



# WINNING OVER PROBLEMATIC CUSTOMERS

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Expressions of Excellence™

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# **From Worst to First:**

## ***Winning Over Problematic Customers***

By Craig Harrison

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Think for a moment about your least favorite customer or client? Why is that so? Are they hard to please? Do they require high maintenance? Are they disorganized? Slow to pay? Perhaps they're unclear about what they want. Some are just disagreeable, ungrateful, or moody. Let's face it, there are 101 reasons why they may not be your favorite. To have your druthers, you'd simply drop them from your client list, either ceasing to do business with them outright, or raising your rates so high they would seemingly go away of their accord.

Consider an alternative. I encourage you to dispassionately analyze the history of your relationship with this "special" client or customer. Gather information and examine it anew, in search of insights into how best to serve them, or not.

The goal isn't to keep every client or customer, regardless of cost or effort required. An analysis of your relationship may make it clear both parties could benefit from a severing of the relationship. Through no fault of either party, you may not be the best provider for their needs. Don't you live in a no-fault state? Part as friends and perhaps you can even refer this customer to a colleague who might serve them better.

Yet analysis may yield further insights. Perhaps a minor change could alter the entire feel of the relationship. If the core problem is a clash of styles perhaps changing representatives within your organization can circumvent the problem.

If the problem is systemic, perhaps a tweak in policy or procedure will ameliorate the problem. A little change sometimes makes a big difference.

Sometimes a friendly "account review" between parties can uncover better ways of conducting business between you and this special client. After a few months or longer, or after repeated problems, you now have enough data points to pinpoint problems. Before problems accumulate and resentments built up, why not have a meeting of minds. Now you two can work toward a solution, or at least a compromise.

To help you gather information, answer the following questions as they relate to the history of this special client:

1. How did you acquire this customer? Inherited? Passed along? Referred by another client? Received by default?
2. Why did this client come to you? What attracted them to you initially? (If you don't know, it's worth asking.)
3. How much "history" do you have with this client? Did their father's father do business with your grandfather? Is there tradition at play in this relationship?
4. Are there trends at play here? If so, then perhaps these trends can be reversed.
5. What percentage of your business does this client or customer represent?
6. Is there anything discernibly different between this problematic customer and your other customers?

The answer to these questions will give you a context to evaluate this relationship. Let's look anew at a typical transaction with this client.

1. Can you identify what aspects of your interactions are objectionable?
2. Is there behavior on the client's part that complicates, aggravates or annoys you or your staff? What exactly is it? Is it stylistic? Is it a personality issue? Are problems the result of poor communication? Is it related to the process by which they do business with you? I encourage you to write down the reason or reasons you don't like working with this client.

Reviewing the answer to the last exercise, take three colored highlighters and highlight in green those aspects of the client's behavior that you may be able to change. Using the yellow highlighter, highlight those aspects of the client's behavior you can NOT change. Now, using the blue, highlight perhaps change your reaction to, including those already colored in yellow. What happens to items colored both yellow and now blue? ...That's right, they too are now Green.

Realistically, it may be harder to change your client's behavior than to modify the way you react to it. Yet the key to this process is for both parties to understand the relationship from the other's perspective. Once you've completed this exercise you can candidly share your perceptions with this client while asking that they share their perspective with you.

Fortified with new information you can now determine what changes will improve your relationship, or whether or not the relationship's problems can be corrected. If so, you've saved a client. If not, you've resolved a festering problem and freed both parties up to prosper independently. Congratulations.

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