

Dear Creative Client

BY BOB KODZIS

"What we've got here... is a failure to communicate."

– The Captain, "Cool Hand Luke," 1967

If you have great relationships with your clients, you understand the power and the value of good communication. Nothing bolsters a business relationship like communication. In fact, communication is so important that it deserves an ode ... so I wrote this one:

*Oh, communication! What power you hold
The cornerstone of good business, you are mighty and bold*

*You free us from our silos and lift us from our pods
Without you we're confused, misguided and at odds*

*Oh, communication! How you make everything clearer
Open up our hearts and minds and bring
our clients nearer*

OK so it's not Keats, but it speaks a vital truth. Good communication is the linchpin to any good business relationship. This is important because, when the going gets tough (and it does for all of us) a good business relationship can mean the difference between a client sticking with you or saying goodbye.

Unfortunately, I've found that good communication is rare a commodity in the creative business world. This is evidenced by the fact that organizations change creative partners more frequently than they change the air filters in their offices. It is also apparent in the volume of rework, unmet expectations and frustrations expressed on both the client and the creative sides of the business. It's so common it's almost a cliché.

The bottom line is that there is simply not enough good communication going on out there. By "good communication" I mean communication that is frequent, meaningful, honest, timely, complete and accurate. Take away any of those traits and your client relationship will suffer. Take away enough of them and your client relationship will suffer an untimely death.

But fear not, my creative friend. This Quest is dedicated to arming you with a powerful communication tool that is designed to give your client communications a shot in the arm. It's the ultimate letter to a tough creative client. In preparing this letter, I queried a couple dozen creative professionals to identify some of the biggest challenges that come between great creative shops and their clients. With the help of this communication tool, you will enter a new realm of proactive communication and unbridled candor with your clients. Simply customize the letter by filling in the blanks and deleting any paragraphs that do not apply. Get ready to bolster the most important business relationships you have.



Print on company letterhead

(client name)

(client company name)

(client address)

(date)

Dear _____ (client name)

First let me say how much I enjoy working with _____ (client company name). It has been an amazing _____ years/months/days/minutes (pick one). So far, I'd have to say the highlights have been the _____, _____ and _____ projects.

_____ (client first name), I am writing to you today in the hopes of opening up a new line of communication and strengthening our mutual bond. Someone quite brilliant once wrote that good communication is the linchpin to any good business relationship. This letter is my way of moving in that direction.

For your ease of reading, I have included sub-headings for all the major topics that I would like to address. Please accept these recommendations in the spirit in which they are offered. My hope is that this will be the first of many open and honest communications between us.

Starting with the positive

There are so many good things about the way you work with our creative group. For instance, I love it when you ... (Check all that apply)

- Trust our judgment.
- Allow us the creative freedom to explore new ways to present your products and services.
- Provide specific direction and feedback so we can hit the mark with great accuracy.
- Give us all of the time and the resources we need to deliver the best possible solutions.
- Champion the concepts we create within your organization from initial pitch through full implementation.
- Bite your tongue when you feel the urge to radically change the creative direction in the 11th hour.
- Say yes.
- Pay us on time.

We really do enjoy working with you. Please remember all of these good things as I shift the focus to some of the things that we really need to change. There are quite a few, but I know if we address them together, things will only get better.

Those wacky deadlines

When I ask you to tell me the date when you need a project to be completed, you seem to think it's a laugh riot to say "Yesterday." While I appreciate the gesture of using humor to soften the blow of an unrealistic deadline, it doesn't bring me any closer to being able to do the impossible. To be honest, we'd have to be a team of time travelers to pull off some of the deadlines that you've requested.

Here's the deal: High-quality, high-impact creative work takes time. We don't pull these concepts out of our ... magic hats. It seems like magic, but there is a lot of hard work going on behind the scenes. It takes a great deal of effort and energy to generate dozens of

original ideas and then to develop three or four of them into viable finished concepts.

All we ask for is a little leeway on the tight deadlines. The result will be more and better creative options for you. We won't waste this extra time that you give us. We will invest it in your success. The creative work that emerges will be so much better. It will be the difference between a gourmet meal and a frozen dinner popped into the microwave. Sure the microwave is the faster option. But when you think of all of the truly memorable and outstanding meals you've ever eaten, how many of them were cooked in a microwave?

Too much information

_____ (client first name), you really dilute the quality and the impact of our print advertising when you force us to cram dozens of facts about your product/service/company (pick one) into every single ad. With so much information, your potential customer will be forced to stare at your ad as if they were looking at one of those brain-damaging Magic Eye puzzle images, hoping that your message and your logo will mystically emerge from the clutter and come into focus. Let's not make them work that hard.

