

The Red Velvet Rope Policy

He who trims himself to suit everyone will soon whittle himself away.

—Raymond Hull

Imagine that a friend has invited you to accompany her to an invitation-only special event. You arrive and approach the door, surprised to find a red velvet rope stretched between two shiny brass poles. A nicely dressed man asks your name, checking his invitation list. Finding your name there, he flashes a wide grin and drops one end of the rope, allowing you to pass through and enter the party. You feel like a star.

Do you have your own Red Velvet Rope Policy that allows in only the most ideal clients, the ones who energize and inspire you? If you don't, you will shortly. Why?

First, because when you work with clients you love, you'll truly enjoy the work you're doing; you'll love every minute of it. (Well, almost every minute of it. It is work, after all.) And when you love the work you do, you'll do your *best* work, which is essential to booking yourself solid.

Second, because you *are* your clients. They are an expression and an extension of you. Do you remember when you were a teenager and your mother or father would give you a hard time about someone you were hanging out with? Your parents may have said that a particular kid was a bad influence. As a teen, you may have thought about how unfair that felt, but the truth is that you are the company you keep. The people you spend

time with make a significant impact on your state of mind and how you feel about yourself. Let this be the imperative of your business: choose your clients as carefully as you choose your friends.

The first step in building your foundation is to choose your ideal clients – the individuals or businesses with whom you do your best work or the people or environments that energize and inspire you. We're going to help you identify specific characteristics of individuals or organizations that would make them ideal to work with. You will then develop a rigorous screening process to find more of them. We're also going to help you prune your current client list of less-than-ideal clients.

When Joana began her career as a freelance graphic designer, she found herself lucky. Most of the clients that came her way seemed to all fit the description of "ideal client." That was until a particular sales call where the potential client raised a handful of red flags. In an attempt to scare the client away, Joana asked for double what she normally would for the project, and to her surprise, the client said yes.

As she dove into the project, she started to dread working on it, not because of the creative challenge itself but because of the client's behavior. This particular client didn't seem to value her creative input, would delay payments, and was overly critical of her work. They asked for more rounds of revisions than were included in the scope of the project, and they pushed back when asked to pay extra for it. The experience was nothing short of draining, with many days ending in Joana questioning her decision to freelance at all.

She no longer looked forward to jumping into her work alongside her morning coffee. The snooze button got hit more often, and she'd find herself procrastinating, dreading her inbox. Each "just one more tiny revision" felt like it could be the final push that sent her over the edge.

It didn't take long for Joana to quickly realize that even for double her rate, it wasn't worth it to work with nonideal clients, and she started to implement her own Red Velvet Rope Policy. It was a game changer, creating a positive ripple effect. She soon started to leap out of bed again, excited to dive into new projects. This excitement was palpable, and it helped deepen the relationship between her and her clients. In fact, she even started flying out to meet some of them face-to-face. This not only made her relationships with her clients stronger but created opportunities for her to be introduced to new ones, just as ideal.

Joana also discovered that when she worked only with ideal clients, her designs got even better. Feeling pumped and into her work meant she could give it her all, leading to doing her best work.

Live by the Red Velvet Rope Policy of ideal clients. Doing so will increase your productivity and happiness. Plus, it allows you to do your best work, which means your clients get the best results possible, which in turn leads to more clients and referrals than you can handle by yourself.

For maximum joy, prosperity, and abundance, think about the person you are when you are performing optimally, when you are with all the people who inspire and energize you. Now think about all of the frustration, tension, and anxiety you feel when you work with clients who are less than ideal – not so good, right?

Wouldn't it be great to spend every day working with clients who are ideal for you, clients whom you can hardly believe you get paid to work with? This ideal is completely possible once you identify who you want to work with and determine with certainty that you will settle for nothing less. Once you do that, it's just a matter of knowing which of your existing clients qualify and how to acquire more just like them.

1.1.1 Written Exercise: To begin to identify the types of clients you don't want, consider which characteristics or behaviors you refuse to tolerate. What turns you off or shuts you down? What kinds of people should *not* be getting past the red velvet rope that protects you and your business?

Dump the Duds

Let's take this a step further. It's time to dump your dud clients. We can just hear your shocked protestations and exclamations. "I thought this was a book about getting clients, not dumping them!" We're referring to the *dud* clients – not all of your clients. It sounds harsh, but think about it. Your dud clients are those you dread collaborating with. They sap your creativity, bore you to tears, or leave you endlessly frustrated with the project, even after giving it your all.

Most creatives choose their career out of passion for their craft. They choose this path to express their creativity and connect with others through their work. However, along the way, many of these talented individuals find themselves burned out and experiencing creative blocks regularly because of working with too many dud clients.

When Joana faced this problem with a retainer client who represented 30% of her agency's revenue, she was terrified at the thought of letting them go. She thought that if she got rid of them, her reputation would crumble and so in turn would her business. But guess what? Dumping this client brought about only positive outcomes, and the team thanked her for it.

