

The Independent Creative's Guide to Better Clients

A field guide for freelance designers, writers, photographers and small studios

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The Independent Creative's Guide to Better Clients

How to find, keep and, when the time comes, leave the people you do your best work for.

Every independent creative can name their best client without thinking, and their worst one even faster. The gap between the two is rarely about budget or industry. It is about fit: whether the client knows what they want, trusts you to help them get there, and treats the work as a shared project rather than a purchase they are supervising.

This guide is about spending more of your working year with the first kind. It is written for freelance designers, writers, photographers and small studios, and it is deliberately practical: a question to ask, a sentence to send, a page to rewrite. None of it needs a sales team or a new personality. It needs you to decide, in advance, how you want to work, and then to say so, kindly and early.



Most of the work in this guide happens before the work: on a page like this one.

Decide who the work is for

Better clients rarely arrive by luck. They arrive because something you published, said or showed told them, before you ever spoke, that you were the right person for a particular kind of problem.

The uncomfortable truth about most portfolios is that they are menus, and people order what is on them. If your site shows a wedding, a pharmaceutical brochure, a band poster and a fintech dashboard, you will be asked for more of all four, at whatever price the last client paid. If it shows six projects for independent food producers, you will start to hear from independent food producers, and they will arrive already believing you understand their world.

Edit the portfolio like a menu

Go through your published work and ask one question of each piece: would I be glad to do this again, for this kind of client, at a better fee? Keep the yeses. Archive the rest, even the beautiful ones. A project you are proud of but would not repeat is a polite invitation to the wrong enquiry.

Then write down what the survivors have in common. It might be a sector, a stage of business, a type of problem or a tone of voice. A designer who keeps only the projects she loved may discover they were all for founders in their first two years, people who needed a whole identity rather than a refresh. That is a positioning, and it was hiding in the archive all along.

Write the sentence

Positioning does not need a workshop. It needs one sentence you can say out loud without wincing: I help a particular kind of client, in a particular situation, reach a particular outcome, usually by a particular method.

> **Example**
> “I photograph small-batch food and drink producers who are moving from markets into shops, so their packaging looks as good as the product tastes.” Or: “I write the websites of architecture practices that are better at buildings than at describing them.”

Notice what these sentences leave out. They do not list services or claim to be passionate. They describe a moment in someone else’s business, and a stranger in that moment recognises themselves. That recognition does most of the qualifying for you, weeks before the first call, and it gives the people who already like you an easy way to describe you to someone else.

PUBLISH HOW YOU WORK

The second filter is a short, plain page on your site called something like “Working together”. It is the conversation you would otherwise have on every first call, written once and read in advance by the people who are serious. It should cover five things:

Who it is for.	Your sentence, then the two or three kinds of project you take on most often.
How a project runs.	The stages in order, roughly how long each takes, and where the client is involved.
Where fees begin.	A starting figure for a typical project. It will put some people off, which is the point.
What you need from them.	One decision-maker, timely feedback, and access to the people and material the work depends on.
What you do not do.	Rush jobs, unpaid pitches, or whatever reliably makes your work worse.

A page like this narrows the funnel, and the people it turns away were going to cost you more than they paid. The ones who still write after reading it arrive half-qualified, already agreeing with your process. Update it whenever you notice yourself explaining the same thing twice on a call.

Qualify before you quote

The most expensive mistake an independent makes is not a bad project. It is the week of unpaid work before a bad project: the call, the moodboard, the detailed proposal for someone who was never going to hire you, or who should not have.

Qualifying is not gatekeeping. It is the short, honest exchange in which both of you find out whether there is a project here worth pricing. Done well, it feels like care to the right client and like clarity to the wrong one.

ANSWER THE ENQUIRY WITH QUESTIONS

When an enquiry arrives, resist the urge to send a price or book a call straight away. Reply warmly and ask a few questions in writing. Their answers, and how quickly and carefully they give them, will tell you more than an hour on video.

What prompted this now?	Projects with a real trigger, such as a launch, a funding round or a new shop, move. Projects without one drift.
What does a good result look like?	Listen for an outcome you can influence, not just a list of deliverables.
Who decides, and who else has a say?	Meet the co-founder and the partner with opinions before the first presentation, not during it.
What budget have you set aside?	A range is fine. Refusing to give any number at all usually means the number is very small.
When do you need it, and why then?	A date with a reason is a plan. A date without one is a mood.

Keep the tone light. You are not sending a questionnaire, you are showing that you think before you quote. Good clients tend to enjoy this. Many of them have been let down by suppliers who said yes to everything and understood nothing, and a few careful questions are the first sign that you are different.

RUN THE DISCOVERY CALL

If the answers suggest a fit, book a call of thirty to forty-five minutes and send a short agenda the day before. Then run it the same way every time, which makes calls easier to compare and much easier to lead.

