

Five Steps to Building a Better Client Base

By Nicholas De Salvo

So, it is that time. You are a working designer who has built a solid portfolio. You are as experienced generating concepts as you are comfortable sending them to print. You have carefully weighed your options and are finally ready to begin working for yourself. Congratulations! Now what do you do?

Assuming you are equipped to handle the administrative functions of trekking out on your own (which is another article in itself), the next step is to begin building a client base. However, if you want to be successful in this highly competitive profession, you must not only build a client base, but you must build a solid client base. To help you on your way, I have compiled five tips for building and improving your client base that I have found useful in my own work:

1 **Form Partnerships with Other Vendors:**

When I was first getting started, my company was able to secure a contract with four major print centers which referred all of their clients who needed graphic design and typesetting work to us. In turn, we would complete the project and send the job back to the center to be printed. Not only did this provide us with a steady workflow, but we also established valuable relationships with new clients who would trust us with work in the future.

I highly recommend forming relationships with other vendors. Print shops often need designers who can provide them with print-ready files, small marketing and public relations firms often need a reliable designer they can send work to, and many designers get overloaded with work and would love to pass some on to others in need of it. Get out there, make friends, build relationships and you will find good work.

2 **Network, Network, Network!**

As you grow your list of contacts, you will find that something good starts to happen; you will gain momentum. When you build relationships you will find that the best way to gain new clients is through your established ones. Be clear to all of your clients about the services you offer and they will remember you the next time they hear of someone with a need you can fulfill.

3 **Charge What You Are Worth.**

This is one of the most difficult things for a designer when they first begin to freelance. Inevitably, the temptation to discount your work will always come. The most frequent phone call I get is one where the prospective client needs something "simple" but really means "cheap." Resist temptation. While there are times when these phone calls can lead to valuable client relationships, the majority will often lead to more calls asking for discounted work.

Run the numbers beforehand. Establish your pricing and be clear about it with your clients. If you find that you absolutely must accept discounted offers, clearly represent how much you would normally charge and mark the discounts on the final invoice. This way, your clients will at least know what you would usually charge when they recommend you to others.

4 **Learn How to Say No.**

Learning how to decline projects is an integral part of working on your own. Bad projects eat your time, create frustration, and cost you money. Establish your criteria for accepting a project and stick to it. You are much better off seeking and planning for the right job, than you are accepting the wrong one. Accepting only the good jobs will help you network with the right kind of clients and produce better work for you in the future.

5 **Stay Focused.**

Focus! Focus! Focus! This is more of a tip for internal use than it is to outwardly seek clients. However, it is the most important advice I can give. So many projects remain incomplete because designers lose focus and turn their attention elsewhere. Whatever your goals are, write them down, create a plan, and stay focused on achieving them. Designers who run a tight ship are almost always the ones who achieve success in this industry. •

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About the Author

Nicholas De Salvo is the Creative Director for Edge One Solutions, a refreshing design company, online and in print. Visit Edge One Solutions at www.edge-one.com.

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