



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

Contract Engineering

The View from the Client's Side – Part 3



By Sam Wallington

[June 2011] Every business relationship has two sides. In broadcast engineering, to get and keep happy clients, it is vital that the engineer take time to consider more than just what the client needs. Attention to the wants and expectations of the client can lead to a long, profitable relationship, surviving the inevitable issues that crop up from time to time. Sam Wallington's series continues:

Maintaining good communication with your client – especially when what you are doing is often something of a mystery to them – is so important that it cannot be restated often enough. Aside from any potential anxieties of being off the air, just taking a moment to let the client know where things are will bring many rewards down the road.

Of course, for most contractors there is a balancing act. You are trying to run a business, not a charity. And it is important to spend time thinking about your business to make sure you have enough income and plans to stay financially solvent. If your client thinks you are about to fold your tent and move to another state to feed your family, he might well be a bit more reticent

to offer you a project or a long-term relationship.

RUN A REAL BUSINESS

There are many books and philosophies about how to run a business. But if you think about it from you client's viewpoint, here are some of the things they will see as a sign of business strength and stability when they look at your services.

A good first step is to get a variety of clients. Not only does this make you look better to the IRS when they are questioning your status as a contractor, you really do not want to have just one major client, even if they are deep pocketed folks who are practically ready to marry you off to their favorite child.

Why give up something so lucrative? From a practical standpoint, they may make some bad decisions and end up bankrupt (I speak from experience). Perhaps more selfishly, having other clients keeps you busy enough to keep them asking for you.

NEGOTIATE A REAL CONTRACT

Too many contract engineers end up operating without a contract or rely entirely on a verbal contract. Though I respect the value of an honest handshake, you need to protect yourself.

That does not mean you always will need to have a 500-page document signed in triplicate, but you should have at least a basic contract that spells out what you will and will not do, what the client will and will not do, how much you will be paid, when, for what activities, how the relationship will end (if it ever does), and other relevant details about the business relationship between the two parties.

Actually, all you need might be a simple one- or two-page document in “plain English,” but do spend a little money on a local attorney and make sure your contract will hold up in court, and make sure you know what protections you have and what you do not have. If nothing else, a contract forces both parties to have a clear understanding of what is expected – which, in itself, avoids a tremendous number of problems. You should be aware that some of the “free” contracts available online are not very good, and may not protect you.

BE ON TIME

Perhaps the first opportunity your client will have to judge you is when you arrange to be on site so – to make it simple – *be on time!*

In fact, when you say you are going to be somewhere at a certain time, show up on time or a little early. If you are terrible at that, either stop promising or get better at it. Yes, you could call to say you are running late, but that should be a fairly rare exception.

If you really struggle with this issue, I strongly encourage you to read some books or attend some seminars on time management, prioritization, and the like.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the same time, having more than one client may well bring ethical considerations and/or conflicts of interest into play.

Be clear to each client who comes first if more than one has an emergency at the same time. And remember to keep Station A’s business out of Station B. Nothing will mark you as a bad operator if a client learns confidential materials – or even non-confidential matters – are ending up at a competitor’s company.

There is a lot of information available on the Internet about conflicts of interest; I recommend you check it out, get some education, and stay away from it.

Being ethical means that if you have a conflict of interest, you will move to fix it immediately! For example, if you are going to upgrade someone’s signal and it might reduce another client’s coverage, you need to stay out of it or disclose the possibilities to both clients, even if it costs you one or both clients. Even just the installation of a new audio processor is not something you should consider for casual conversation with another company.

Confidentiality is also critical. If you happen to overhear a station’s plans, keep your mouth shut. Doing otherwise is a good way to spend a lot of money on attorneys!

KEEP THEM LEGAL

Your clients depend on you to keep them legal. Though they may be aware of a lot of the Rules, they need you to tell if something they are doing or plan to do is against the Rules.

