

How to:
GET THE CLIENTS YOU WANT

BY JUSTIN KEMERLING

In my independent practice, I've had clients that run the spectrum from inspiring and wonderful to kind of soul-crushing. I've had relationships with kindred spirits working together to make a project the best it could be. Those I hold on to. Then there have been those clients akin to after-school detention. You know the ones. They come with the expectation of silence on your part and a process that reminds me of chalk sentences on the board with little chance of making something valuable. Those relationships don't last, thankfully.

Early in my career, I had a buffer of account people who did the relationship stuff. I hunkered down in the department of introverts. Just another creative too freakishly awkward to interact with other humans. Best left in the corner with a Mac and five days' worth of music to keep me occupied. Projects would magically appear in job pouches complete with instructions. I'd do my designer interpretation and send the pouch back when finished. For a while I enjoyed this simple efficiency, playing a cog in a well-oiled machine.

As I learned more how to be a designer, I knew I wanted to try my hand at doing my own thing. This would, of course, require honing my relationship skills. Outside of an agency, on my own, I wouldn't be able to count on magic job pouches and only talking to other creatives who spoke my language.

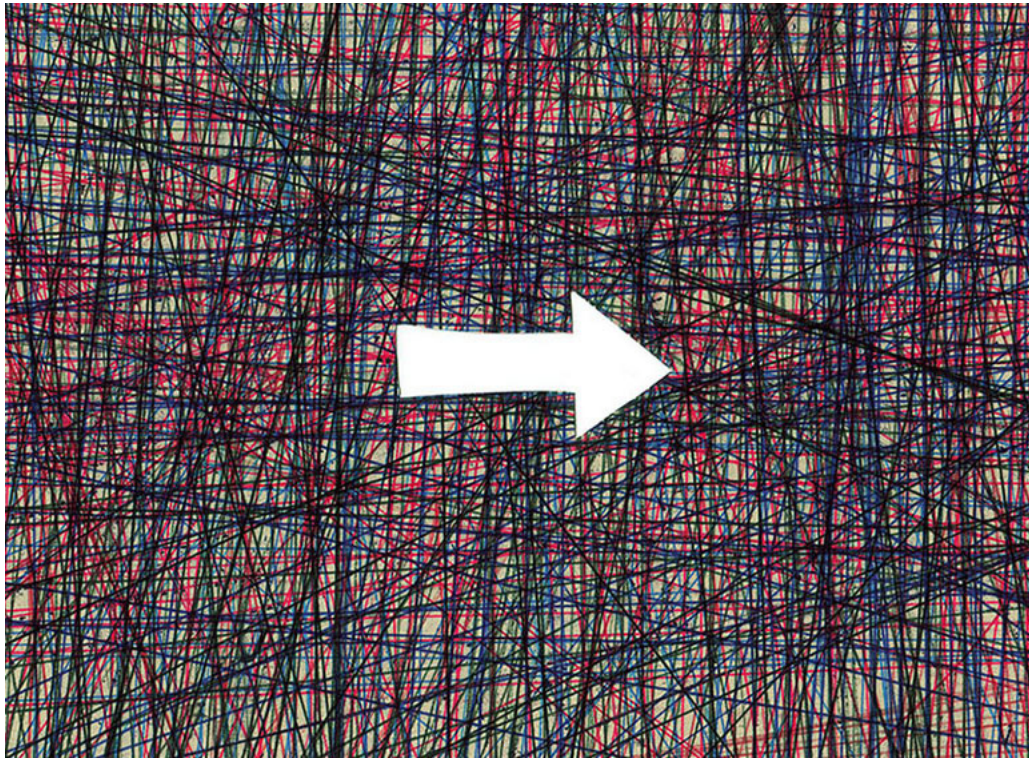
Now that I'm fully responsible for getting new clients and keeping existing ones, I practice a set of guidelines to get better at the most important side of any design business: the client relationship.



□ Set the tone.

From the first interaction, I've standardized more and more how I get things going. I'm consistent in how I time email responses, when information calls happen, and what my hours of operation are for the work day.

I've also tried to find the sweet spot for the right amount of paperwork: the proposal, basic contract, statement of work, workflow document, whatever. It's just enough so the process is light on bureaucracy but formal enough so that everyone involved knows this is a serious thing we're about to do.



- **Process, process, process.**

I make it clear there's a rhyme and reason for all of this. Design takes time and is best executed when a standard process is applied to the work. When creating a brand, designing a website, or crafting an infographic, a designer should always attach a process to the expectations. Note that projects for new clients tend to require more discussion around that process. It's a beneficial opportunity for explaining right away how I'll do the project and what role the client can expect to play.