1	**Restate what you heard.** Summarise their written answers in two sentences and ask what you got wrong.
2	**Ask about the trigger.** Go one level deeper on why now. The real reason is often the second one.
3	**Find the measure.** Ask how they will know, six months later, that this was money well spent.
4	**Walk through your process.** Stages, involvement, feedback rounds. Watch for discomfort.
5	**Name the budget.** Say where projects like this usually land for you and ask if that is in range.
6	**Agree the next step.** A proposal by a named date, or a friendly no. Never leave it vague.

The budget step is the one most people skip, because it feels rude. It is far ruder to spend a day writing a proposal that is three times what they can spend. Say it plainly: “Projects like this usually fall between these two figures for me. Is that roughly where you were thinking?” Then stop talking, and let the silence do its work.

Read the signals

Most of what you need to know shows up in small things on the first call. One signal decides nothing; two or three pointing the same way deserve your attention.

On the call	Green flag	Red flag
The brief	They describe a problem and ask how you would approach it	They send a finished layout and ask you to “just make it nice”
The budget	A range, even a rough one, offered without a fight	“We’ll know it when we see the quote”
The deadline	A date with a reason behind it	Urgency that nobody can explain
Decisions	One named person who can say yes	A committee you will never meet
Past suppliers	They explain what went wrong and what they learned	Every previous designer was “a nightmare”

When the red column fills up, you do not need to be dramatic. Say thank you, say it does not sound like the right fit at the moment, and suggest someone else if you can. A no given early is a gift to both of you. A no given after three rounds of revisions is a dispute.

Scope it, then start well

A proposal is not a price. It is the first piece of work you do for a client, and the one they use to imagine what working with you will feel like. A tidy, specific proposal says the project will be tidy and specific. A vague one says the opposite, and no fee will fix that impression.

Write the proposal in their words

Open with a short summary of the situation in the client's own language, taken from your call notes: their problem, their trigger, their measure of success. When a client reads their own words back on the first page, they relax, and everything that follows reads as a response rather than a pitch.

Then describe what you will make, in nouns. "A brand identity" is not a noun anyone can check. "A primary logo, a secondary mark, a colour palette, two typefaces and a twelve page guidelines document" is. Offer three options rather than one figure: a single price invites the question "can you do it for less?", while three invite "which of these fits us?"

> TIP
> Add a paragraph of exclusions, naming what clients most often assume is included: copywriting, photography, extra rounds of changes, social templates. End it with "Any of these can be added as a separate piece of work, priced before it starts."

The way the document is built changes too. Most independents start with the first version below, and graduate to the second after one awkward project too many.

Old way

- Opens with credentials, a studio history and a wall of client logos
- One price, with a long list of deliverables underneath
- Revisions described as "unlimited within reason"
- Payment terms tucked away on the last page

New way

- Opens with the client's situation, in their own words
- Three options, each solving a clearly different problem
- A fixed number of feedback rounds, defined in plain language
- Deposit, schedule and what happens if dates slip, on page one

Make the yes easy

Close with a single next step: sign, pay the deposit, and the start date is held. Give the proposal a validity of two or three weeks, explained rather than threatened: your calendar fills, and you would rather hold their slot than lose it. Follow up once, on the day you said you would. Clients who need chasing at the proposal stage usually need chasing for feedback and invoices too.

THE FIRST FIVE DAYS

A project's tone is set in its first working week. Clients form their view of you from small moments: how fast the first message arrives, whether anything is asked of them twice, whether they know what is happening without having to ask. Within a day of the deposit, send a welcome that confirms the money, sets the dates and promises a rhythm:

"Thank you, the deposit is in and your start date of the 3rd is held. By Wednesday I will send a short questionnaire and a list of the material I need. The following Monday we have a ninety-minute kickoff. After that you will hear from me every Friday with a short note on where things stand."

Then keep a shape like this one. Adjust the days but keep the order:

- Day 1: Welcome email sent, contract and invoice filed, a shared folder created with a clear name.
- Day 2: Questionnaire and materials list sent. Ask only for what you will use in the next fortnight.
- Day 3: Read everything they have sent, and note the gaps rather than chasing them one by one.
- Day 4: Kickoff call. Confirm the goal, the decision-maker, the feedback dates and the one thing that must not go wrong.
- Day 5: The first Friday note. Three lines: what happened, what happens next, what you need from them.

At the kickoff, ask the question most people avoid: "What would make you regret hiring me?" A founder might say she fears the brand will turn too precious for a company that sells hardware. Both of you now know where to be careful. And keep the Friday note going, even in weeks when nothing visible happened. Especially in those weeks, because silence is where doubt grows.

Feedback and the creeping scope

Most client relationships do not break on a big moment. They erode through feedback that is late, vague or contradictory, and through small requests that each seemed too minor to price. Both are easier to prevent than to fix, and both come down to structure and to having the right words ready.

Ask for the feedback you need

"What do you think?" is the worst question you can ask after a presentation. It invites taste, and taste invites the whole office. Ask instead for feedback against the goal you agreed at the kickoff, in a form that is easy to act on.