For example, you might be asked to turn up the station so it is over-modulating or operating over their authorized power limits. If you learn that something is not operating properly according to the station authorization or the FCC Rules

will you need to make sure your client knows. I suggest, for your own protection, that you do it in writing in case they decide to ignore what you tell them!

In my experience, most stations with a legal violation are not doing it on purpose (with the possible exception of over-modulation). Many times they honestly do not know or have not checked – or do not understand the technology enough to know if they are violating a Rule.

Discovering a violation can provide a great opportunity for you to give away some of your knowledge to provide the basic education needed. Yes, I think that most times educating your client should be off the clock. If a station gets fined for something you knew about but did not tell them, it will cost you a lot more than five minutes of your time.

THE MONEY SIDE

Unfortunately, getting paid is usually the hardest part of the job. Having a contract helps, especially if you have “what happens if you don’t pay” clauses,” but it does not solve all problems.

With a new client, no matter how nice they are, you do not really know how they will pay until you have done some work for them. You will have to decide how much you can afford to do without being paid, but do not buy a zillion things or do a huge amount of work before your first bill to them.

If they pay on time, regularly, terrific. You may be willing to take more risk with them. If they do not, you will have to decide what you are willing to do – and yes, being off the air can be a great motivator for some clients to get caught up!

One idea is to get a merchant account so you can accept credit cards. When you have a recalcitrant client, you can get nearly instant confirmation that the money exists before you start working. The small service fee is probably

worth it because you will have money in your account before you go home.

BILL FAIRLY, CONSISTENTLY, AND QUICKLY

While you need to bill enough to cover your expenses, gear, and costs of operation as well as leaving enough to live on, you also need to stay within the expectations of your client.

Be sure your bill is fair. If you know a job should have taken two hours and it took ten hours because you honestly did not know how to do it properly – or you broke something in the process – consider a healthy discount off this item. On the other hand, just because a job is long, does not mean it is unfair to bill for it. Just keep it fair.

A good habit to have is to document your time and expenses immediately as you finish the day/job. It is too easy to forget the details when it comes time to billing and likely you will either over- or under-bill, neither of which is desirable.

I used to keep a pocket audio recorder handy. Every time I drove, I would document the time, my mileage, where I was going, where I had been, what I had been doing, and who I was billing for it. Then, when it came time to prepare the bill, I just sat at the computer and typed while I listened, and I rarely missed anything.

You may have a better system – but use *some* system religiously.

AVOID SUPPRISES

Another important point, if you want to keep your clients, when billing them, try to avoid surprising them.

For instance, if they are used to a few hundred dollars in a typical month and suddenly get a bill for ten thousand, they are not likely to be happy. To avoid those surprises, *over-communicate* any time you head down a path leading to

unexpected labor or parts costs – as an example, maybe something like, “The transmitter repairs last night took a lot longer than we’d hoped. To keep your bill under control, do you want me to postpone some of this other work we’d talked about?”

If your client feels that you have their interest at heart, you are more likely to be trusted – and paid.

BE WILLING TO SHARE

You have a lot of knowledge, some of it very hard earned, but do not be afraid to give it away.

When appropriate, explain to the DJ or the board op how something works, even if it means they can fix it themselves next time it breaks. Give the GM or PD details they really should know. Or help a newbie get started.

If you enjoy teaching and people seem to respond well to it, look for more formal opportunities to train, perhaps at a local trade school or through the SBE. Why? Several reasons: First, knowledge you share is cemented more clearly in your own mind. Second, when you help others, they will want to help you. Third, do you remember that I said earlier about not

being too self-promoting? This is a way that you can share some of what you know without sounding like a know-it-all jerk.

THE ULTIMATE APPRAISAL

With all that we have covered in this series, if you were hiring a contractor would you hire yourself? Most of us have vendors with whom we prefer not to be involved. Why? Because they do not treat us right. Maybe the quality is sub-par, or they are rude, or one of an infinite number of other reasons.

But after all is said and done, the question you need to answer is this: Do you consistently treat your clients in a way that you would want to be treated? If not, what will you change? If so, I hope we get to work together sometime.

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