



HOW TO TELL WHEN A CLIENT HAS HAD ENOUGH OF YOU

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It's a truism that successful firms are usually built on the back of solid long-term clients. And once a client has been with you for a while you usually forge a relationship of mutual respect and trust - sometimes even friendship.

So when a long-standing client ups sticks and leaves, it can have a profound effect on both your bottom line, team morale and, let's face it, sometimes even your own sense of worth.

Because of this, many professionals, such as lawyers and accountants, can become paranoid about their clients ending the relationship. They start to see every small misunderstanding as a potential signal that the client will leave them. And they work themselves up into a ball of nervous anxiety, anticipating that the door will open at any minute.

I'm here to tell you, hard as it may seem, that a bit of client turnover is natural. Better still, many of the signs you might interpret as a client looking for a way out could be something else.

For instance, if your key contact initiates a difficult conversation about a recent project don't rush to assume they're about to swing the axe. Instead, they're probably looking to save you. (In my experience clients who genuinely are about to leave, don't waste time having in-depth discussions with the professionals they don't want to use.) Even questioning a bill to justify expenses to their accounts department is often done for your benefit, not theirs.

With that in mind, here are the 6 signs I think it's worth looking for if you want to really know whether a client is about to go, as well as quick guide on how to react if you want to save them.

1. They Start To Nitpick

One of the first signals unhappy clients start to give off is nitpicking. I don't mean when they challenge your opinion or suggest you come up with a different approach. I mean when they really start to sweat the small stuff - looking for fault just for the sake of it.

Nitpicking comes when someone suddenly becomes overly concerned by, say, formatting or syntax or the way something is presented. It also happens when someone harks back to something from the past and starts looking for small errors or ambiguities that really has no bearing on things. Often they're just looking for a reason to justify getting out, even if it's only to themselves.

That said, not all client nitpicking is a sign that someone is about to walk. Some people are just born pernickety (see 5 below). But if it begins to happen in an obvious way, or a way that's out of character, the red flags should start to be raised.

2. They Go Silent

As I mentioned at the start of the article, departing clients often don't waste their breath giving you a dressing down or scheduling a meeting to tell you why they're going. They just sever ties. So a solid sign they could be walking is when they start ignoring your calls and emails.



Again, however, ignoring you doesn't necessarily mean they're definitely going to leave. They could just be busy. But if you try to contact them at regular intervals over a couple of months and they never get back to you, chances are you're being ignored for a reason.

3. They Get Someone Else To Deal With You

Deflecting queries to someone else is a tried and true technique of the departing client. So one strong signal is when you've tried to get in touch and they get someone else to call you back - usually an underling.

Sure, this may be because they don't have the time and your questions require a relatively urgent response. But, if you're used to dealing with the one person and they suddenly stick someone more junior in their place, it could be a sign.

The same goes for meetings: if the senior people stop coming and the juniors take over you may be onto something.

4. They Start Paying Late

Another sign a client is considering going happens when your invoices stop receiving the same priority they used to. Happy clients often (but not always) want their advisers to receive their payment when it's due. If you used to get paid on time and now have to chase every bill, you could have a problem on your hands. Then again, this one may be the result of changed internal processes.

5. A Personality Change Takes Place

Ever experienced that client who goes from affable and gregarious to cold and direct? Yep? Well, that's another signal. If you're used to in-depth conversations and then you're suddenly getting 'yes/no' answers, or if you've come to expect a bit of banter but now it's all about business, you could be on the outer.

Again, however, you need to exercise a bit of caution here. Not all directness shows someone is about to cut and run. Some people simply are direct, especially when they're busy and under stress. What's important is a change in behaviour and why it's happening. Here a little bit of [understanding about the temperament](#) of the person you're dealing with can help out.

6. They Start Seeing (Or Liking) Other People

Have you noticed your clients liking your rivals' posts on LinkedIn? Have they been taking snaps at their events and posting them with a caption "Really excited to be at ABC's talk on XYZ #bestlawyersever"?

OK, forget the hashtag but you get my point. If they're openly cavorting with your rival, it's a sign.

7. What Should You Do Next?

One of these in isolation could be explained away. But three or more? I reckon you've got a problem. So what can you do about it?



My first advice is to relax and take a deep breath because, you know what? Chances are they'll be back. Time heals all wounds, even those between a professional and their client.

Besides, you can only control 50% of your relationship with them - and that's your own actions.

For this reason, I'd suggest letting them know you're still around in a tactful way. Email them with interesting articles you've written. Keep inviting them to your training and invite them to your seminars. Call them at regular intervals (regular long intervals - we're not harassing here), just to see how they're getting on. Keep them on your Christmas card list. Watch news about their business and send them a 'congrats' note for successes and keep an eye on changes in their teams and KPIs. ([Ask Google to let you know when things crop up](#)).

And, perhaps most importantly, include them in your client feedback surveys. After all, if they're prepared to go through this it's usually a good sign. And, if they use the client feedback session to state their problems, use the information to your advantage. Address issues where you can and learn from what you've done.

That way you can maintain good relations with the rest of your client base and potentially win these guys back when you can prove you do things differently.

Want More?

If you'd like to know how client feedback can help your professional services firm, get in touch.



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