

Business relationship management essentials for editors

What one freelance writer learned in her first three years

By Elizabeth Trew

HELP ME! I JUST CAN'T DEAL with my demanding clients. Sound familiar?

Sometimes we forget that we're not just in the business of editing or writing; we're in the business of fulfilling the needs of our clients. We can get so lost in our work, we forget our purpose.

October's guest speaker, Linda Dessau—writer, editor, life coach, and music therapist—had us nodding our heads in agreement with words of wisdom about the mistakes she's made and what she's learned from her three years as an editor.

Linda admitted that she would do things differently if she had to start all over again. At her first EAC meeting in June, a light went off in her head while bantering with her fellow editors about the all too common frustrations of dealing with difficult clients.



Linda Dessau, guest speaker

She thought, why not share what she's learned?

Linda started out as a life coach but she loved writing and considered herself an editor. Her own coach suggested combining the two to complement her business. Over time, Linda developed a niche market by helping other life coaches with writing, discovering by trial and error how to avoid conflicts with clients and build lasting business relationships.



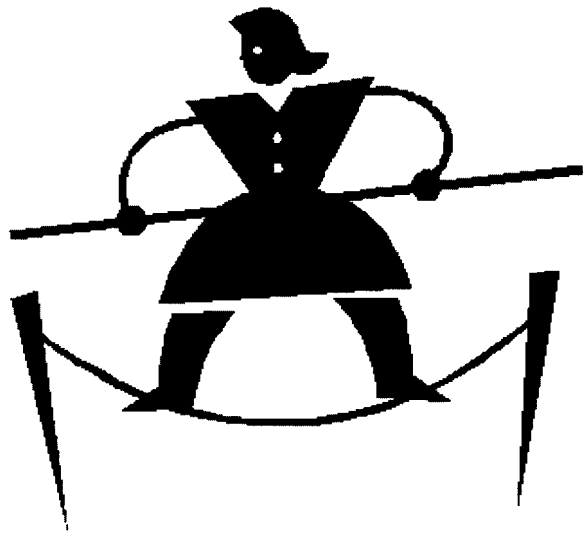
*Underestimating and overestimating—
Walking a tightrope*

Like many new editors, Linda didn't know how long projects would take when providing an estimate to clients. "There's nothing worse than an angry client who is surprised when you exceed your agreed-upon budget. Keep in touch with your clients to let them know when you are approaching your budget", she advised. Another editor advised that when under budget call your clients to ask if there's anything else you could do for them that would fit within their budget.

With multiple deadlines to meet, there's always too much work and only so many hours in a day. When Linda replaced the term "deadline" with "scheduled delivery date", she felt more positive about her work. "'Deadline' sounds so negative, while 'delivery' is a positive word", she explained.

*From knowing it all to knowing where
to look*

Now when she looks back on her old articles, Linda detects many errors. But her work had improved quickly, as she taught herself what she needed to know and took courses to hone her writing and editing skills. To help coaches who couldn't write and to make her job of editing easier, she combined a variety of style guides to self-publish a book, *The Customizable Style Guide for Coaches Who Write*.



*From hoping to asking and from
promoting to attracting*

I'm sure all of us have completed a job and had no idea whether we'd met our client's needs. *How do we know if we don't ask?* Linda advises that when finishing a project, we should find out what our clients think about our work and ask them for testimonials and referrals. Linda says that such promoting is like buying advertising. Anyone can do it; all it takes is money. Rather, she aims to attract clients, saying, "When a client likes you so much they can't stop talking about you, *that's attraction.*"

From avoiding to embracing

In the past, Linda either ran from conflict or fought for her position, finding neither to be very helpful. To help with confrontation, it's vital to pay attention to the client's viewpoint, rather than simply reacting or responding emotionally. Linda provided a few common-sense suggestions to help us work with our clients:



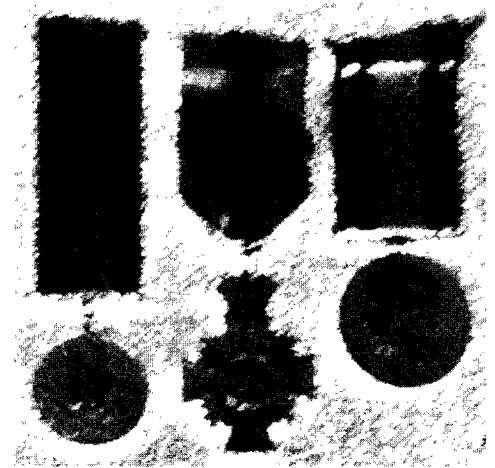
- Stop thinking that clients get in the way of work. They're the reason why we are in business!
- When responding to a client, say thank you at the beginning of every e-mail, rather than rush off a curt response.
- Always say thank you when a client asks about your services.
- When upset, don't jump in and start reacting. Pause. Before sending an e-mail or speaking, ask yourself, "How should I handle this?"
- Smile when answering the phone. (Put a mirror by the phone to check yourself.)

From being right to being of service

When working with an unreasonable client, it's important to work "in the spirit of service", rather than focusing on what or who is right or wrong. Linda says that, above all, the client is the expert on content. Let the client have the final say.

Linda related a lesson she learned early on. A client was very upset when the formatting on a document she had edited differed from the original. Initially she thought about charging the client to change the formatting, as it was not her fault. She quickly realized that to avoid alienating her client and potentially losing him, she would absorb the cost "in the spirit of service".

As a final tip, Linda added that when feeling discouraged by a demanding client, it helps to keep a file with positive client feedback to look at for a quick morale boost.



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An abundance of resources

Linda's Web site, www.youtalk-iwrite.com, has a plethora of resources she's developed with links to other sites for her clients. It includes an *Idea Generator* blog designed to spark one's creativity (too bad I didn't know about this earlier!) and a *Top 10 Article Generator*, which is provided free with her weekly e-mail updates.

Linda's words of wisdom provided us with a blueprint for establishing successful business relationships. Her calm demeanor and self-assuredness illustrated that she walks the walk when dealing with difficult clients. ■■■

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