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Fire That Client!

Most entrepreneurs want to get business, not turn it away. But sometimes a customer isn't worth keeping.

By **RACHEL WEINGARTEN**

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(FORTUNE Magazine) – Four years ago I posted a sign above my desk that I look to when I'm frazzled. It reads, DON'T GET INDIGNANT. Making difficult clients happy is a part of what my company, GTK Marketing Group, does. Our clients [including Warner Books, which, like FORTUNE, is owned by Time Warner] hire us to work for them. We rarely consider how they work for us.

Recently, though, I had to fire someone I'd been working with very closely for several months. Not an employee, not even a vendor--I fired a client. As a media personality and the author of a new book, this woman was a rising star. While earning a healthy monthly retainer, my company created a marketing plan for her that soon put her on everyone's speed dial. She then made a critical mistake: She believed her own hype.

She was a bit of a diva from the start, but her demands escalated. She would phone six or seven times a morning and send back artwork and copy countless times for revisions. The mood in our office went from creative, relaxed, and fun to tense, with constant bickering. I would pull account executives off other projects to finish work on hers, just to avoid a new round of nasty e-mails and voicemails. To top it all off, she started

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ignoring my invoices, claiming it was now worth far more to us for our company simply to be associated with her.

After five months I had an overwhelming desire to fire her, but doubts crept in. Was I a failure if I couldn't make this business relationship work? Could I just walk away from the significant monthly income she brought? Professional ego also kicked in at the thought of some other agency's reaping the benefits of the brand we'd worked so hard to create.

While dropping her went against everything I'd learned in business, it turned out to be the best decision I've ever made. Over lunch I politely told her that it was time she found another agency. After overcoming her shock, she unleashed a litany of complaints about the ineptitude of my company and left the table while I was in mid-reply. I felt overwhelming relief, and yet I didn't sleep any better that night. I was riddled with self-doubt and wondered where our next big client would come from. I worried that she would badmouth our company. Through the grapevine I found out that she did try to spread some nasty gossip about us, but our reputation spoke louder than she did. Within weeks we landed two new accounts, showing me that not only had we done the right thing by banishing such a negative influence, but that we'd opened ourselves up to attracting and retaining the right kind of client.

Slowly things got back to normal. The time I'd spent worrying about the situation was replaced with a welcome flurry of creativity. I still have to remind myself not to get indignant about the daily annoyances of business life, and of course I can't fire all my difficult clients. But I have learned to value my own talents and not let any customer's demands take control of my business.

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