

The Theory of the Hairy Arm

Many years ago I had the privilege of doing some work for a vice president of marketing — I'll call him Joe — who was, without doubt, the nicest executive I've ever met. (Yes, I know I just damaged my curmudgeonly reputation by admitting this.) Joe was close to retirement when I met him. He'd been a marketing exec for about a zillion years, and had great stories to share. This is about one of them.

Part of what made Joe special was that he saw the people who worked for him (both staff and independent professionals) as real human beings, not just as chess pieces to help him achieve his goals. He seemed to have a permanently rosy view of human nature. In spite of this, I never tried to take advantage of him — that would have made me feel like a heel. Nonetheless, to tell you the truth, I did think Joe was a little naive; I thought he was incapable of understanding that people might try to take advantage of his niceness, to manipulate him. I certainly never thought him capable of manipulating anyone else. One day I discovered I was wrong.

I used to present Joe with graphic-design layouts I had drawn. Inevitably, he would ask for some changes; that was a normal part of the design process. In fact, the opportunity for clients to make choices and revisions is the main reason you present layouts to them in the first place.

One day I showed Joe a layout that I had worked on long and hard. In addition to my layout drawing, there was a

headline I had written which I was quite proud of. Since he was an experienced copywriter, I was afraid he might change the headline.

Joe scrutinized the layout for a few minutes. Finally he said "I like it," and handed it back to me.

"You like it ..." I said, my voice trailing off. I didn't understand. "You like it and ..."

"And nothing. Do it."

"No changes?" He shook his head, no. I was in shock. Clients always made some kind of change. "Wow," I said. "I was afraid you were going to change the headline, but I was hoping you'd just change something trivial instead. It never occurred to me you wouldn't change anything."

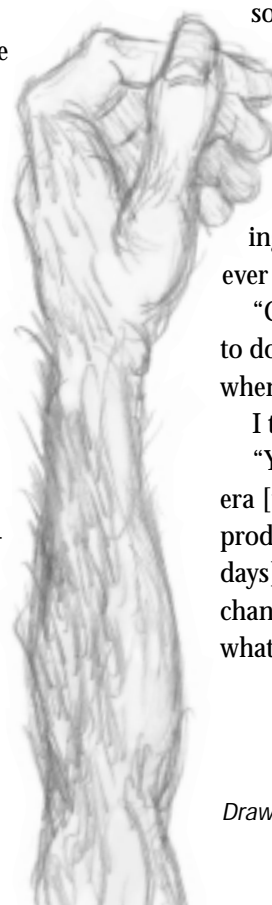
He smiled. "I've been doing this a long time," he said. "I don't need to 'put my stamp' on everything. But most clients always do, don't they?" I nodded my agreement, and he continued. "They have some kind of inner need to affect every project in some way, no matter how minor — so they can feel it was theirs, that they're a part-author of it, that they're in control, that they made a difference."

"I've never heard anybody say that out loud before," I told him, admiringly. "How did you know that? Were you ever a freelancer?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "Did you know I used to do graphic-arts production, decades ago when I was a young man like you?"

I told him I hadn't known.

"Yes," he said, "and we had this stat camera [used to make photographic layouts or production duplicates in pre-computer days]. And we had this client who had to change something on every piece, no matter what. Usually he would ruin it. So the other



Drawings by the author

Once upon a time there was a very nice executive who remembered a strange little theory from his freelancing days. San ... ahem ... arms you with a psychological trick for manipulating clients.

freelancers and I devised this technique. We called it the hairy arm.” To demonstrate, Joe rolled up one of his sleeves and flourished ... a hairy arm.

To say Joe had my undivided attention would be something of an understatement. I waited for him to continue.

“Well, when I made a photostat, I would ‘accidentally’ have my arm intrude into the picture area when I snapped the shutter. Then when I presented the client with the stat, there would be the image of my hairy arm on one side, partially overlapping the ad. The guy would look at it, and he’d say, ‘What the hell is that hairy arm doing in there?’”

Joe grinned at the memory and went on. “I’d say, ‘Arm? Oh, that. I didn’t notice that.’ And he’d say, ‘Get that arm out of there! You can’t leave a hairy arm in there!’”

“And then, as he was stalking self-righteously away, I’d call after him, ‘When I remove the arm can we go into production?’ and he’d call over his shoulder, ‘Yes, but get that arm out of there first!’ Then I’d hear him muttering, ‘These people! You’ve got to watch them like a hawk!’”

Joe was laughing now, and I was laughing with him. “Telling me to take out the arm satisfied him,” he said, “so he didn’t change anything important.” He rolled his sleeve back down. “You should always put a hairy arm into every project you work on, to give the client something to change. Of course, you’ve got to make the arm dumb enough so they’ll be sure to see it and object.”

That’s how I discovered that even a gentle, straightforward soul like Joe was capable of a little deviousness and manipulation. Unless he was just kidding and the whole story was a joke. I never did find out.

As my freelance career progressed, I learned not to be bothered by the changes most clients make. In fact, not taking revisions personally is part of becoming truly professional. However, occasionally I’d run into a client who seemed to have some compulsive inner need to make arbitrary, almost random changes to my work. It didn’t feel like just a control-freak thing — more like a dog who has to “mark” every tree and fire hydrant with his scent, to establish his ownership of the territory. In extreme cases like these, I’d occasionally remember Joe and try to put his hairy-arm theory into practice. Sometimes it worked, though I discovered that it had some drawbacks:

(1) The client might like the arm, and then you’re stuck with it.

(2) You can never predict with certainty what someone will actually focus on. No matter how well you think you know a client, you can’t really know what’s in her mind or predict what her reaction will be to every detail. Second-guessing can burn up a lot of energy without giving you any more control.

(3) If you throw too many hairy arms around, you’ll get a reputation for being sloppy. Or at least hairy.

As a result of these drawbacks, I don’t actually use the hairy arm much. But somehow, in a way I can’t really explain, I’ve found it valuable for helping me to understand the way people think — or maybe I just like it because I think it’s funny. **1099**

This is probably the mildest column San ever wrote. For lots more *inSANity*, including the hard stuff, web yourself to 1099.com/insanity (but don’t say we didn’t warn you).

