

15 signs a client is taking unfair advantage of you



L-R: David Wescott, Brian Bond, Paul Weber, Janet Holliday, Brock Berry, John Maroon, Jason Dunn, Joy Frestedt, Brett Farmiloe, Andrea Turnipseed, Zee Ali, Rachel Namoff, Katie Wahlquist, Lane Conner, Brent Foley



The Business Journals Leadership Trust By Business Journals Leadership Trust Expert Panel®

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Relationships between a business and its clients aren't often truly "equal." However, in an ideal world, both parties should work together so that each receives a fair benefit. Sometimes, business leadership feels undervalued or overworked by a client, but they

don't want to lose their business. Still, if the relationship is unfairly balanced and the client won't budge, it may be time to move on.

We asked members of [Business Journals Leadership Trust](#) for the signs that a client relationship is unfairly balanced and should be ended by the business for its own good. Here's what they had to say.

1. The contract sets you up to fail.

I was recently awarded a plumbing contract that expanded over seven states for a Fortune 100 client, but they wanted us to guarantee unclogged toilets for five days after cleaning. That would have set us up to fail and would have cost us lots of money. In fact, we would have lost money, so we turned down the multimillion-dollar contract. - [David Wescott, Transblue](#)

2. The client is pushing for extended payment terms.

If a client knows they are the largest customer, they may take the position that payment for services will be made on terms that are favorable for the customer and not you, the provider. Extended accounts receivable can strain a company. In this case, the company/service provider should strive to lower their client concentration. - [Brian Bond, Strategic Business Brokers Group](#)

3. The client frequently asks for discounts.

Businesses that ask for discounts simply to get "a better deal" create an imbalanced relationship between the company and the customer. A business relationship should be based on the fair market value for a product or service. Asking for a discount without consideration for the company's pricing model says that the customer doesn't appreciate the value of the company's product or service. - [Paul Weber, EAG Advertising & Marketing](#)

4. There's a lack of teamwork and collaboration.

Teamwork and collaboration are the desired outcomes everyone wants with a client or customer. This involves a clear expectation of roles, goals and accountability. When a relationship is missing this sense of trust or clarity, it leads to a lack of respect and ineffectiveness. It is key to strengthen the relationship through open communication and strategy. - [Janet Holliday, The CE Group, Inc.](#)

5. Your team members are unhappy.

Most people would measure this based on the profitability of the relationship. That's a consideration, but another way to measure it is based on the "drag coefficient" for your team. Some clients can be abusive, time-consuming and detrimental to the team's morale. Bad-actor customers can cause unhappy team members who are now unhappy when they're talking to good customers. - [Brock Berry, AdCellerant](#)

6. You feel like a vendor, not a partner.

We know pretty quickly things have gone south when we start feeling like a vendor. While we are a vendor, our best relationships are when we are treated as a valued part of the team versus as an outsider. This often takes time, especially if the client hasn't previously used an agency. - [John Maroon, Maroon PR](#)

7. The customer makes unexpected demands.

When customers make demands that are out of line with the core values or stated processes of the business, the relationship between the customer and the business should be reevaluated. Perhaps greater communication is warranted to illustrate the values and practices of the business, or perhaps the customer is the wrong fit for the business. - [Jason Dunn, CFA, DACS Asphalt & Concrete](#)

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8. The client refuses your advice.

When a client refuses your advice, a company has two choices: First, assign the advice to noncritical discussion or second, escalate all critical discussions to senior management. If senior management is unable to resolve critical disagreements, then end the relationship. If I've learned one thing in the past 12-plus years of running my own business, it's that I need to stop toxic relationships ASAP. - [Joy Frestedt, Frestedt Incorporated](#)

9. Employees are sharing negative experiences.

Employees on the front lines will usually tell you when a client relationship is unfairly balanced. As a leader, you just need to listen to those people who are sharing their experiences. Then, it's on you to investigate further by having a conversation with the client and coming to an ultimate resolution. Listen to the team and act on their suggestions. - [Brett Farmiloe, Markitors](#)

10. The client has become toxic to your organization.

When the customer becomes toxic to the organization, the relationship must be ended. Toxicity is determined by the organization, but employees and the culture of the company must not suffer for one client, no matter the cost of the deal. If an exception is made for one client, the organization has increased its tolerance for discomfort and will risk a cultural shift in values. - [Andrea Turnipseed, Roots Behavioral Health](#)

11. The relationship does not generate win-win benefits.

When the relationship is not profitable for either side – if there isn't enough of a win-win or long-term benefit – then that's a sure sign it's time to say goodbye. When one side is having to suffer financial consequences or when one side is experiencing scope creep, it's not a beneficial relationship anymore. - [Zee Ali, Z-Swag](#)

12. Too many resources are consumed.

When a large number of resources – such as time, money or human capital – are being vacuum-sucked from either side of the relationship, it is likely unfairly balanced. It is worthwhile to evaluate client interactions on a regular basis – quarterly or semi-annually – and assess which relationships are a “go” and which are a “no.” - [Rachel Namoff, Arapaho Asset Management](#)

13. The client is consistently late to meetings.

Mutual reliability is an important component of building trust and is at the core of any good relationship. When a client or employee is often late for meetings or when communications are “ghosted,” it’s a demonstration that the relationship is not as important to that person as it should be. Continuous disrespect of one’s time begs the question of whether the relationship is mutually beneficial. - [Katie Wahlquist, Star Bank](#)

14. There’s a lack of respect or trust.

Dishonesty and not treating people the way they should be treated are two easy ways to ruin a relationship. Relationships are built on trust and respect, both in business and in your personal life. Lose those and you are left with something that is transactional, not relational. - [Lane Conner, Fuzse](#)

15. The client doesn’t pay on time.

One of the clearest signs that your client doesn’t value you is that they don’t pay you in a timely fashion. Clients who value you understand that good service has a cost, and they are happy to quickly pay you as they have agreed to in their contract. Our best, enduring clients pay us quickly, without question. We take this as a great compliment! - [Brent Foley, TRIAD Architects](#)