ARE YOUR EMAILS CLIENT REPELLENT?

Are your emails client repellent?

Clients judge your emails in a split-second. This essay will show you what they look for when they decide to hire you.

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When you send a bad email you're telling a client you can't be bothered to figure out how you're valuable. You're saying you can't solve the problems you're getting paid to solve.

This makes clients think, "I'm also not sure how you can help. I'll give it some thought and get back to you."

This. Never. Happens.

Your email seeps to the bottom of their inbox. It turns cold, dusty, and gray. Weeks or months pass. Occasionally, the client sees it and thinks, "Oh yeah, that email."

Eventually it begins to chafe away at them. It bugs them. Every passing day the question looms, "what do I think?" Until one day, they shrug and say IDGAF and click delete.

They exhale and never think about you again.

This is why emails are important.

It's easy to spend big chunks of your day writing them. Most of our interactions with clients happen over email. Yet we never think about improving this important skill.

We've all sent potential and current clients emails that went ignored. If they had responded, it would have meant:

- More money for you
- More chances to explore your best ideas
- Less back-and-forth hassle and time-wasting

In short, more money, more time, and a better working life. But the opportunities you miss are just half the story. You also hate doing it. Writing bad emails takes a frustratingly long time and can make you feel like a spambot.

What if you enjoyed the process? What if you knew you were delivering value every time you emailed a client? Sure, you'd make more money, but sending great emails would be an unfair advantage in every facet of your company. It would mean better marketing, customer support, retention and overall a more profitable company.

This essay will walk you through how to do it. Few implement what they read, so if you do, I'd like to [hear from you](#).

Before you write another email read this.

Your biggest competition for a new client is yourself. Most freelancers and consultants eliminate themselves before they ever get told "no" by a client.

In true Eeyore fashion, they let self-doubt set in:

> "Why bother? This person is probably getting pitched a hundred times a day… **I won't be first, so it's useless**. Hundreds of more experienced freelancers have already contacted this person. I don't have a chance."

The truth is, being first isn't a great position when it comes to email. I've studied clients who post on [my private job board](#), and they rarely go with the first person to email them.

In fact, when they get a lot of replies, they usually have to take a step back to process everything. They might even delay the project for a few weeks or months until they can sort out the hiring process.

That's when it happens. They never actually come back to read the replies. That first email you think is so crucial gets thrown away with the rest. Being first is usually a disadvantage.

It's more important to be timely. An email stands out if it's different. In fact, one of my most successful [Workshop](#) customers, Eric Davis, puts off emailing the leads I send him for weeks or months. He saves them all up in his inbox then revisits them later.

That's when he follows up about how the project turned out and – only then – talks about what he can do to help. He's earned over $60,000 by doing this with Workshop leads.

It's true, you can't know the perfect time to email someone. But being first doesn't matter.

Email Goal #1: Educating your clients

If you're waiting for leads to come in with huge budgets and projects that match your skills perfectly, forget about it. It's not going to happen.

You have to make educating clients a priority. Ideal clients aren't born; they're created by great consultants who teach them. That's why some people triple their client's budget while others are stuck giving discounts.

The truth is, if you're a consultant, any job post or inbound inquiry is a request for your help educating on what the right solution to a problem is.

The most successful consultants get this. Instead of complaining about low budgets, they show clients how working with them is in their best interest.

Instead of discussing the price of open heart surgery they discuss whether the client needs the surgery at all. Questioning whether they even need your service, immediately put a client in a position to fight for what they want.

Suggesting smaller projects for price-conscious clients will build trust by demonstrating you won't ever sell them something they don't need. You'll create life-long clients this way.

In the end, you might lose a few thousand dollars by suggesting a cheaper route, but get 10 or 20 times that in the end when they realize you were right and come back for more.

After all, would you rather work with someone who's going to nickel and dime you, or someone who truly has your best interest at heart?

How to make a connection quickly.

The first thing someone thinks when they see your email is… *"is this spam?"* Be upfront about this. How can you make them KNOW your email was written by a warm human body?

Remember that each client you email is potentially worth thousands of dollars, and you only need a handful of clients to make a lot of money. So it's OK to spend some time on each one.

