

Avoiding Bad Customers

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Sometimes your instinct is to land every customer at all costs. Many professionals spend an enormous amount of time and effort pursuing prospects. Once you've taken the energy to track down the decision-maker, make follow up calls, write contracts and attend meetings – it can be hard to pass on a customer. But not every prospect is really a good candidate for taking your career or business forward. In fact, some of them can be detrimental to both your mental health and bottom line!

Everyone can think of a few nightmare customers they've had to deal with. If you watch for early warning signs, you can often identify problems before they ever get the chance to hire you or do business with you. Here are some telling statements that clue you in to prospects who should never become customers:

1. ***"We can't make a commitment to you, but please hold this deal open for us."*** It's never a good idea to reserve time or product for a customer who cannot give you a confirmed schedule or obtain the necessary approvals. If your customer won't commit to you - you shouldn't commit either.
2. ***"We aren't able to get your contract signed or cut a check before you start, but we'll do it soon."*** Don't make the mistake of trusting a client to make good on verbal promises. Too many professionals can tell horror stories about completing work or delivering goods before realizing they weren't going to get paid. Remember that you have lost your bargaining chips once your client has your work or your product in hand.
3. ***"I know we've met four times already, but we'd like to meet with you again to talk more about what you can do for us."*** Meeting with a prospect once, or twice, or even three times is usually necessary and productive. But when potential customers ask for multiple meetings and endless talk without committing to anything, you should be wary.
4. ***"We want to hire you, but we can't afford to pay you what you're asking. Will you help us for less?"*** Prospects who ask you to cut your prices by 20% or more obviously do not value you as a professional. They're just looking for rock bottom rates, and they don't care about quality or service. If they want to contract with the lowest bidder, let them. Just don't let it be you!
5. ***"We would like a discount because we can send you lots of business in the future."*** A deal in exchange for future referrals may seem like an acceptable tradeoff at first glance, but consider the implications. You'll be locked in to earning less on this deal and you have no guarantee of any return. More often than not, customers who request a "volume discount" never deliver on the volume.
6. ***"I know we've ignored your calls for a month, but now we need you to start tomorrow."*** Potential customers who disappear and then resurface with a crisis will probably behave exactly the same way at later dates. You don't want to work for someone who constantly translates their own lack of planning into your problem.
7. ***"We've hired people like you before, and none of them worked out."*** It's always tempting to think that you can be the one who will succeed where others have failed. Unfortunately, customers who complain that they can't find good help usually have no one to blame but themselves. They're demanding, unclear on their needs, or not willing to be flexible and make changes. You don't want to see your reputation ruined when you become the next person they complain about.

8. *"I know what we need is not what you usually do, but we really want you to handle this for us."* It can be appealing to take any sort of work a prospect offers you. But when you work on jobs you don't enjoy or lack experience in, they can sap your energy, distract you from your core business, and generate referrals for the wrong kind of work – creating a vicious cycle of underachievement.

Prospects that undervalue and take advantage of you don't deserve to become customers. Don't ignore warning signs and allow them to hire you, because they can consume your time without payment, keep you trapped in under-earning, and hold you back from finding valuable, long-term customers who will truly appreciate the products or services you have to offer.

It can be hard to let go of a prospect. But make sure you spend your energy pursuing only the best customers - and leave the rest to the competition. You don't really want them anyway!