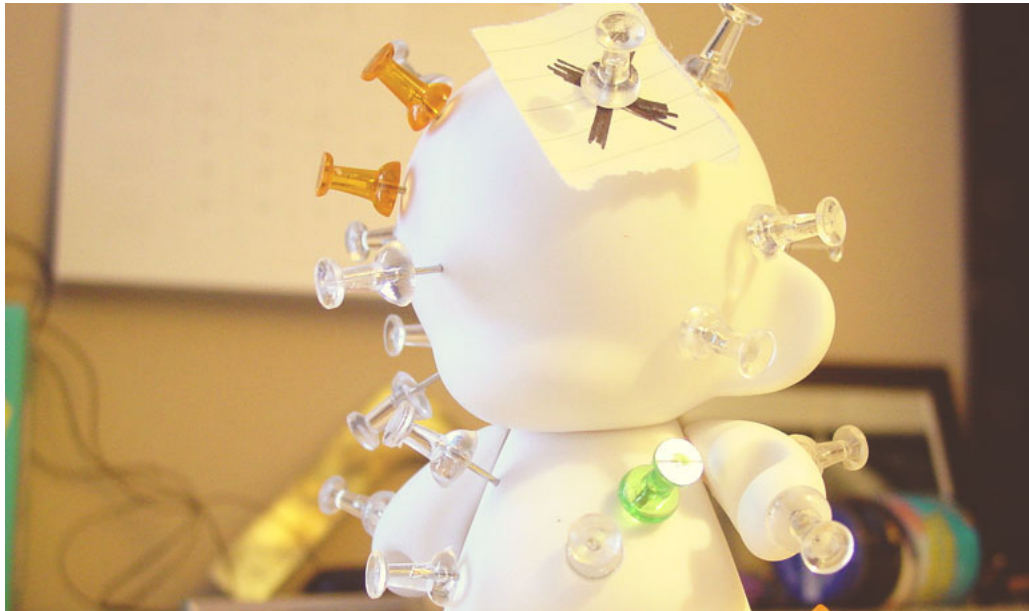
□ **Deliver. Always.**

This is a must. Deliver on time and on budget. And to expectations. The feedback of “good enough” isn’t something that should sit right with a designer.

There is always an end point. A moment in time when you must say out loud, “This is it, we’re done.” If this is a point when expectations are exceeded, when what is delivered is so right for whatever the problem was, that everyone is happy and can’t wait to do more work together, then commence with high fives and hugs.

□ **Yes to hugs!**

The best feedback I’ve ever received was a hug. And not your typical, run-of-the-mill hello hug. This was a full-on, warm embrace of appreciation and enthusiasm for a job well done with expectations far exceeded. I aim for hugs because it helps me to not take this line of work so seriously and remember we’re all people trying to make something memorable.



□ Be better at confrontation.

I don't care much for confrontation. I'd prefer everyone get along and give high fives as much as possible. But that's not how life is. With design, the best ideas are usually uncomfortable and require risk-taking. Some amount of confrontation and persuasion is necessary to move those ideas from concept to reality.

I realized if I wanted to be any good at design and have the chance to create some really inspiring work, I'd have to get over my dislike of confrontation. If I didn't, then I'd be on the path to being a button pusher with a shoebox full of boring work. When it comes to the design process, with revisions and approvals, I'm honest in my assessment. I tell it like I see it and push back on feedback I disagree with. It's taken a lot of practice to get sort of comfortable with confrontation, but it's helped make the work better.



□ Design the work you want to do.

Since I set out on my own, I've designed with nonprofits, community organizations, and startups. Each of these clients has some change-making, progressive quality to the projects we do together. It's a very intentional strategy for me to only do those sorts of projects. And it all started with a self-initiated art project.

When things started to come together on the business side and great projects were coming my way, it was all largely because of a project another designer and myself just did on our own: a poster project that commented on the issues of our time. Anyone, anywhere could download, print, and post them.

That project has been the single most effective tool for me to get the kinds of clients I want, and it's led to more and more design work. It helps set a tone and a direction while offering a concrete example of my point-of-view on design: Done well, design helps make change possible.

□ Look for partners.

There's one particular client I've worked with since I started my independent work over four years ago. By this point, they aren't just a client, they're partners. Yes, they set me up for success with engaging projects. Yes, they do what they do and let me do what I do. And yes, our process is more of a symbiotic relationship that hums along at a quick, efficient pace where we don't even really think about it anymore, it just happens. But the thing that I just love is that they get big things done. Period.

They continue to impress me, which makes me want to keep impressing them. It's a long-term partnership I hold in the highest regard, and it's this relationship I refer to as other client relationships develop. Knowing what a good partner looks like makes new ones easier to find.

All of these elements make up a framework — very much a work in progress — that has helped me get out of my freakishly awkward stage and focus attention on the deserving client relationships. Having clients who are exhilarating to work with, who have been excellent partners, and who have become really great friends is enough for me to keep referring to it in my day-to-day operations.

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