**Clients From Hell**How to Avoid 6 Common Client Driven Project Pitfalls.

I am Tami Burke, and for the past 20 years as President of Honey House Web Designs, I have been a freelance web. As of March of this year, I was named the Technology director with TootSuite Communications, a division of Evening Post Publishing. At TootSuite, I continue to provide full web development services and consulting, I also advise the sales staff, and steer technology choices.

As a freelancer, each web project I have ever worked on was a 'baby" for me and the client. And over 20 years, I have had lots of babies. With lots of clients!

But exactly 'what a baby' is depends on who you are.

A Project Manager thinks nine women can deliver a baby in One month.  
A Marketing Manager thinks he can deliver a baby even if no man and woman are available.  
A Developer thinks it will take 18 months to deliver a Baby.  
A Tester tells that this is not the Right baby.  
A Quality Auditor is never happy with a delivered baby.   
A Client doesn't know exactly how to make a baby.

Clients wanting a new or reworked website or with an online need will come to you. They They understand that their web presence is vital to their business credibility and advertising. And they look at other companies "website babies" -- full of bells and whistles, push notifications, mobile responsiveness, animations, etc. They want their own baby.

They expect to be able to pick a web developer who will create this wonderfully, beautiful bundle of joy that will create millions of screaming fans who will spread the word of how wonderful the client is and will bring thousands of enthusiastic customers who will flock into their business. They will become overnight sensations from the baby you will create.

And, they want it all " done by next week for less than $500".

So begins your new client relationship. often, Clients don't know that a creating a digital project is a partnered relationship that relies on both the client and the developer. The behaviors I am going to discuss, that if not kept in check have the power to consume your time, reduce your productivity, and ultimately, can impact your bottom line.

You, as the professional, sometimes will need to teach your client on how to be a good project parent in addition to building a website.

Now, when I talk about projects, it doesn't matter of your project is a traditional waterfall style of project where all the objectives and deliverables are known and scoped up front, or it it is only an scoped interation of a larger project. These behaviors can still occur.

**The Dog Ate My Homework:**   
(or Client Pitfall #1: **Clients have not done their homework)**

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And they really don't want to.

The client wants you somehow KNOW what they want. sometimes they forget that a project **is based on their goals and visions.**

They **want you to THINK** for them. and for you to create a work of magic.

**They want you to both read their mind and know what they haven't thought about.**

**They want YOU to do their *planning*.**

**How to recognize a client who had not done their homework:**

If you get a phone call and the first words out from the caller is: "**What will it cost to build me a site**", this client isn't really ready to start a project as they are more focused on the cost than on the goals of the project. But, We'lll come back to this guy.

Before you bid a project, there is an discovery or introductory phase where you determine just what type of project will be contracted, what the deliverables are, how it will be developed, and so forth. You usually ask the client questions about their project. The client's answers will tell you if the client is prepared and ready to begin a web project.

You should develop and keep a standard introductory questionnaire developed that you can email to the client ahead of your interview time so they can begin to thinking through the questions before the interview

You may ask Questions such as

"What type response they would like a website visitor to have after viewing their site?"

place an order,   
come to the establishment,   
consider a lifestyle change, entertainment....

**Big Fat Clue:**

If the client looks blankly at you and says "**I DON'T KNOW**". that is your first clue that they have not done their homework.

or: **I haven't thought about that.** or, "**Isn't that your job to know**"

**Dont Fall For:** "I don't know" is not an answer. It is a copout and an excuse

**What to do:**

Circle the "IDK" question on the questionnaire and continue on.

Now, it is reasonable for a client NOT to know everything you may ask. However, if they have not done enough preparation work or planning or even thinking about what they want, it will become obvious by the "Idon'tKNow's".

If it is apparent that either the client hasn't even looked at the questions or has not thought through the answers, **stop the meeting.**

Hand Mr Client the questionnaire. Point out to him the discovery questions help you to accurately estimate the project. The client gets a more accurate cost and schedule estimate if he spends a little time thinking through the answers. " This is really to help him"

Then reschedule another meeting, soon (within the week)usually to revisit the questionnaire.

For Mr CheapSkate phone caller, you can use that questionnaire to "prequalify" whether or not you even want this person as a client. If they don't know enough about their project, they are not worth wasting your time.Then you don't even have to waste the hour or 2 in a bogus meeting.

**Risks/Consequences:** Of course you run the risk of the client never getting the homework done. And that's ok. If they are not serious at the introductory phase, they will be less likely to meet their responsibilities later.

You also run the risk of them getting another developer who will take the project as-is. That is ok too.

Remember, you are in the business of making money. So the better defined the project and deliverables, the better the opportunity for timely turnaround and success, and the higher the profit margin for you.

