

When It Comes to Pleasing Difficult Clients, Sometimes It's Better to Be Fired by Amy Anderson

When I first started my business, I was terrified of disappointing my customers.

I would hit “send” on a completed project and slowly sink from that exhilarating high of having met a deadline into a swamp of self-doubt.

Would the client like what I produced? Or would they wonder why they even hired me in the first place?

My mind filled with dire images of my clients rolling their eyes and shaking their heads as they looked at the finished product I had labored over with love.

Now, you may not suffer that extent of self-doubt at this point in your career—I'm glad to say I've grown out of that stage myself—but the idea still persists among most entrepreneurs I talk with that losing a client due to customer dissatisfaction is one of the worst things that can happen to a business owner.

I'm here to go against this pervasive belief and tell you a different story.

The Challenge of Customer Satisfaction

I was once fired by a client we'll call Jane.

Of course, I had no idea our professional relationship would end that way when we met. Jane was referred to me by a trusted friend who had done business with her previously. From the beginning, I thought Jane's industry, business and attitude seemed like great fits for my services. I love working with people who are on a mission to improve people's lives and businesses, and Jane was passionate about helping entrepreneurs reach the next level.

Jane tasked me with helping her to write three articles. She wanted to send one per week to her mailing list. If all went well, we'd collaborate on an ongoing basis.

I set to work with enthusiasm. As I wrote, I envisioned a fruitful, long-term relationship with Jane, including weekly chats, brainstorming, and the joy of watching Jane's business grow as she helped coach other business owners.

Then I turned in the first article. I got a polite but slightly dissatisfied response with a request for multiple changes. Now, as a writer, I can tell you that this isn't all that unusual—sometimes it takes a while to really learn someone's voice and style. But even after I made the changes I thought she was asking for, she seemed unhappy.

Nevertheless, we pressed on. But the same thing happened with article number two. Only this time, Jane made no secret of her disappointment in my performance.

I was mortified. Not only was one of my worst business fears coming true—I was failing to make a client happy—but I was failing to make a referral client happy. The person who introduced me to Jane was someone I deeply respected, so I buckled down with renewed commitment to get the third article right no matter what.

I failed. She hated it. By this time, she wasn't even polite about it anymore.

OK, let me just say that I'm a decent writer. I've won an Emmy. My articles have been featured in countless publications over the last decade. So while I'm sure there were things I did wrong and just couldn't see, in

my estimation at the time, I was doing the best I could with what was some pretty vague direction. I asked Jane clarifying questions and tried to get at the real issues she was having with my work, but again and again, we failed to come to understanding.

This is what I want you to pay attention to here: Neither of us was at fault.

Was she a cryptic communicator? Yes, I think she was. But was I also perhaps not skilled enough to read between the lines and understand what she wanted? No question.

The last email I got from Jane was a notice of receipt for the third article. No edits, no attempt to salvage the work. Just a thank you and a request for my invoice.

Is the Customer Always Right?

So when we say, “The customer is always right,” what does that mean?

In the days when I was a waitress at a steak restaurant, it meant that no matter what they asked for or how they asked for it, the people who were paying for their meal got their way.

Now as a business owner, I’ve come to understand that this phrase means something slightly different. Yes, the customer is always right, but not because they get all their demands met or they get to be dictators about timelines or processes or fees. The customer is right because ultimately the customer is the only one who can say if they’re happy or not.

Customer satisfaction can only be judged by one person: the customer.

Jane was unhappy. It didn’t matter how good of a writer I was or how hard I had tried to understand her conceptual directions. It didn’t matter that just about every other client I’ve ever had has been not just happy, but thrilled with the work my team and I have done for them.

As the customer, Jane was right about her level of satisfaction.

So what if she hadn’t fired me? Should I have tried to keep her?

Let me tell you what would have happened.

Since that time, I’ve encountered another Jane. A customer who I have not been able to please. A customer who insists that she is dissatisfied. And let me tell you, I have no problem letting her be right and therefore, letting her go.

Slamming your head against the wall trying to make someone happy after you’ve given them your best doesn’t help either you or your client. You’re keeping your customer from seeking help from someone who might actually be able to help her. And you’re keeping yourself from being of service to people who want what you have to offer in the way you have to offer it.

The customer may be right, but that doesn’t mean you’re wrong. It may just not be a good fit.

In the end, Jane was right to not hire me again.

I will never please all people. Neither will you. The question is, how long are you going to beat yourself up about it before you set yourself and your customer free?