There are likely many reasons you *think* you can't dump your dud clients, and we know this can seem really scary early on, but hang in there with. Embrace the concept and trust that this is sound advice from loving teachers and a necessary step on the path to booking yourself solid.

Why have clients, or anyone for that matter, in your life who zap your energy and leave you feeling empty? You might decide to dump five dud clients in one week, or you may decide to dump one per month over the next year. The Red Velvet Rope Policy may be provocative. It might not feel like an easy thing to do. It requires a leap of faith (faith in yourself), but the emotional and financial rewards will be transformational. Within a few weeks of dumping your duds, you may add a dozen or more delightful clients. Sure, you'll increase your revenue if you add more ideal clients to your roster, but you'll also feel at peace and at ease as a business owner and creative. You'll enjoy your work more. Maybe not straightaway, but that Red Velvet Rope Policy? It's your ticket to a more positive workday. It'll keep the duds away and ensure you choose your ideal clients – people who inspire and energize you and, more important, allow you to do your best work.

Ask yourself: "Would I rather spend my days working with incredibly amazing, exciting, supercool, awesome people who are both clients and friends, or spend one more agonizing, excruciating minute working with barely tolerable clients who suck the life out of me?" Any initial discomfort or loss you may feel when dumping your duds will pay off in the long run.

Using the phrase "dump your dud clients," suggests that there is something wrong with them. But that's not necessarily the case. Well, in some cases you may have a real nut job on your hands, but most of the time, they're just not right for *you*. A client who doesn't resonate with your style,

for example, could be a dream for another creative who creates work in the style that client is after. Keep in mind that you don't need to create conflict and fire clients. You just need to stop signing on to their projects. You can be tactful, diplomatic, and loving. You can even attempt, when appropriate, to refer them to a colleague who might be a better fit. Whenever possible, keep it simple. Try, "I'm not the best person to serve you." Or "I don't think we'd be a good fit."

Are you always going to get a positive response when dumping your dud clients? Maybe not. If the first thing that comes to mind is "I don't want anyone out there thinking badly of me," we're with you. We love helping people, and we want people to think well of us. But living life fully can require difficult conversations, and you can't please everyone. To even try is an exercise in futility, as the following Aesop fable demonstrates.

The Old Man, the Little Boy, and the Donkey

An old man, a little boy, and a donkey were going to town. The little boy rode on the donkey, and the old man walked beside him. As they went along, they passed some people who remarked it was a shame the old man was walking and the little boy was riding. The man and boy thought maybe the critics were right, so they changed positions.

Later, they passed some people who remarked, "What a shame! He makes that little boy walk." They then decided they both would walk.

Soon they passed some more people who thought they were stupid to walk when they had a decent donkey to ride. So they both rode the donkey. Later, they passed some people who shamed them by saying how awful to put such a load on a poor donkey. The boy and man said they were probably right, so they decided to carry the donkey. As they crossed the bridge, they lost their grip on the animal. He fell into the river and drowned.

The moral of the story? *If you try to please everyone, you might as well kiss your ass goodbye.*

When considering who you want to work with, look for qualities in a person who you resonate with, so you don't limit yourself to just thinking about the clients you don't yet have. Your Red Velvet Rope Policy is a filtration system that lets in ideal clients. However, you can choose to loosen or tighten the rope at will. We're not (necessarily) asking you to turn away

your very first clients. We understand what you're up against. When you start your business, if you feel that you'd like to keep your red velvet rope a little looser so you can work with more clients, go right ahead.

For example, a recent graduate who is just venturing into freelancing for the first time should have some non-negotiable traits built into their Red Velvet Rope Policy, but it could make sense for them to keep their red velvet rope closer to the ground so they can build a client roster and, critically, generate the revenue necessary to ensure the revenue they need.

Just make sure you know what is ideal and what isn't ideal about the people you're letting into the VIP room. As you become booked solid, you'll tighten your red velvet rope and become even more exclusive so as to work only with those who energize and inspire you and – most important – allow you to do your best work.

1.1.2 Written Exercise: Now take a good, hard look at your current clients. Be absolutely honest with yourself. Who among your current clients fits the profile you've just created of people who should *not* have gotten past the red velvet rope that protects you and your business?

1.1.3 Booked Solid Action Step: Dump the dud clients you've just listed in the preceding exercise. It may be just one client, or you may need another two pages to write them all down. Is your heart pounding? Is your stomach churning at just the thought? Have you broken out in a cold sweat? Or are you jumping up and down with excitement now that you've been given permission to dump your duds? Maybe you're experiencing both sensations at the same time; that's totally normal. Do it and you'll feel better.

Taking a Booked Solid Action Step is a bold action and requires courage. And courage is not about being fearless – it's about owning your fear and using it to move you forward, to give you strength. There is no more rewarding feeling than the pride you'll feel once you've moved past the fear to do what you set out to do. Maybe you'll find it easier to take it one step at a time. Start by dismissing just one of those dud clients.

The feeling of empowerment you'll have once you've done it will motivate you to continue pruning your list of clients until the duds have all been removed.