The second client driven project pitfall is

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**A Half Truth is a Whole Lie**  
(or client driven pitfall #2: **Clients Lie.)**

Suppose you are wandering around the BMW car lot. No one, when looking at cars, tells the salesman who swoops down on you that they do not have a job, or that they cannot drive, or even that they cannot afford the BMW.

When asked if asked if they are interested in a car, 'WELL OF COURSE THEY ARE". The temptation to fib to look good is strong

So goes clients.

**How to Recognize Fibbing Clients:**  
While you are defining project deliverables in the discovery phase, you are also seeking the project boundaries: time, budget, authorities, goals, etc. So if the client makes a statement that just doesn't sound right, chances are they are not being forthright with you.

For Example, I once had a potential customer tell me they wanted a site similar to MTV: very music driven, lots of uploadable videos, 24/7 access and streaming, allowing customer comments, and engagement.

Great! I thought. A meaty website project that will push the limits and be lucrative. When asked the client what his budget was, I heard "**WE DON'T HAVE A BUDGET".**

I quickly tallied up the features in my head and ball parked to cost in the $35-50K price range. After all, anything that was specifically scoped based on MTV would be easily in that price. The client's response "Well, that is higher than I was thought it would be". AHA! He **DID** Have a budget in mind.

OK this is easy, so I explained that to lower the cost = he would need to reduce features. "NONONO - It MUST be like MTV, only cost less than $30K". "So, what is your budget?", I asked. "I don't have one", he replied, "just lower your price".

**Big Fat Clue: "We Don't Have a Budget"**

There is always **some boundary**! Clients always have a $ in mind but won't always will tell you. they want you to either "know" or guess. This behavior may or may not be intentional for fear you will gouge them. Or, they just don't know and have picked an arbitrary number out of the air. But they always have a price. And usually they have a deadline. or some goal time boundary that they have not shared but is vital to the project.

**lies to be considered:**

Along **with 'We don't have a budget**" are lies like: "We **don't have a time frame**".... "**as long as it's done by Summer**" ...." **end of next month**".....

**"I trust you to make my choices for me"**

**Don't Fall for it:** As a free lancer, it is not your job to be cajoled into lowering your prices or to help the client define their scope *without* their active participation. Just as it is not your responsibility to work for pennies on the hour.

**What to do part:**

Accept that you don't know what you don't know. Work with what you are told. and from that information

To Deal with clients who don't exactly tell the truth depends on how large the project appears to be. If If it is small enough them define a scope by writing down deliverables and goals. If it is larger, contract consulting services and work with them on developing the scope before estimating the project itself.

For those smaller projects, "Forget about your budget for moment. Let's work up your deliverables together and write them down. Then tell me the most important tasks and let's assign a priority to that list."

After that list is created, you may say "Now, give me aballpark idea of what you want to spend" (don't use the word budget), and then if the amount` is insufficient, draw a line denoting those priotiry features that can be done for that "ballpark", and suggest a "plan to phase in the other features next year".

Back to the "MTV" project. I asked the client to make a list of his priorities. A week later, I called the client back and he informed me that he had hired a high schooler to do the project. For $300. (Poor kid I thought)...

**Side note About Scopes and Deliverables**

Put all deliverables in writing.

Everything. Pages, Budget, api or external tie-ins, adminstrations, social networking or seo, everything that you will create as part of this project.

And include Client's responsibilities. Yes, not only will you itemize what you will deliver in writing, you will also put in writing YOUR expectations from the client. You expect payment, You expect content, You expect periodic reviews at project hold points, signed approvals.

Make these responsibilities part of your both work scope and contract.

Then review and walk through the project proposal including the client responsibilities so the client understands the parameters of the project before it begins.

and get a signature and deposit.. No work should begin w/o a signature and a deposit (ever)

Now you have an itemized document to reference for some of the upcoming Client behaviors.

**Are We There Yet?**  
**(** or Client Project pitfall #3: C**lients are Distracted)**

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I have a client who contracted for and paid for a private intranet project in full, cash up front That project has been 75% complete for over 5 years, and at a formal hold point due to failure of the client to get content necessary to complete the project.

**How to Recognize client distractions:**

The client's Content delivery is the single most critical-path to a project schedule. The single task of providing content can bog a project down to a grinding halt.

Your project profit margin is directly related to the amount of time you have to spend on the project based on the work scope. the faster the client can provide their content, the faster the project can proceed. Clients who have their photos and content done and turned over on time are a dream. and rare. So when a client is slow in providing content, your productivity and profitability slows in waiting and nagging.

