

How to...

# Deal with a Difficult Client

BY MIKE CLARK

**I**n virtually any industry, business owners must deal with difficult customers at some point or another. While that may be just a few individuals or accounts a year, these tricky clients can pose challenges for a business that wants to maintain the delicate balance of doing what's best for their bottom line, but also ensure they're going the extra mile for the right people. For coping techniques, Printwear spoke with a few experts in the apparel decoration industry on how to approach this task to ultimately make a stronger business.

## COMMON PROBLEMS

Whether it's an embroiderer, a contract screen printer, a large-scale distributor, or a

small mom-and-pop shop, there are common issues that almost all businesses encounter. A few of these include:

**Pricing:** Because shops have different scales of production and staff, pricing can differ greatly across the board. A shop with multiple automatic presses and a team of 12 press operators, for example, will be able to offer a potential customer shopping around a much more competitive volume price versus a smaller shop with one automatic and a manual.

When customers push the smaller shops on price, it hurts the smaller shops dramatically in ways that cannot be calculated, explains Michael Savino, Total Ink Solutions. He adds that situations like a six-color front/six-color back job with

Pantone-matched colors for a larger shop can be priced at a much more competitive rate, while a smaller business might struggle to get anywhere near this quote, and definitely not at a profitable margin. Smaller shops worry they may not be able to retain that customer if they can't offer the same price, but also need to be realistic about what they can handle, he states.

Adam McCauley, Sandlot Sports, explains that in addition to the cost of an actual order, one common issue screen printers encounter are setup costs. Particularly when printing team wear, he explains, there's always the instance of someone asking for one or two extra shirts printed after the job has been finished and the screens reclaimed.



We have to explain that since there's a screen setup cost, the sweatshirt that was originally \$25 is now \$45, and sometimes customers get upset about that, states McCauley.

**Artwork/decoration specifics:** Since many customers visiting a decorator's shop don't come from a graphics background, they may have vague requests regarding what they want printed on their garment. Marshall Atkinson, InkSoft, says that regardless of how challenging it is to get that design honed in at the start, it's ultimately the shop's responsibility to figure out what the client is looking for.

The biggest problem comes down to not understanding what the customers asking you to do, says Atkinson.

Jay Busselle, Printa Systems, points out that in addition to miscommunication over design work, some customers may bring in an idea that features copywritten or trademarked graphics, such as licensed sports or brand logos.

McCauley adds that because people are so accustomed to decorated apparel in the retail market, they don't always grasp the complicated work involved in certain designs and color combinations.

They see a store in the mall with an all-over print or a wraparound logo, and they only want four of them, says McCauley. Sometimes you have to explain how difficult those prints are.

**Delivery dates:** Like design work, many customers are accustomed to a retail culture where goods are available with the click of a button, and often overnight. Shops run into difficulty with this expectation because of production workflows, staff availability, and order volume. Clients unaware of the work that goes into printing a shirt, for example, may assume it'll be ready in a day or two. Even with deco



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ration methods like direct-to-garment, a small business with minimal staff and constant order intake won't necessarily have the capacity to turn a customer's order out in this timeframe.

### **PREVENTATIVE MEASURES**

Whether it's price matching, meeting an unrealistic deadline, or other expectations, Savino says that one of the simplest things a shop can do is learn when to say no. This, he explains, does not have to have a negative connotation, and can often benefit a business in the long-term.

As silly as that sounds, you must do it sometimes. Your shop will grow faster because of it, adds Savino. Only take the jobs you know will profit your company and do not wager on future promises.

In addition to using discretion, a standard operating procedure manual for all employees is key to avoiding misunderstandings with a customer. You need to have written guidelines and written expectations as much as you possibly can, explains Atkinson. Once you have these guidelines in place, you can easily communicate them to your customer.

Decorators can display posters or signs in the front of the office that explain how the shop approaches common job requests. For example, having a detailed measurement diagram of what a full-front print entails will help avoid confusion if it's a client's first time at the shop.

To avoid delivery issues, McCauley suggests being as transparent as possible so clients know they can't realistically expect some work overnight. We tell our customers right up front it's seven to 10 days, and that's after art approval, he states, adding that if the job is more complicated,

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like a large-scale sublimation job, to let the customer know that they'll need at least a few weeks to complete the work.

For screen printing, he also suggests explaining the process to customers, so they understand the different components involved. This way, McCauley says, a client will ideally grasp the concept of why changes like adding a new color, which involves setting up another screen, warrants an additional charge.

To avoid potential artwork discrepancies, Atkinson suggests a creative brief to run through before going to print. This can

feature basic action items like spell check, Pantone color verification, and logo specifications. When you have to keep making changes (for the client), typically it's because what you're doing to the artwork hasn't been defined, he adds.

To truly cover all bases, a checklist or intake form, detailing key factors a client must sign off on will help this process. Busselle suggests a form of this type include artwork ownership, image sizes, delivery dates, packaging instructions, and terms and conditions for payment.

With this form and a personal meeting

or phone interview, you can address each potential friction point and review every thing in detail, explains Busselle.

### ***IT'S NOT ME, IT'S YOU***

In some very rare instances, shops may encounter the difficult decision of whether to fire a client or not. This, all parties contend, should be a very last resort. And before doing so, businesses should take one more detailed look internally to ensure they've done everything possible to make the transaction with that customer mutually beneficial. The consensus is if a customer



costs a shop more money than they generate, you may be at the tipping point.

McCauley adds that if the jobs coming in put a strain on overhead, like making staff stay excessively late, and contributing to a drain on overall workplace morale, that's also a consideration. That gets taxing because you're wearing your staff out, he states.

To me, some of the right reasons are when the customer is unreasonable, not providing you with the correct information, or not specifying due dates on a purchase order, Atkinson states, adding that an alternative to firing a challenging client is developing new rules after an incident. For example, a client who puts a shop into overtime because they suddenly announce a rush due date that was never previously established could be subject to a 10 percent charge every time it happens after the initial incident.

All contributors concur, however, that a decorator cannot take things personally. Most demanding customers quite often have their own customers to serve; whether it's a retail store, a promotional products outlet, or a school team. The customers of a decorator's customer are also demanding a quality product.

Be it embroidery, screen printing, direct-to-garment, or other forms of apparel decoration, all parties agree that the core of dealing with any difficult client comes back to empathy. We've all had really poor customer service in our lives, and we've all had fantastic customer service in our lives. We can smell the difference as consumers, states Atkinson.

Being an active listener, communicating clearly, and ensuring all departments in-house are thorough in their jobs won't necessarily stop negative and difficult clientele, but taking these steps can help maintain consistency, and for most businesses, help drive a healthy running shop.



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