beneath your usual standards, but it’s an art in itself – and something we’ll never attempt again”

TOP WAYS TO MANAGE DIFFICULT CLIENTS

- Make sure the contract is watertight and is updated if there are changes in the work
- Collaborate on briefs to avoid potential conflict
- Encourage clients to discuss changes with you, to avoid conflicting feedback
- Stay calm – even if your client does not
- If you’re spending more time managing the situation than doing the work, drop the project



David Kimpton

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