

HOUZZ PRO GUIDE

How to Prevent Client Disagreements on Projects

In a perfect world, every design, renovation, and outdoor project would run on time with no surprises and patient clients. But the fact is that renovations can be stressful for homeowners, especially when the unexpected happens. This can sometimes lead to conflict with you – the trusted pro they hired in the first place.

We recently spoke with a handful of experienced professionals to get their wisdom on how to handle client disagreements. Their biggest collective takeaway: do everything you can to avoid tension in the first place. Here's three ways you can do just that.



STEP 1

Make Your Process Clear

Communication with clients about a design, renovation, or outdoor project should begin well ahead of demolition or breaking ground. It's critical that you outline from the get-go what clients should expect during each project phase.



"We don't have a lot of disagreements with clients, we really don't. The reason is we do such a good job of preparing the client for how we work. We go over it on the phone in the initial discovery call."

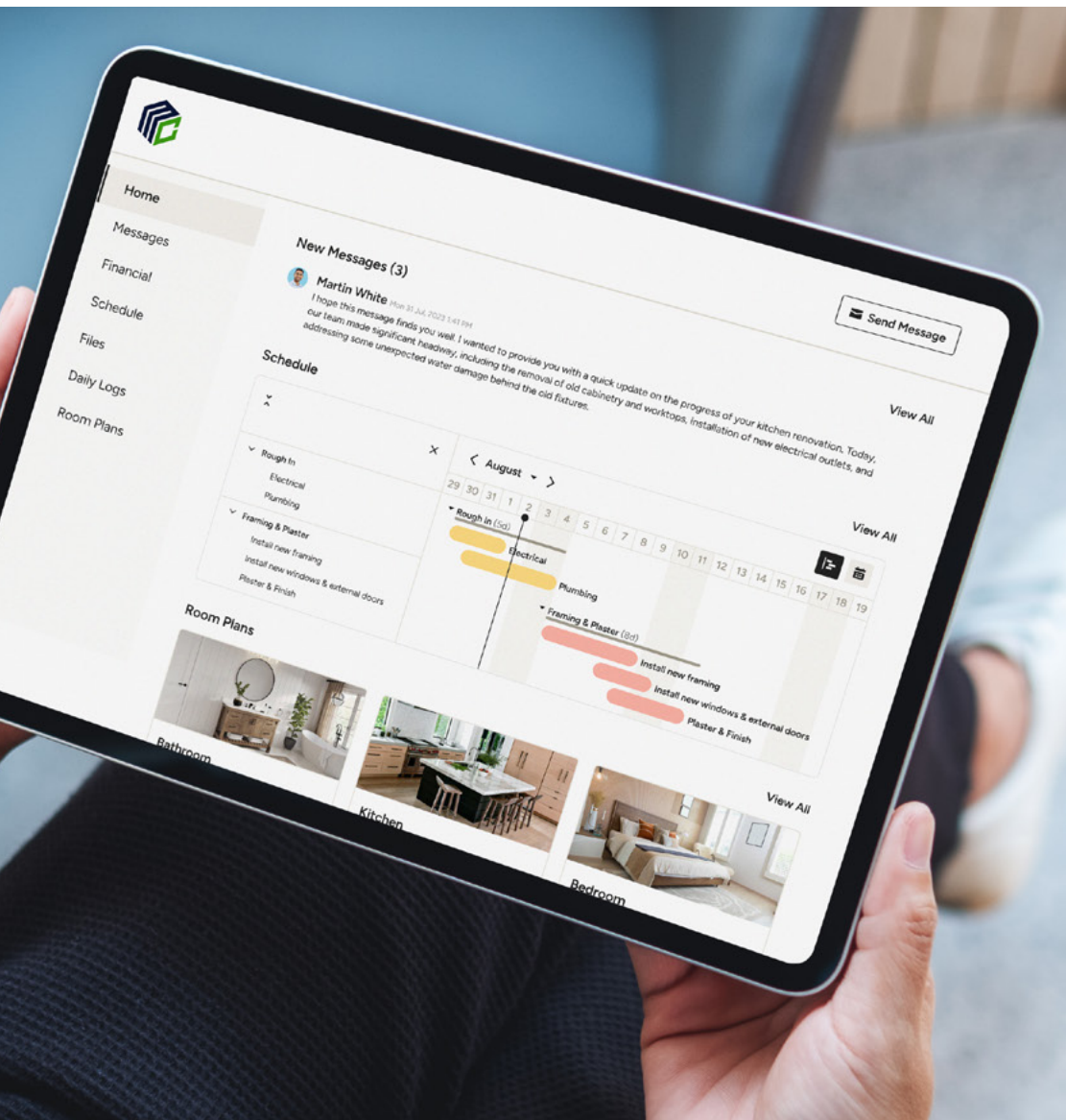
Cheryl Kees Clendenon, In Detail Interiors

