

Thanks But No Thanks

How saying no to a client can pay off

From Working Woman Magazine

Like a lot of women business owners who are looking to achieve a better work-life balance or to keep their company moving in a certain direction, Caryn Amster has found that it pays to say no to some clients – as long as it’s done gracefully. So when she must turn away business, the 59-year old owner of Custom Marketing Associates in Elk Grove Village, Illinois, tries to let them down easy. She does this by keeping the brush-off conversation upbeat and leaving the door open for a possible future relationship. “I tell them I’ve reached my billable limit that I know I can perform well at,” says Amster. “I tell them, ‘I can’t serve you the way I believe in serving people.’” She also politely lets them know that she keeps a waiting list.

Handling rejection is never easy. Do it wrong and you’ve alienated a possible future client; do it right and clients will respect you for it and may even come back and knock on your door later when you’re ready to do business with them. Here are four ways to make saying no a positive experience.

- 1. Look before you lose.** Before you start turning away business, make sure you’re doing it for the right reasons. Use this as an opportunity to review your life and work goals and be sure to get input from your family, say Tom Bay, PhD., author of *Look Within or Do Without: 13 Qualities Winners All Share* (Career Press). Consider the potential sacrifices in income, lifestyle, and revenue growth you’re willing to tolerate. Angela Bendorf Jamison, who owns the Raleigh, North Carolina, marketing firm Communicopia, says she chose to jettison a low-paying client who was located a two-and-a-half-hour drive away. It simply wasn’t worth the time away from home.

Cynthia Dodd, a horticultural designer whose Hartford firm, Plantscapes, creates and maintains corporate and private gardens, refuses even lucrative work if it isn’t a good fit with her love of design. She tactfully tells clients that she needs to “keep focused...and not scatter our forces in too many directions.”

- 2. Take it personally.** This is one task not to delegate, says Esther Bleuel, a licensed family therapist and small business counselor in Westlake Village, California. “No one can communicate your limits but you,” she says. Send a carefully worded e-mail followed up by a phone call. Or try a personalized letter and then a call. Be honest but not overly blunt, suggests Mike Trueblood, director of the Family Business Council at California State University in Fullerton. If you’re ending a client relationship, be sure to make time for a thorough handover of information to the new person who will handle the job.
- 3. Use a spoonful of sugar.** Jamison is keeping her rates steady in 2001 to appease clients miffed because she’s taking Fridays off for her newborn. Depending on the situation, you may even want to consider sweetening the pot with a discount

or extra perk. Custom Marketing Associates' Amster refers clients she turns down "to reliable people who I believe could do the job as well as I could. As a result, they refer jobs to me. It's a win-win situation."

- 4. Remember – losing clients doesn't have to be a bad thing.** Susan Stern, a public relations consultant in New York, likes having a few clients rather than lots of them, mainly so she can give them personalized service. That high-touch service has proved to be a tremendous boon to her business. Saying no has also been a big part of success for Suzy Girard, chief executive of seven-year old Gate International, an Internet consulting and digital marketing boutique that's done Web sites for Sony Music, Blockbuster Entertainment, and Goodyear Tire & Rubber. Girard's philosophy is simple: "Carefully select clients with whom we can grow," she says.

"My goal is to consistently give business owners the best and latest tips, tricks and information on marketing their business," says Caryn. Custom Marketing Associates, started in 1988, is a business-to-business marketing, advertising and public relations firm located in Elk Grove, Illinois. Amster's second business, The Marketing Coaches, specializing in speaking, training and consulting on marketing, direct mail, customer service and trade show issues, was started in 1990. For information, contact Caryn at (847) 895-6449, e-mail Caryn@MarketingCoaches.com and see the site at www.MarketingCoaches.com.