



## Watch the language

When dealing with clients, look out for words that can come back to haunt you

**THE LATE** Rodney Dangerfield built a successful comedy career while “not getting any respect.” Unfortunately, not many designers work the nightclub circuit. They rely on the respect of their existing clients to help employ staff, pay suppliers and create value for partners and shareholders.

Language is often overlooked as a way to gain and build respect from your clients. I’m not talking about the technical language of design but rather the everyday comments that get thrown around in creative briefings or casual conversations that can (unintentionally) devalue your services.

As designers, finding ways to correct and manage this subtly abusive language is one way that we can educate people on the value of design.



### “Make it pretty”

I’ve had this phrase thrown out at the end of briefing sessions too many times to count. Do people think it’s cute? For years I used to just smile, pack up my things and thank the clients for their time.

I think a more appropriate response – and certainly one that started to work well for me – was to use this as

an opportunity to explain that designers often don’t pride themselves on their ability to make things pretty or beautiful. Rather, the yardstick used to evaluate work is whether or not it achieved the objectives set out in the creative brief. Be gentle, however. Many people don’t understand how demeaning a comment like this can be.

### “I’ll know what’s right when I see it”

This is probably the single-most useless piece of feedback a designer can receive.

The implication is that there is no way to measure the success of the creative process when in fact one already exists. I’ve found relying on a signed-off creative brief is critical, as you can demonstrate exactly

what decisions were made to arrive at the proposed design solution. By being assertive, you may even glean some insight into what is making the client uncertain. Remember that when clients are viewing new creative for the first time, feeling uneasy is not necessarily bad. People are comfortable with what is familiar. Vancouver-based art director Christopher North of Rethink Communications says: “If something challenges them in ways they didn’t expect, there is a strong chance that the creative is fresh and original. Feeling uncomfortable is actually a good thing.”

By focusing on the brief as the benchmark for evaluating creative, we move away from the emotional and subjective views of the client towards achieving strategic objectives.

### “Can’t you just whip something together?”

The last time I checked, whipping things wasn’t part of a design firm’s mandate. Comments like this actually undermine the entire design process. It assumes the creative process is something that happens immediately and solutions can be created out of thin air.

Nicholas Di Cui, creative director at Ferrand Communications in Toronto, often uses humour as a bridge. “Let me check the backroom to see if we have any logos left in stock,” would be a standard reply. Deliberately ridiculous, it would stop clients long enough for Di Cui to enlighten them on the steps required to achieve superior results.

### Watching words

I’m not suggesting you become hyper-vigilant and go around correcting everyone who makes a misguided comment. However, if you are in a situation where the client is using terms and phrases that ultimately demean the value you provide, you need to be assertive to earn respect. Use these situations as entry points to communicate and explain the design process.

Managing conversations is important. A client who didn’t respect you yesterday may, over time, grow to value your process and abilities enough to reward you with additional work. Take heed.

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