



## On unhappy clients, and how to react

>> *Some tips to ensure that inevitable client issues are resolved effectively.*

No matter how effective your project management or how talented your employees, it's inevitable that clients will occasionally grow unhappy. Design projects are complicated and as a result, mistakes and misunderstandings will occur and must be resolved. It's really our response to these issues that enables us to develop deep, meaningful, long-term client relationships. The following tips will help your firm resolve client concerns.

### **Tip #1: Diagnose the problem early.**

Unlike cheese, project issues do not improve with age. I've certainly been guilty of avoiding a client when I knew they were unhappy with our service. This is a disastrous response. Instead, develop a culture where project managers react quickly when they sense a client may be unhappy. One way **MacKay & Sposito, Inc. (M&S)** does this is through a formal client feedback process. This process supplements our regular project communication and provides clients with multiple ways to voice their concerns.

I wrote about client feedback programs in a previous article (see *The Zweig Letter*, Issue 823, August 3, 2009); at a minimum, a client feedback program should include a client interview at the end of every project and intermittently during large programs. Once implemented, encourage your project management staff to take advantage of your feedback process. They should be invited to use this process whenever they sense projects aren't going as smoothly as they'd like. I've found that our feedback process differentiates our firm, and communicates to our clients a sincere desire to continually improve our services.

### **Tip #2: Seek understanding.**

When addressing an unhappy client, your mindset and attitude will determine your success in resolving the problem. Express to your client your appreciation for their constructive criticism. Avoid defensiveness. Carefully select those sent to resolve the client issue. At times, it may be better to send a firm owner or business development staff member who will focus on understanding the client's concerns and who won't be tempted to offer excuses or convince the client they are wrong.

Consider that there may be little that can be done to convince an unhappy client to stay with your firm. In those situations, constructive criticism may be the only value left to be gained from the relationship. However, that feedback is invaluable. Once collected, share it broadly within the firm as project lessons learned. With consistency, project managers will learn the importance of reviewing lessons learned in all their projects, a habit that allows for continuous firm-wide improvement.

### **Tip #3: Respond, but do so carefully.**

Take a long-term approach when considering your response to unhappy clients. This might require that you prioritize client relationships above short-term project goals. If you've decided your unhappy client is worthy of long-term investment, and you've carefully sought to understand their issues, you then must demonstrate to your client a commitment to improve. This will require action, and a specific plan to resolve the client's issue. Although this may seem like hard work, consider the effort required to replace good clients in this difficult economic environment.

Like any plan, ensure that tasks and goals are specific and measurable. Commit to check back with the client to ensure any changes made satisfy them. Real change—implemented to satisfy the client—will likely “bolt” that client to your firm, assuring them you value their business and that future issues will be resolved similarly.

As stated earlier, good clients are difficult to secure in this down economy. As a result, efforts spent to retain current clients are easily justified. By diagnosing problems early, seeking to truly

understand client issues, and responding appropriately, you will retain clients who, for whatever reason, have grown unhappy with your firm. This hard work will also help differentiate your firm and develop additional business.

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