Clendenon lays out her firm's process five times for a would-be client before she ever creates a design proposal. The process is outlined in materials she refers to as "The Client Introduction," which explains to homeowners the benefits of working with her design firm.

Clients hear about the process again in a follow-up email Clendenon sends after the call. She reviews the process once more during the initial consultation, which is when she visits the home to diagnose the problems leading the homeowners to want to renovate or decorate. Finally, information about her firm's process is also on the company website as an FAQ.

Repetition like this is a great way to make your design or renovation process clear up front. Remember that your way of working may be second nature to you and your team, but most homeowners are experiencing the renovation process for the first time. Reiterating what they should expect can eliminate many issues before they arise.





STEP 2

Communicate About Everything

Another good way to avoid project conflicts is to over-communicate on prices, schedules, looks... essentially everything you can.



"There's three things clients want communicated: price, schedule, and finish – meaning how it's going to look. Most builders fail because they don't communicate in all three of those. They'll send a bill out too late in the game and the customer will say, 'Oh I thought that was included.'"

B.J. Barone, 41 West

Another good communication practice is to document everything that's discussed. Barone adds:



"I preach to my guys that every conversation should be followed up with an email recap that summarises the conversation."

Homeowners don't know how unexpected issues or mid-project changes they want can affect their timeline or bottom line, especially if they haven't hired a pro before. When a client brings up a possible change to the project, Barone or his employees immediately address the three key points: price, schedule, and finish. His company is also quick to send out change orders detailing how the change will affect these three things – and the client must sign off before the project proceeds.

Project management software like Houzz Pro can help you track client communication, share project photos and files, and more so everyone has a record of what's going on and what's been agreed to.

STEP 3

Be Upfront About Lead Times

Another critical thing to convey is the lead time before you can take on a new project – or get started designing for a potential new client.

For instance, landscape designer Jim Drzewiecki of Ginkgo Leaf Studio found that while project enquiries slowed for only a couple of weeks during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, his typical work process was thrown off for much longer. Normally, Drzewiecki works in an office with fellow designer Hannah Paulson and they are quite collaborative.

When the pandemic first hit, the pair worked from their respective homes, texting and touching base daily. This continued for three months. In May of 2020, Drzewiecki's father passed away. All of this understandably lowered productivity for their two-person team.

Today, the designers are back in office and project enquiries are higher than ever, but Drzewiecki and Paulson are still digging themselves out of the hole caused by the shift in their work process. As a result, their turnaround times to produce a new design are longer than before.



"We tell people six, eight, 10, or 12 weeks [before a project can start] depending on how busy we are. And some people are contacting us when it's only been four weeks."

Jim Drzewiecki, Ginkgo Leaf Studio

Drzewiecki is telling clients about the lengthier turnaround times early when they first call, so that if they do decide they want to work with him, a conflict doesn't arise later over how long they'll need to wait.





Handling Conflicts When They Do Occur

If you've followed these steps, communicated throughout your project, and documented all the client's decisions, there should be little opportunity for conflict. Still, sometimes disagreements can't be avoided. In those cases, you have to decide what matters most to you: being right or keeping your client happy.

“

There is a cost of doing business. If you know that they signed off on the yellow knob and all of a sudden they want the red knob, you just get the red knob.”

Cheryl Kees Clendenon, In Detail Interiors

Also, differences of opinion about a project's direction might occur with a client who's already agreed to work with you and your vision.

“

I come back to 'the client is always right'. Unless it's something that is going against code or could be dangerous, I tell clients 'If you want a purple tower connected to your house, I will do the best purple tower that can be done.' I will say 'I don't think it goes with the architecture' or 'It's not a good colour for the neighbourhood,' but it is their house.”

Jimmy Crisp, Crisp Architects