Has the recipient written a book or blog post you can read? If so, read it. Learn their name. Lead with something you really love about their company. Sincerely discovering what YOU think is great about them will not only feel good it will result in 10x the results. Remember, as your future client reads each sentence, they only have two options:

1. Stop reading.
2. Keep reading.

Give them a reason to choose #2 by stepping into their shoes and addressing the fact that their inbox is full of spam. It's the best way to ensure they keep reading.

How to get your emails read.

Think about the emails you get and read without a second thought. They're usually from friends and family with language in them that is completely different from emails you hate getting.

Emails you always open address you by name, get to the point quickly, and usually contain no extra fluff. They end with a yes or no question or a simple set of instructions.

> Subject: Hey Robert, I want to help you find high-quality leads for consultancies.

If I received an email with this title, I'd open it immediately. Whoever sent this email knows who I am and what I do. This means they couldn't send this email to just anyone. It means this isn't spam.

The most common subject lines freelance consultants send are so generic that they provide no incentive to open the email. Typically, they're phrases like "Freelance Web Developer" or "freelance design help". These are subject lines that could literally be from any freelancer in the world.

Your subject line should be so specific it could only be sent to one person. This will make sure your email gets opened because busy people look to remove spam first.

Think about an email from a friend.

Do they say, "Hello, I'm your friend, I'm interested in discussing your plans for this evening. My favorite food is Chinese, and my favorite genre of movie is comedy. Let me know if you're interested?"

No!

If they wrote like that you would avoid that freak like the plague. Yet, freelancers send almost this exactly email everyday because it's easy to write. It makes sense clients avoid them like the plague too.

Instead say how you heard about them and why you're emailing them. It sounds easy, but this usually takes the most time to get right. You need to exhibit an intimate understanding about their specific situation. Lead with something you know they'll find interesting and shows you actually know something about them.

> "Hello Rob, I came across your amazing DYF article where you say to lead with something interesting, and... boom."

As you continue writing, don't forget to keep the email speaking about the person you're emailing.

Should you send your portfolio?

As a design student, I focused most of my time on my portfolio. I thought just having an excellent portfolio would make all of the difference.

I agonized over every detail, every stroke, and every pixel, making sure it presented me and my work perfectly. I wanted my work to speak for itself. And that's what I see freelancers doing still.

Most consultants and freelancers have great work on display in their portfolio. They all look the same. They all have a link in their signature. It

makes sense that you want to use something you've invested so much time into as much as possible. Don't. You needed to stand out.

Clients aren't trained in design or development, expecting them to be able to look at a portfolio and see how your work will help them is outlandish.

But what happens if you don't send it?

It means a potential client will have to ask to see it. This allows you to keep track of every single person who sees your work. Sending your portfolio to each individual client will put an emphasis on the words you use to describe your work.

It also lets you tailor exactly what they'll see depending on their current needs. You can craft an offer specifically designed for the person you're currently talking to.

You'll also naturally avoid client-repelling terms others use in their portfolios because saying things like "user interface designer" or "experienced web developer" comes off awkward and impersonal (it does on your website too but that's for another day).

Instead you'll ask yourself: "will showing or saying this help me land this client?" Your work can't sell itself because it can't address a client's needs via screenshots of your work.

Stop letting the success of your business depend on outside forces like others contacting you, visiting your portfolio, liking your work, and understanding how it will help them.

Instead present it explicitly and track where your efforts are getting the biggest return. Not sending a link to your portfolio is a great place to start.

Sell an outcome, not yourself.

Similarly, no one wants to read a 10-page proposal email about you and your awesome websites. People don't want websites. They don't want to hire a freelancer. They want something to happen. They want a result.

So focus on selling results.

If you had to remove the words "I," "me," or "my" in the email and replace them with "you," (meaning the client) what would you say?

> I've helped hundreds of businesses in your position. I helped X-company to accomplish Y-benefit.

Would become:

> Your website reminds me of past client of mine: X-company, which probably means you want Y-benefit as well.

This is way more effective because you're making the client the star of your email. What's the outcome they want? Leave everything else out.

What else to leave out

I also recommend you don't include links to your social media or blog. A prospective client doesn't care about your work yet.

The only point of your email is to get them to reply. Making them click on your website, linked profile, or blog makes this less likely to happen.

In fact, leave out anything that doesn't help you get them to reply. That means keeping your emails extremely short. That way it's easier to find the point of your email.

Don't go into your regular spiel about *insert boring specialty*. Instead use words that they use to talk about their business. To find these words you can simply scan their job posting or website, steal their words, and mirror them back.