**Big Fat Clues:** How Many Times, when you ask for the content, or a client deadline looms, do you hear this?"**I haven't gotten to it"**, or **"I haven't had time yet".**

**What to Do:**Breaking down the content into small chunks can help with delivery. As can splitting out text from photos.

Small business clients respond better to phone calls and onsite visits. Emails/text are too easily ignored (esp from mom/pops) Of course visits are time intensive.

For larger clients also benefit from content deliverables in smaller portions. These clients usually respond to Reminder Emails are more effective, with phone calls. If the client is savvy enough, online project managment / task reminder tools can also be very helpful.

**REmember**. You can put in writing in your contracts that failure to provide material will not stop the project's progress, and then proceed to build a page with dummy content on it. Then at project end, send the client a project complete letter. and tell and notify them all changes (aka content) must be submitted within a 5-10 day review period 5-19 days. after that date, the site is considered complete and any further updates are additional production fees. Then call them and say them "I never received content for all the pages. If you can get these to me in the next 5 days, I'll slip them in".

**Remember**: Although a deliverable should mean a completed page, it doesn't always have to.

**Risks/Consequences**: If your client has significantly overrun their target deliverable dates, you may have to place a hold on their project and start work on other projects. This means that the client goes to the back of the line and gets worked in after they get the content to you and get rescheduled in.

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**How Much is that Doggy in the Window?**(Or Client Pitfall #4: **Scope Creep**)

While you are working on their project, your client surfing online, peeking at competitors', neighbors', colleagues, pals, etc. websites. Clients are seeing "more better" features that they like. And because these extra features look cool or have created some **emotional impact,** clients consider them both highly desirable (AND easy to implement). there's a new "need-want" for the project.

This behavior is feature creep or scope creep and is one of the most common client driven project pitfalls.

You *may* have a contract that outlines the deliverables. The client *may* have signed it.

**Clients forget** the contract **outlines** when it comes to what they want.   
"I have a **contract for a website or digital project = " I can has anything I wants".** Deliverables become irrelevant.

**How to Recognize:**

Recognizing this behavior is easy when they begin to ask for features or tasks that are not in the project scope. To recognize if a request is creep... check the request against the contract.

And, creep can occur in both traditional or agile development environments.

**Big Fat Clue:** "**CAN WE ADD**" or "**What About This**"

**'Can you Add", or** "**Can we also do this**", "**what about**..." **"I thought we talked about..."**

and then ask for that extra feature.

**Don't Fall for:** To decide whether to implement a "new" non-scoped feature request is **your call not the clients**. Be careful if you do slide that change in on the side. this is a slippery slope. If you add one little feature here, but not another there, clients will catch it and will call you on it. "Why did you do this one and not that one?"

**What to Do:**

So, ask the client. **WHY** do they want this additional feature? Is it **vital** to the project's or iteration's success? Perhaps they failed to include in the discovery phase, but really is needed. Or is it just a pretty blingy thingy they fancy and want to have added.

Iif the new feature requested is indeed a newly realized requirement, Mr. Client will have no problem reviewing and approving of a change order . Project cost and schedule impact are accepted in order to implement new feature.

**What to Do**: The goal is to manage change control. The first step is to get scope changes in writing.

Traditional projects: Since you are usually adding to a contract, create a change order to itemize changes in the scope, along with a financial and schedule impact. Then include at the bottom, two signature areas, one for an approval, and one for a decline. This now becomes part of the contract document if approved.

**Remember**: Be unapologetic about holding them to their contract and asking if they would like to incorporate the new feature, item, request for $xxx now or wait until this phase is completed and add into the next cycle of development.

Agile projects: Since Agile develoment considers scope change part of the process, you still need to manage how change is managed within an iteration. And you still need to have a way to prioritize, schedule, and estimate scope changes.

**Risks/Consequences**: If the feature is just a sparkly new bling they want to add, seeing the financial and schedule cost on paper will be much more difficult to justify. But if blingy is what they want, and blingy is what they pay, then start writing a change order.

**Let's Just Be Friends**(Client Pitfall #5: **Fear of Commitment**)

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I started a web redesign in April for a medical practice and I waited for months for the office manager to provide the text. I called, emailed, even met with him weekly. And after months of him telling me "he was working on it", the office manager admitted that he didn't know what to write. So I wrote the content, and sent it to him for edits and approvals. At that point, he admitted, **"I am afraid I have either written something wrong, or that the docs won't like it**". We went ahead and placed the site into production, and his fear was realized. Within 2 hours, docs started sending me extra content to add. Perfect! they were too busy while the project was in development. but let their name be advertised... let them see the finished product... and they did the office manager's work for him.

Had he gone ahead and placed the site online in May, he would have received the feedback he was desperate to get long ago!