Good advertising requires us to choose our battles. Those who try to be everything to everyone end up being nothing of real value to anybody. Let's simplify and focus on the few essential elements that make your product stand out from the crowd.

Working with your account executive

I know that much of your contact with me is filtered through your account executive (AE), _____ (name of AE). Here are a few things to keep in mind when dealing with _____ (first name of AE).

Your AE is a very smart and talented person who completely lacks the ability to say the word "no" to you. She/he can't even say the word "know" to you for fear that you will confuse it for rejection.

You see _____ (client name), your account executive wants to please you. And they will do anything in their power to make you happy ... even promise to achieve the impossible. So when you start asking for the moon and the stars to be delivered by tomorrow and they start nodding like a bobblehead Chihuahua in the rear window of a low rider, fight the urge to believe them. Accept every nod, every smile, every acquiescence as a, "We'll get back to you on that."

Creative by committee

I appreciate that you like to run our creative ideas by a number of people before committing to a specific direction; people like your team, your boss, your board members, your spouse and your dog, _____ (dog name). Unfortunately, this approach results in what we call "lowest common denominator" creative work. It whittles away the most original creative elements, one opinion at a time, until the work is so generic that nobody finds anything objectionable. Sadly, after that paring down, nobody can find anything interesting or memorable about the work either.

Creative judgment by committee never works, so be bold and make a judgment call. If you must ask someone's opinion, do a focus group with members of the market segment for whom we are designing this stuff. Ask them what they think of our ideas. After all, they are the only people whose opinions really matter. No offense to your wife or _____ (dog name).

Different is good

You hired us to create distinctive, high impact and memorable communications for _____ (client company). Yet every time we present a truly original solution to your challenges, you rein us in like a runaway stagecoach. It's tough to create jaw-dropping ideas from the end of a creative choke-chain.

In all of the work we do for you, our first challenge is to get the attention of your target market. We can't do this by aping your competitors and saying the same things that everyone else is saying. That's the fastest way to lose the needle of your message in the haystack of constant media bombardment. Our job is to make that needle shine; to stand out so that it cannot be missed.

I guess what I'm asking is for you to keep your mind open to all of the possibilities ... and to "cowboy up" and muster the courage to try some things that are truly new and innovative. I know that this is not easy to do. But it's well worth facing the challenge. In the end, your product/company/brand/reputation (pick one) will stand head and shoulders, over that of your competition.

Kindness and respect

As stressful as this work can get, let's never lose our mutual respect for each other. Although I love the energy and the extremely colorful language you toss around when things aren't going your way, verbally abusing the members of our team tends to limit the number of flaming hoops we are willing to dive through on your behalf.

_____, (client first name), we are on your side. Your goals are our goals. Your adversaries are our foes. We enter the creative battlefield seeking to take the next hill for you. It's a lot tougher when you come out with your verbal guns blazing and shoot us down. You can imagine how disheartening it is to be taken down by friendly fire.

Even when we are extremely frustrated or disappointed, let's keep things cool, professional and respectful within our team. We accomplish a lot more, and it's a lot more fun when we are working on the same side.

Well, _____ (client first name), I think I've written enough for now. I sure appreciate you taking the time to read this letter and I feel sure that this is the beginning of a bright new chapter in our professional relationship.

Please keep in touch.

Best Regards,

_____ (your name)

_____ (your title)

"The problem with communication, is the illusion that it has been accomplished."

— George Bernard Shaw

As cathartic and joyous an experience it was to write this client letter, I'm not sincerely recommending that you approach your clients with this tool. It's a bit too pointed and sarcastic for the average customer and thus it may close more avenues of communication than it opens.

What I am recommending is that you find a way to honestly and sincerely connect with your clients on a regular basis. Forget the form letters. Talk to them. Tell them how you feel. Get to know them beyond the projects. Tell them the truth and ask them to do the same for you in return.

If you lose touch with your customers, you lose.

Beyond talking to them, maybe the most important thing we can do when we are in the room with our clients is to listen closely. When we really listen to our clients, we have the opportunity to learn who they are, what they know and what they need and want. That's powerful stuff. Use that information wisely, and you can pave the path to the Holy Grail of all business — a longer and stronger relationship with your customers. ■

Until next time ... Stay inspired!

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Bob Kodzis is an award-winning artist, keynote speaker and performer. He has been contributing ideas and articles to *Create Magazine* for five years. Kodzis is also a facilitator and founder of the wildly creative thinktank Flight of Ideas, Inc. — a company whose mission it is to unleash a new level of fun and creativity throughout the world. His clients range from the United Way to Kennedy Space Center to Vekoma, the largest rollercoaster manufacturer in the world. You can contact Kodzis directly online at Bob@flightofideas.net, or check out his cool Web site at www.flightofideas.net.