The fastest way to win over a client

When you're about to contact a lead, think about how you can make their problem go away. Don't worry about giving away the farm. In fact, get to this crucial solution as quickly as possible and even give it to them for free. Know what plugin will solve their WordPress dilemma? Send it. Have a suggestion to get their project 80% of the results they're looking for? Suggest it.

Most businesses already do this because it works. Basecamp lets you use their service free for 30 days. Costco gives you free samples around every corner. Give a sample of yourself away, too.

If you can save a client time, do it. It's much better than claiming you can help them, because it proves that you can. Take work away from your clients. Make smart decisions for them and put the burden on yourself to prove that you can help. Ask yourself:

- What do they need accomplished?
- What's most important to them?
- Why do they need this?

Ignore everything else. Can you take care of their problem by sending this one email? If so, do it every time.

Is your email helpful?

Maybe the most important question to ask before you send the email is whether you'd be happy to receive it.

Nobody cares about great design. Nobody cares about clean code. Nobody wants to have the best content just to have it. It's all about what it means for them.

A great SEO strategy means that a business owner doesn't have to worry about promoting articles as much and can just focus on making customers happy.

A web app means that the business owner can outsource a process and have it taken out of their hands. It doesn't have to be more complicated than that.

If you only talk about the benefits using technical jargon, they'll never figure out the real reasons they hired you on their own. You have to explicitly call them out. Delivering this is valuable in itself.

And your emails should all provide something of value. Even if it's simply you connecting the dots on how you're making their life better. Would you be happy to receive this email, even if you had no intention of hiring someone?

The email line that repels clients.

I'd gone through dry spells before but this one was bad. Each day the stress mounted. The importance of every new client meeting seemed greater than ever before. I went in thinking: "I need this job."

Yet, each client would slip out of my grasp. Some would say it was a change in plans, others balked at my rate, but most — most just stopped replying altogether. I knew it was something I was doing wrong.

But what I didn't know at the time was that it was a single phrase I was writing in nearly every email I sent that was causing this hole in my pipeline.

> "Let me know how I can help."

I would spew it out constantly when I didn't know what else to say, or when I wanted to be helpful. All my emails ended with some variation of "let me know."

It seemed like a professional way to end an email. By letting a client dictate, I thought I was giving them exactly what they wanted. In reality, I was dumping my work on to them, and saying "here, YOU deal with it."

It reeked of incompetence and undermined my business. After all, these were problems I was asking to be paid to solve. So I tested the complete opposite for a few weeks. Instead of open-ended emails, I prescribed a solution.

At first, this felt wrong. I felt like I was barking orders and bossing clients around. It was scary. (At least until I became drunk with power.) But I slowly noticed a change. Clients were responding to my emails. Even prospects were chirping back. My response rate improved just by suggesting a next step.

If someone wanted a meeting, I'd suggest a time. If I was presenting an idea I would also present how to implement it quickly.

This set the tone that my time was valuable. It proved I was a professional capable of making the right decisions. It showed my hands wouldn't have to be held throughout a project. It meant I was taking work away from my clients.

Now, in the coming weeks you're going notice yourself ending emails with "let me know" too. Sorry about that. It cannot be unseen. The truth is most people do it. It's become an invisible phrase that our brains turn into "you've now reached the end of an email, so there."

If you don't apply anything from this article, just take away this: end your email with a suggested next step. You'll know you're on the right track if a

client can reply with a quick "sounds good" to any email you send.

Do that and your emails will win you more clients in less time too.

Examples of amazing emails:

The "in-conversation" emails.

So you used this essay to send a great email and now you've got clients replying left and right. Great job! Receiving a positive response is a great first step. Now comes the most important part. Following up.

You should put leads in different groups depending on what stage they're in. You'll want to follow-up with some leads more often than others.

In my lead generation service, [Workshop](#), I allow freelancers to group the leads I send into different groups. (I also remind them to follow up with these leads every week).

For a client who has responded positively I recommend the group "In Conversation", because these leads are different than a lead who has never responded. While you should follow up with both, the people who have responded positively to an email should get more aggressive follow-ups: every 4–5 days until you get a solid "no" or "not right now". It's your duty to remember. Embrace the no. Try to get to it as quickly as possible.

So how do you follow up with someone who's replied favorably to your email? Simple. Ask one question:

> "Hey! This sounds good. Are you looking to bring me on in the next month?"