**How to recognize fear of Commitment:**

This client had a fear of commitment. Similar to scope creep, fear of commitment comprises a client's fear to make a decision. On colors, on style, on layout, on photos, on content (again with the content), even on functionality..

**Big Fat Clue:** . Ever hear one of these lines on a date?

**"I'm just not sure**", "I **am afraid",** or "**I have been thinking", "I'm working on it"**

Nothing is more frustrating than nearing the end of a project, only to hear the client say that they don't like the colors, changed their mind about the menu system, or the entire project for that matter.

**Remember** that to NOT make a decision IS a decision.

**Dont Fall for:** allowing your client to drag their feet.

**What to Do:** To help mitigate fear of commitment, require your project to have client signature approvals at certain project points, or release points. This forces your client to approve the work done to that point.

At the beginning of a project approvals should be set at contract signing layout design, phases/iteration planning if the project is large enough, releases, project conclusions, and after training if necessary.

By requiring a signature, you are getting client buy-in and engagement. Sure they may change their mind, but that approval makes it mentally harder for them to flippantly make changes. Then, if they do want a change, it becomes a billable additional work (change order) to the project.

**Risk/Consequences**: Failure or reluctance to sign off on hold points of a project indicates that the for whatever reason client is at a hold point himself . Encourage him to sign. Ask what his objections or delays are. and should enough time pass, you may need to consider formally placing the project on hold and scheduling other work, coming back to this project when the client is ready to either approve the hold point, or at least work out the issues with it.

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**Mom Knows Best**(or Client Pitfall #6: Clients Will Undermine You)

**How to recognize:** The project is in development. You have moved beyond scope, contracts, approvals, and You are in developer bliss, getting to crank out the project itself. You may have even uploaded a copy of the site to a sandbox for the client to see as it is being developed.

Meanwhile, your client is excited. And they are sharing their excitement with the people most important to them. No, not the management, or peers at work. they are sharing it with their spouse, significant other, mom, dad, grandmother, neighbor. And they are receiving feedback on an unfinished project that they then are passing along to you..

This is the compound effect usually based on a combination of behaviors 1-5. For whatever reason, your client is just not confident that they have made good choices, and turns to others for advice.

**Big Fat Clues:**

"**I let my wife's best girlfriend** who is an interior decorator look at the site. She is really good with colors, and she doesn't like the blue you are using. Can you change it?"

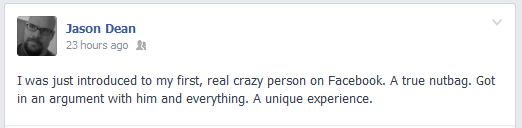
"**I was over at my mom's last week**, and I showed her my site. I was embarrassed by all the misspellings on the site. 'What misspellings?" "The Ipsum Lorax stuff". And since we don't know Greek, we couldn't read all those words. Why didn't you write the page in English?"

"I have decided **that this project is taking far too long** and I have hired my sister-in-law's cousin who is taking a web design class in high school to knock it out instead of using you"

**Remember**, you are the expert. And they realized that when they hired you. but they have asked for and will value feedback from other who are just like them, novices/non-techies

They are friends, family, teens, mothers, neighbors, facebook buddies.

**Don't Fall For This:** For some strange reason, these contacts are granted a higher credibility factor than you, the indeed expert. Good Gravy, save us from the opinions of mothers and facebook buddies.





**What to Do**: Unfortunately, the only way to manage this is to rely on that contract and that design approval you had the client sign off on. Also, require enough of a deposit before project start to ensure the client is vested in the success of the project.

Then, Make sure throughout the project that you communicate to the client that the site is a work-in-progress, or that it is only an iteration of a larger project.

If the client values Mom's opinion so much they are willing to make changes to the design, features, etc, after approval, then the client will understand the additional fees required to make the changes. Otherwise, he will tell Mom that her ideas were great, but too expensive and will hope she cannot remember the site URL and revisit later.

If the client has decided to have someone (cheaper) complete the project, then hopefully you have either have enough retainer to cover your costs, or you can include in your contract a termination clause that requires the client to pay your hourly rate to exit the contract.

**Wrapping up:**

Remember, that the primary factors in controlling poor client behavior is a well defined objectives and deliverables, a rock solid contract, and constant communication.

Bite the bullet and pay to have a real attorney draw up a contract. This establishes a relationship with your lawyer and helps you be more confident in holding a client to the contract.

And then communicate, via email and phone, and more importantly, in person when a clients behavior is slipping into one of these 6 areas. Your ultimate goal is to be as profitable as possible. and to do that, you need to be able to produce a product as quickly as possible. Client agreement, attention, and participation are keys to a successful project.