1. **Present before you send.** Walk the client through the work live, so they hear the reasoning before they react.
2. **Restate the goal first.** Open with the problem and the measure you agreed, so the work is judged against them.
3. **Ask three specific questions.** What works, what feels wrong for the goal, and what is missing.
4. **Collect it in one place.** One consolidated document from the decision-maker, not a thread of opinions.
5. **Set the date.** Agree when feedback will arrive and what happens to the schedule if it is late.

The fourth point does more work than it looks. When feedback comes from one person who has already reconciled the team's views, you stop being the referee between the marketing director and the founder's business partner. If the client cannot consolidate, that is useful information too, and worth raising early rather than quietly absorbing round after round.

Define a round in the proposal, in words a busy person will remember: one consolidated set of comments, answered with one revised version. Two rounds suit most identity and editorial work. A third is a sign the brief has moved, and a moved brief is a conversation about scope, not about patience.

When one small thing arrives

Scope creep almost never announces itself. It arrives as a friendly message on a Thursday: could you just do a version for Instagram, could you also look at the brochure, could the copy be a little longer. Each request is small. Together they turn a profitable project into a loss and a willing supplier into a resentful one.

The fix is not to refuse. It is to make every addition visible, priced and chosen, using the sentence you planted in the proposal. The difference is mostly in the wording.

DO

- “Happy to. That sits outside the current scope, so I’ll send a short quote today.”
- “We can add it now and move the launch by a week, or keep it for phase two.”
- “That’s a good idea for the next piece of work. Shall I add it to the list?”

DON'T

- “Sure, no problem, I’ll squeeze it in.”
- “Normally I’d charge for that, but just this once.”
- Silence, followed by an invoice nobody expected

KEEP A GOODWILL ACCOUNT

None of this means being rigid. Most experienced independents keep a quiet goodwill account: small favours they choose to give, deliberately and visibly, because the relationship is worth it. The difference between a favour and creep is that you decide, and the client knows. “I’ve fixed the typo on the old flyer as well, no charge” builds trust. Doing it silently, then doing the next three silently, builds a client who believes the work is free, and a version of you who starts to dread their name in your inbox.

A favour is something you choose to give.
Scope creep is something you forgot to price.

Rates, endings and referrals

Every independent eventually notices that their existing clients pay less than new ones. You raise the price on new proposals, the old clients stay where they were, and one day your favourite long-term client is also your worst-paid one. Resentment follows, quietly, and it shows in the work.

RAISE THE RATE WITH NOTICE

The signs that your rates have fallen behind:

- You win almost every proposal you send, and nobody ever negotiates.
- Your newest clients pay noticeably more than your oldest for the same work.
- You are fully booked, yet cannot afford to turn down work you dislike.
- Your skills, speed or reputation have grown since you last set the rate.

Give two or three months' notice, in writing, without apology: "From the 1st of March my day rate for new work moves to the figure below. I've kept your rate unchanged for two years and wanted you to hear this well ahead of your planning. Nothing else about how we work changes." Do not justify it with software costs, which invites a negotiation about your expenses. If a client pushes back, offer time or a smaller scope rather than a lower rate. A half-raise only means having the conversation twice.

> TIP
> Raise rates at a natural boundary: a new year, a new phase of work or the end of a retainer term. A change that arrives with a fresh scope feels like part of the project rather than a toll on it.

END IT GRACEFULLY

Some relationships should not last. The worst way to leave is slowly: answering later, quoting higher in the hope they will go. It feels gentler. It is not, and it costs you the reference you might otherwise have kept.

1. **Finish what is in flight.** Close the current phase properly before you go.
2. **Tell them in person first.** A short call, then an email confirming it. Not the other way round.
3. **Give a reason that is true and kind.** "My work is moving towards identity, and I'm no longer the right person for ongoing campaigns."
4. **Hand over generously.** Source files, a short handover note and, if you can, two people you would recommend.

The handover note is where you show who you are: where everything lives, what is half-finished, what to watch out for. A client who receives one remembers you as a professional, whatever came before, and professionals get referred.

Not every exit can be planned. When the work has become unhealthy, through missed payments, personal criticism or constant manufactured emergencies, the same steps apply with shorter notice and a firmer tone. Stop at the end of the last paid phase, say so in writing, and keep every message calm enough to be read aloud. If money is owed, ask once, clearly, with a date, and decide in advance what you will do if it passes.

MAKE REFERRALS A HABIT

The clients you keep are your best source of the next ones. They are usually glad to recommend you. They simply forget, or do not know who to send your way.

Ask at the high point.	At launch, when the client is proud of the work, not three months later.
Be specific about who.	“If you meet another founder opening a second shop, I’d love an introduction.”
Make it easy to forward.	Keep a short paragraph about what you do, written for a stranger, ready to paste.
Close the loop.	Thank the referrer whether or not the work happens, and tell them how it went.

None of this is a system you install once. It is a practice, and it gets easier each time. Pick one thing from these pages, perhaps the enquiry questions or the Friday note, and use it on the next project that comes in. In a year, look down your client list and count the names you are glad to see.

Better clients are not found so much as chosen, and then kept.

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