You don't want to waste your time or the client's time on a project that is too far into the future.

If they respond that they're looking to bring you on sometime in the next month, then you should begin talking about the project seriously. When you confirm the project will be happening soon, it's time to schedule a call.

> "OK great. I've structured similar projects with past clients in your situation a few different ways. The best way to find out which one is right for you would be a 15 minute call where we can meet and discuss what you need.
>
> Does next week on X at X:00 work?"

This call will allow you to ask everything you need to know about their budget. Usually I like to recommend retainers for the bulk of my clients. If they can't schedule a call, respond with your budget questions over email.

On the other hand, some leads won't have a project starting for a few months. If this is the case, move them to a "Staying in Touch" group and reply:

> "OK I'll follow up with you then. I love X about your company so you'll be high on my priority list."

It's great to take the follow up on yourself because it means the client doesn't have to do anything.

Lastly, the most likely response to any of your emails is no response.

The key to turning positive replies into paying clients is to actually follow up. Losing an opportunity in your inbox is so common that usually the consultant who snags the client is just the one who actually follows up. (Note: That's the exact reason I added a follow-up list to [Workshop](#).)

If a lead doesn't reply to one of your emails (and trust me they won't) you'll need to follow-up until they respond again.

The follow-up.

Following up is a delicate flower. You don't want to do it too quickly or too often. But most importantly you don't want to not do it. If I had to get twice as many clients by just doing one thing it would be making sure I follow up with every single lead and past client.

Besides actually doing it, the key to successful follow-ups is that you don't want to rush the conversation. You just want to make sure you're having it. Avoid phrases like "I can start tomorrow" when you haven't even established whether they want to hire you.

You want to have everything ironed out before you begin closing the sale. You need to have established what you will be working on, when you will be starting, whether you're tackling the right problem, whether you know their business intimately, and how much you'll be getting paid.

Rushing through these things doesn't help you or the client. A client can tell when you're just telling them what they want to hear. It's extremely important to make your follow-ups short.

If you send a long rambling email, you'll leave a client thinking: "I don't even want to reply to this because I know I'll get an even longer response if I do."

You don't want to be too fast to follow up either. One follow up in the first week is fine, and two in the second week.

Here's the sequence. You'll be amazed at how simple it is:

First follow-up -

> "Hey haven't heard back from you on this, is it still something you're looking to do?"

1 week later -

> "Hey there, any update on this?"

3 days later -

> "Hey is this project still a priority for you?"

At this point, if you haven't heard back to your cold email it's OK to end the conversation and walk away. However, you should let them know by sending one last email a week later:

"Hey there, since I have not heard from you on this, I have to assume your priorities have changed."

That's it, resist the urge to add anything else to this final email. The abrupt ending will cause clients to respond more often than not.

By following this sequence alone you'll see a huge increase in new clients. Use this sequence, most people won't.

It will also be a load off your mind to know exactly what you're going to say to every lead and not have to worry about any lead because you've closed the loop on every conversation.

The testimonial email.

The easiest way to get testimonials is by minimizing the client effort involved. When you're coming close to the end of a project, send an email like this:

"Oh and by the way, I'm thinking of doing a case study about ProjectName on my website – with your permission. I would also love to include a testimonial from you about my work with :CompanyName: Something like this would be perfect:

"Using Robert's design services to create a website that measurably attracts more customers is a guaranteed investment.
    ClientName: - Founder"

In fact, if you're busy at the moment, I can use that quote for now. Either way, let me know. Thank you!"

This works most of the time, because all a busy client has to say is "yeah, sure," and the work is done.

The referral email.

Once I get a testimonial (which is basically an endorsement to the whole world), I'll go in and ask directly for a referral:

Hey,

Thanks for the testimonial. This was an awesome project.

I'd like to continue working with you. I have a few ideas for what we can do in the next few weeks to add to this project and make it even more successful.

I'll send those over soon, but for now, if you know of anyone who would benefit from a similar service, I would love it if you could send me their email. I'll let them know that you were thinking this might be right for them, and answer any questions they have about how your project worked out (I'll also cc you on the email)!

Sound good?"

Again, this approach does all the hard work for the client. They simply email me with a name, and I take care of the rest.

The fully-booked email.

One of the questions I get from [Workshop](#) customers who have booked themselves solid is about approaching clients when your work calendar is already full for the next few months.

