

If you're a soloist, you've got clients ... and that means, sooner or later, you've got arguments. Your goal shouldn't necessarily be to win a debate — there are many ways to turn the inevitable collisions with the big suit to your own advantage. Independent professionals: welcome to the wonderful world of IP/client conflict psychology.

REARRANGE YOUR CLIENT'S BRAIN



Bad ideas. Sooner or later, everyone dreams up one or two of 'em. But what happens when a genuine grade-C clunker takes possession of your most ... ah ... lucrative client? The guy invites you to visit his office. He shakes your hand, gets a big grin on his face, and then introduces you to the most astonishingly wrong-headed notion you've ever heard. He's clearly in love with his pet idea ... and you're, well, not. In fact, you're starting to sweat marbles and a little voice in your head is barking, "This guy's got it all wrong!"

What do you do? What can you do?

There are many possible answers. How you choose to respond to an off-kilter client will tell you a lot about yourself and your tolerance for conflict. Some independent professionals prefer to confront their clients directly and debate a point until one side wins. Other IPs seek ways to minimize conflict, perhaps by gently manipulating their clients into changing their minds. What about you? What will you do when the time comes to argue with a client? Read the following and you'll have — at the very least — plenty of options.

It Doesn't Always Pay to Be a Good Sport

Recently, marketing and PR consultant Kathleen Zemaitis faced a difficult business challenge. One of Zemaitis' clients — a sporting goods firm — contemplated selling its shin guards in large discount retailers like K-Mart and Wal-Mart. A bad move, Zemaitis thought. At that point, she had a major-league dilemma on her hands. She wanted to tell the company's CEO that she thought he was wrong. Logically, he should want to hear her viewpoint (why else hire a consultant in the first place?). But she didn't want to risk pissing him off. "It was a tough situation," she recalls.

Scenarios like this are common in business, but uncommonly tricky for IPs like Charlotte, North Carolina, resident Kathleen Zemaitis. On the one hand, her client pays her to speak her mind. After all, she presumably possesses expertise and skills that he needs and wants. On the other hand, Zemaitis' client is a big shot, and is used to getting his way. "Why should I let an outsider bully me into changing my mind?" he might have said to himself, just before punting her opinion downfield.

How did Zemaitis turn this iffy situation to her advantage? Let's go to the videotape.

by Mike Hofman

PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL WARREN & GARY CALLAHAN

ILLUSTRATION: LAWRENCE SAN



Find Evidence

If you're going to take on a client and tell him that he's making a serious blunder, the first thing you should do is find evidence. Zemaitis did — right in her client's target market. She aimed her camcorder at potential customers



Zemaitis: Show the tape

and, in the process, collected some persuasive data to strengthen her position.

Here's the background: The shin guard her client makes cannot be exposed to moisture prior to being removed from the package. For that reason, the product is sold in thick, two-ply, vacuum-sealed plastic bags. Shoppers can't actually see the product through the packaging.

Because of this, Zemaitis figured sales would stink. After all, Wal-Mart probably carries cheaper competitive products that kids could try on before they purchased them. Flat out, she told her client: "If they can't see it, they're not going to buy it." Especially since, as she points out, "at a K-Mart or a Wal-Mart there's no one there to help a customer — no one who will be really familiar with the product." But the shin guard magnate wasn't sold. He argued that he couldn't change the



packaging without exposing his product to moisture. "At that point, I said, 'If you can't get past the packaging hurdle, don't go there,'" Zemaitis recalls. "Still, they really wanted to be in K-Mart."

That's what we call an impasse.

To persuade her client that she was right, Zemaitis actually went to a big retailer armed with a video camera and some sample products. In the parking lot, she asked people for their feedback and videotaped them. "One by one, the customers said the same thing," Zemaitis says — exactly what she thought they would say. Zemaitis showed the tape to her client. The man on the street — or in the parking lot, actually — turned out to be the IP's perfect partner in crime.

You might think Zemaitis' turn behind the lens would infuriate her client. And in some situations, this sort of camcorder sneak attack could easily backfire. But Zemaitis says that, in most cases, a tape is exactly the kind of evidence she needs to persuade a client to change his mind. "I've done it a lot of times with a lot of different clients and I've never had a client say they didn't believe the customer tape," she says.

Find Allies

Other IPs look elsewhere to find a Robin to play opposite their Batman. Christian Harrison, a graphic designer and brand developer based in Provo, Utah, looks for a "like-minded person within the organization" for help. In many cases, that person is a creative director who is more familiar with Harrison's work — and his process — than a more senior executive might be. These intra-client moles are useful for Harrison because they can dish on their bosses. In talking to them, Harrison gets a valuable preview of objections that might be raised about his work. In one recent case, for example, the graphic designer was warned that he'd have to defend his use of bright purple in the design of a new Web site. Armed with this knowledge, he prepared a defense of the hue and carried the point when the top dog begged to quibble.

