

# Gimme an A: Getting Clients to Grade Your Work

If you've ever done time as a wage slave, you recall the quaint ritual known as the performance review. You know: the periodic inquisition in which the boss screams at you for all your mistakes. It's a terrifying, horrifying, mortifying experience . . . and a damned good reason for going solo.

But before you start gloating over your unreviewed existence, reflect for a moment. Sure, the way companies choose to assess work may be madness, but the concept is a good one. Feedback is important. And because there's no built-in review process for independent professionals, it's up to you to check in with your clients. This isn't always easy: It can be difficult for clients to say what they want . . . and for IPs to hear what their clients are saying.

If you're not getting detailed feedback on

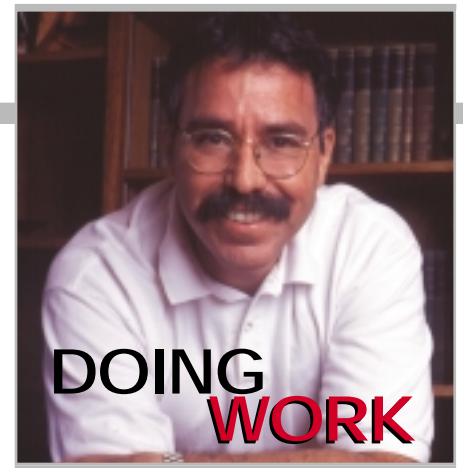
your work, you should be. According to a study by the Technical Assistance Research Programs Institute for the Research Institute of America for the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs, 90 percent of dissatisfied clients don't bother to announce their annoyance; they just go away. And here's another vital statistic from the same study: Unhappy clients tell an average of nine other people about their bad business experiences.

Yeow.

## The Essentials

Let's begin with the basics of collecting feedback. According to Colleen Burke, owner of Greenfly Design in Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania, a provider of Web-site designs — and impeccable service — to small businesses, there are three *Rs* of client feedback:

- 1. Recognize.** Identify the problem areas in your latest project. Were there moments when your client seemed unhappy with your work but didn't actually say so? Or did he give you constructive criticism that, in an attempt to shield your ego, you pretty much ignored? If so, write down everything you can remember about the problems. You'll use those notes to map out the territory the two of you should explore.



by Peter Economy

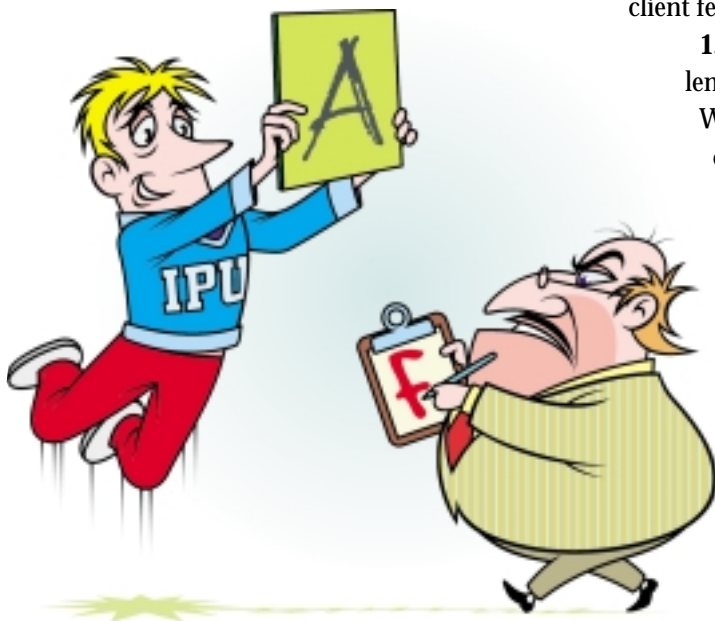


ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE SMALLWOOD

Feedback: It's not gonna come knocking on your door. Peter Economy explains how to get off your rump and hunt it down.

**2. Request.** You won't get useful criticism — at least not consistently or in the form you want — if you don't ask for it. Make a practice of formally asking for feedback. Timing is key here: You want feedback not just when a project is done but also at some point during the process (in fact, getting feedback at the project midpoint for shorter projects, or at scheduled intervals for longer projects, can be invaluable for making sure your client is satisfied with the final product). And while you're at it, make it easy for your client to get feedback to you: Set up a meeting at a time and place that's convenient for her, or have the client pick a day and time when she'd like you to call.