It may seem like you have to stop all sales activity but the opposite is true.

When you're booked in advance it's actually the best time to email new leads because it means you can take your time, make sure there's a good fit, and negotiate from a position of power. It's the opposite of when you're in dry spell because you don't need the job. You can even experiment with different approaches.

In fact, awesome freelancer [Paul Jarvis](#) deals with this all the time. He continues to land work despite being booked 6+ months at all times. Here's what he tells prospective clients:

> Hello Client, First thing I want to let you know ASAP that I'm booking months out in advance.
>
> If you need someone immediately I'll be happy to recommend someone else, but if you'd like to work with me specifically - fair warning - the longer you wait, the longer it will be until we can work together.
>
> ONLY signed contracts with down payments go into my schedule, and only then will any of my clients save a spot in my schedule.

[The rest of your awesome email with the next step goes here]

This email indicates how in demand you are (the truth) and makes them sign on quicker to make sure they get into you schedule. Everything you say is true, and even better it's clear and upfront with the client.

It puts you in a position of power and creates scarcity, separating you from the crowd.

The retainer upset email

Clients will often need small updates and tweaks to their website. When they ask about your availability down the road or what it will cost to make a change to their website in the future, they're really asking if they can trust you won't disappear the minute you hand off a project. They want to know you won't leave them out to dry.

This creates a perfect opportunity to up-sell a retainer agreement because you can position the retainer as a premium way of ensuring you're available to them if they need help:

> "For small maintenance updates like that it would probably be best to do some sort of small retainer. For example, some of my clients pay $Xoo every month to have me on call for up to 4 hours. They have that time reserved just for them no matter what.
>
> Otherwise, I'd still be able to do pretty much any small updates you need (at my normal $Xoo hourly rate) – you would just need to wait in my queue if I have other clients.

> For companies of your size I usually recommend option 1 because I can sometimes be booked weeks or months in advance, and in that case, updates wouldn't be as fast to get done (with option 2)."

This positions you as a very in-demand freelancer yet you also get to remain flexible to their needs. It's great to have a handful of clients paying hundreds of dollars every month for minimal work too because you can count on that revenue.

In fact, recurring revenue like this is great for consultancies in general because it kills the feast or famine cycle.

How to end your emails.

Freelancers regularly shoot themselves in the foot with their closing statement.

> "I'm not sure if you may be interested in something like this, but if you are feel free to let me know what you would like to do."

This does you no good. You're trying to not sound pushy but you are undermining your credibility. Instead, emails should end in two things ways.

A yes or no question.

A suggested instructions on what to do next.

Or both.

Your email should be written based on what this next action step is.

For emails where you're contacting potential clients, that means you include how to move forward assuming they're interested.

As a freelancer, it's your job to assume they're interested, and to write the email as though you've already gotten the project.

This makes everything more comfortable for the client because they feel they're working with a confident, experienced, professional who does this all the time.

> I'd like to discuss the details, sometime this week, if you are interested. If so, would it be okay if I sent you a few ideas on how I could help?

The only goal for an email should be to get a one word reply from the busy person, preferably a "Yes."

The end of your email should be easy to reply to in seconds.

You don't want to give a busy lead more work. If the lead can say "sounds good" you're probably on the right track.

The last step: How to make it easy to hire you.

The last thing you want to do is remove any obstacles that come between you and a positive reply. People are more likely to do something when it's easy. That's why you've gotta make it easy to read and act on your emails:

Break emails up into sections

Make them easy to scan by using lists and bolding key points

Remove all links unless the client specifically requested them. You're not trying to drive traffic to a website, you're trying to get a reply

Don't send your entire portfolio. Break out 1–2 pieces that are relevant to their project.

Match the benefits of your past work to their current needs.

Remove any job board links. They know they posted on a job board.

Don't give them a long questionnaire to fill out. No one wants to do it.

Use good grammar. Write simply and get straight to the point.

Once you've agreed on the price and scope, link them to an easy payment system, like Stripe, Shopify, or Gumroad.

A good rule of thumb: if someone can just reply "sounds good," then your email does enough of the heavy lifting.

It means you've taken away the hard part: deciding what's next. Even the busiest people will reply if you make it easy.

Robert Williams Bio

I send a weekly essay like this to my [free customer mailing list](). My lead-generation service for design and development consultancies, called [Workshop](), finds you clients to email everyday.