Harrison also uses his close contacts inside client organizations to ferret out the history behind a project over which

**Pressing the right buttons:
Manipulating angry clients is an artform**

he and a client might disagree. Hidden agendas abound, he reports. “What sometimes happens is that I find out the company invested a lot of money in a terrible design project, and they don’t want to feel like they’ve lost that money,” he explains. “They ask me to transfer as much of the bad work into my redesign as possible to get at least some return on that investment.” Of course, Harrison doesn’t want to work with some other designer’s failed work. It’s neither fulfilling for him nor good for the client. But only an insider would be able to tip him off to a client motivation as silly as recycling. An insider can also tell him how to adjust his design to include some little flourishes to assuage the client. “When you know exactly what the VP of marketing likes, you can pour in a few items to soften the blow,” Harrison explains. Again, the only way to get a catalog of a client’s idiosyncratic tastes (barring the psychic hotline) is to tap an insider. Just make sure you’re discrete, and don’t play two insiders against each other — or their boss.

Always remember that as an IP — a loner though you may be — you need to work well with others. When a dispute arises, don’t become a business-world vigilante. Rather, do a little behind-the-scenes work and market research. Use it to build consensus for your opinion. Allies can help you formulate, clarify, and explain why one idea — yours — is better than another one.

Don’t Choke on Consensus-Building

Of course, good ideas are often killed by well-meaning people, as anybody who’s ever tried to build consensus knows. So, while navigating through a dispute with a client, make sure you don’t inadvertently invite that person to meddle unnecessarily.

To make sure that his vision for a product prevails, designer Harrison has learned *not* to provide his clients with ammunition. What constitutes ammo, you ask? Rough drafts. For years, Harrison has kept them out of the view of his clients. “I like to take my drafts out of my client’s view because I need them to feel that all of my ideas are good,” Harrison says. “If clients see a draft that’s not so good, they’ll remember it and they’ll be trained to want a bigger role in each draft.” For the IP, this is a potential quagmire: “I need to be the person making the decisions,” he explains.

Another part of Harrison’s routine is that he makes

sure to compare notes with a client immediately after handing off one of his designs. “I don’t just email a client and let them make a decision,” he explains. “While they’re looking at a design I’ve done, I like to be on the phone with them, talking them through it.” Not only does this rapid Q&A session constitute good service, but it also gives Harrison the leg up in settling disputes in his favor. Before he lets clients off the phone, he can usually get them to agree to the basic principles of the design he’s worked up. Harrison thus robs his clients of time to develop (let alone cement) a differing point of view. It’s a sneaky but necessary tactic, he says. “Once a client has the idea that my work is different from what they expected, that response is difficult to massage,” Harrison explains. “Their reactions are quick-drying, so to speak.”

Know Thy Client

Why clients have certain reactions — “quick-drying” or otherwise — is actually another important point to consider. Too often, IPs fail to spend enough time learning the individual strategic difficulties of their clients. At

least, that’s the experience of William Bridges, author of *JobShift: How to Prosper in a Workplace without Jobs* — an influential 1995 book that predicted the rise of IPs in the United States. “Some free agents are so independent of mind that they have no appreciation of what a company is trying to achieve,” Bridges explains. “A free agent has to understand what the priorities and commitments of the organization are, and then he has to sell his ideas in terms of something a person in the organization wants to have happen. You can’t get an organization to change what it is.”

But be careful: knowing a client



What a sweetie — *after* you’ve properly reorganized his personality

— an organization — may be trickier than you think. For most IPs, clients fall into two categories: familiar, longtime clients, and new clients. Interestingly, IPs are likeliest to run into trouble with familiar clients, according to Bridges. If you've worked with an organization — maybe you've even been an employee of a client — “they may think they know you,” he says. In other words, an organization might come to believe that you're always trying to push them into something they don't want to do, and they might start ignoring your advice altogether. You may want to document the conversations you have with a client to see if a pattern like this is developing. You may also ask your allies within the organization if they think their bosses have a certain, set perception about your suggestions.

With new clients, of course, this isn't an issue: you're probably fairly unknown to them. But when a dispute arises, that lack of familiarity can cause a different problem: clients may think your opinion is the result of not knowing them well enough. On the other hand, this can be an opening for you, if you manage the conversation properly.

One IP who does this expertly is Geoffrey Meek, a Web consultant who lives in Winchester, Massachusetts. Meek has helped more than a dozen companies devise and implement Web strategies. He actually uses disagreements with a client to learn more about them. One tactic he relies on is referencing a previous job in order to bolster his case for proceeding in a certain direction. “If I mention a former client, what happens next is that the client says ‘This is why we're different from that,’” Meek says. But far from being fearful of this response, Meek actually uses it to learn about those “wants and needs” that Bridges says IPs ought to consider more carefully.

To Meek, a previous client's job — or any other relevant examples or analogies — are useful as specific reference points. “I usually talk about any kind of reference point that I can,” he says. Not only that, but if the client explains why his company is different from one for which Meek has previously built a Web site, Meek pays close attention. After all, he says, “They might be right.”



Meek: Learning mode

Sit on Your Ego

Don't let the name fool you: Meek doesn't let his clients push him around. Quite the contrary. “My clients know that if they want to keep working with me, they have to do things my way,” he says. “But frankly, with business models changing so rapidly, I'm never sure that I know exactly what's right.” A good IP

I'm your client and you're annoying me so cut it out okay?

Hey, I never said I was MINE

the client is a fool and the idea has no merit; ha ha ha!

can you back up that statement? you're annoying me

DON'T BE A KNOW-IT-ALL

WHAT'S YOUR GOAL ANYWAY?

DISAGREE

TRANSLATION: BE A WIMP, KISS YOUR CLIENT

THAT'S JUST YOUR OPINION