**3. Respond.** Respond positively, that is. Whatever your client has to say, be sure to thank him. Even if the feedback is painful — “My 3-year-old daughter could have designed a better logo than this piece of crap!” — say you're grateful for the chance to do better. Sure, you may want to jab a rusty hook into his eyeball, but don't. Instead say “Thanks for the input,” and sound and look like you mean it. Pouting puts an immediate stop to most honest criticism.

### Use What Works

So what's the best method of gathering feedback? Whatever works for you and your clients. Although some clients like those fill-in-the-blank “How did we do?” postcards that have checked into hotel rooms across America, others respond best to a visit, a phone call, or an email. It all depends on the client's availability, honesty, and interest in you — and your willingness to absorb criticism.

According to Laurie Gibson, the IP owner of Word Association Editing and Proofreading Service in San Diego, “The

telephone is the most direct way for me to get real spontaneous feedback from clients. To get sincere feedback, I'll encourage them by saying ‘I appreciate your honesty’ maybe halfway through the conversation. As good as telephone feedback can be, however, I find that when I receive feedback through email, it's more detailed than the feedback I get through a telephone call.”

Depending on the kind of business you run, good feedback can come from observing your client actually using your product. Says Burke: “I receive the best feedback when I watch clients use a prototype Web site that I've designed for their business. I ask clients to think aloud as they maneuver around the site. This elicits an incredible amount of feedback, while at the same time involving the clients in the design process.”

Whatever method you choose — in-person interview, phone call, email, questionnaire — be objective. Objectivity is so important that it should be a factor in your choice of method. If the vein in your neck tends to jump out when you get angry, send an email or a questionnaire. You want the maximum amount of distance between you and the client and lots of cooling-off time. Phone calls are more immediate but give you the privacy to flip your client the bird while you say, “Oh, I never thought of it that way. What a good idea.” Face-to-face meetings should be attempted only by folks who have elephant skin and a permanent smile.

Finally, in meetings and telephone interviews, be sure to listen carefully and write everything down. Neatly. You don't want to miss a word.

### What's Your Motivation?

Feedback is about learning to do your job better. If you're using the process to make a

sale, don't. Ditch the pitch immediately. If you've got a motive that's not related to doing a better job, your client is going to pick up on the vibe and shut right down. And when that happens, you're going to lose an invaluable source of information — and you may lose the client as well.

### Keep Them Coming Back for More

Reinforcement is the name of the game. As lab-rat rustler extraordinaire B. F. Skinner once said (in a slightly different context): "When the behavior is followed by a consequence, the nature of the consequence modifies the organism's tendency to repeat the behavior in the future." Which is to say, if you reward a client for being honest with you, chances are you're creating a method of communication that the client will want to repeat. In some situations, a detailed explanation of how you're going to use the feedback to improve your work — followed by the swift implementation of that plan — is necessary. In others, a freebie might help: Try knocking an hour off your invoice or giving your client a copy of a favorite book or industry magazine. As Burke says: "The prize doesn't have to be a trip for two to Hawaii; a discount on your services will do just fine."

### Dealing with the Data

You've got your feedback; now do something with it. Collect your client's comments, type up your notes, and develop a way to track them, perhaps with a spreadsheet or a database program. Decide what's important and then analyze it. If the client is right — and the client is always right, right? — zoom in on your latest project and change what needs changing.

Suppose your client is annoyed because you're always late with your rough drafts. Figure out a way to get your final draft in early. Or suppose your client thinks the brochure you designed looks too "feminine." Work with him to identify his specific concerns — the font is too delicate or the stock is too pale — and then go back to the drawing board and redesign the damned thing. It may be a stupid and sexist criticism, but it's what your client wants, so do it. Or get another client.

The point is: You can't just collect criticism; you have to use it. Fact is, my independent friends, asking a client for feedback and not acting on the information is worse than not asking for feedback at all. Ignoring client feedback is both an insult to the suit and a not-so-subtle suggestion that she go shopping for a new IP. 1099

### Questions, You Ask Questions

The best feedback questions are specific. They should focus on a specific project and the specific areas you believe are problem areas. Say that you want a client's thoughts on a quarterly report that you wrote and designed. Overall a good job, you think, but you're worried about some of the formatting and the illustrations. Your note to the client might look something like this:

**How am I doing?**

I'm always looking for ways to improve the products and services I provide. Please take the time to give me your candid responses to the following questions:

\_\_\_\_\_

Y N

Did you think the design was easy to read?

Were there any sections that seemed confusing to you? If so, please tell me (on the back of this card) which ones and, if you can, why.

Did you find enough graphs and charts?

Do you think the report will be clear to the nonexperts who need to read it?

Thanks for your time.