What to Do When You Don't (Yet) Have Clients

But Michael and Joana, what if I just started my business and don't yet have clients, let alone dud clients? Ah, yes, excellent point. Consider yourself lucky. You'll never have to worry about dud clients because you'll put your Red Velvet Rope Policy in place on day one.

In just a moment, you'll begin to create your Red Velvet Rope Policy. If you're starting a new business and don't yet have many, or any, clients to speak of at this point, as you're working through the exercises, think about current or former co-workers, friends, or even service providers that you've hired in the past. To create your future Red Velvet Rope Policy, you'll be able to draw on your past experiences – who inspired you and who made you want to do them bodily harm. Refrain. Rewind. Remember: love and kindness. Love and kindness.

Pruning Your Client List

If you're struggling with the idea of pruning your client list, keep in mind that it's for your client's benefit as much as it is for yours. If you're feeling empty and drained, or frustrated and dreading the interaction with the client, then you're giving that client far less than your best, and it's both of you who are suffering for it. You owe it to these clients to refer them to someone who can, and will, do their best work with them. If you are working with people with whom you do not do your best work, you are out of integrity. And as we discussed earlier, you *are* your clients. When your clients go out into the world and speak of you to others, they are representing you.

With whom do you want to be associated – the duds or the ideal clients? It's also the ideal clients, those who are wildly happy with you and your services, who are most likely to go out and talk about you to others, to refer other clients like themselves, more ideal clients. The fewer duds you

allow to hang around, the more ideal clients you have room for, the more referrals you'll get, and so on.

Clients are like family, so we know this can be hard and can cause a period of intense and painful negative energy worrying about those challenging client relationships. It's exhausting and takes away from providing the best creative services for your clients. It is impossible to be your most effective, most attentive, and most precise self when working with less than ideal clients.

Joana's agency had been working with a client for more than three years – let's call her Sophie. Wanting to serve Sophie as best as she could, over time, Joana started to expand her offerings beyond her agency's usual capabilities, handling everything from brand identity design to web design and development to editorial design and social media graphics. However, the quick turnaround needed for the latter began to stress the team. This, coupled with the reduced creativity social media design required for this brand, started making the work feel monotonous. The team started to dread working on Sophie's account, and Joana started to find it harder to keep them motivated.

It wasn't that Sophie was demanding or difficult; it was just that this particular task didn't align with the team's passion or expertise. Moreover, the process for quick turnaround social media graphics was so distinct from their other projects that it disrupted their day-to-day operations, making everything feel more challenging than it should.

Recognizing this mismatch, Joana decided to do something about it. She approached Sophie, explaining that while they cherished handling her branding and web needs, both areas for which Joana's agency was known, they believed she would benefit from someone with a keen passion for social media design to take over that role.

To ensure Sophie was well taken care of, Joana introduced her to a freelancer starting out, who she knew and trusted, proficient in social media design and already an admirer of Sophie's brand. This move was a win-win. Sophie gained an expert who was enthusiastic about her social media needs and at a more budget-friendly rate. Meanwhile, Joana's team was free to channel their energy back into their true strengths: branding and web design.

The decision not only re-energized Joana's team but also ensured that Sophie received phenomenal service in every domain. It was a clear demonstration of the benefits of aligning client relationships with one's strengths and passions.

Imagine if Joana hadn't taken this action. From experience, this is how we know the story would have played out instead: Joana and her team would have grown increasingly resentful of the work they were doing and therefore of the client. They would have started to diminish the quality of their service or, even worse, find themselves snapping back at yet another urgent social media request. This would have in turn led to a poor experience for the client and eventually a termination of the contract. Not to mention, it would have ended all the referrals this client had been sending Joana their way.

This is what can happen when you work with clients who are not ideal for you. At some point, you're going to create a conflict, whether intentionally or not, because you're going to be frustrated with those clients. Those clients will think you're not providing them with good service – and they'll be right. It doesn't serve you or the client when you stay in a less than ideal situation. If you do, you'll have former clients going out into the world telling anyone who will listen that you're the worst person to work with. And while navigating nonideal client relationships can be challenging, remember that parting ways, or redefining the project parameters, doesn't have to be painful. Done with care and integrity it can result in a win-win experience for all parties involved, setting the stage for more ideal clients to come your way.

Creating Your Red Velvet Rope Policy

The benefits of working with ideal clients are many and meaningful:

- You'll get to do your best work.
- You'll feel invigorated and inspired.
- You'll connect with clients on a deeper level.
- You'll feel successful and confident.
- You'll know your work matters and is changing lives.
- You'll feel fully self-expressed.

Joana knows her ideal client's traits so well she even created a framework for them:

Here's her DREAM client framework:

- **Decisive** (can make decisions in a timely manner)
- **Respectful** (of Joana's time, her team's time, and their process)
- **Engaged** (communicative and responsive throughout the project, giving honest feedback in a timely and constructive manner to help move the project forward)
- **Adaptable** (open to new ideas out of their comfort zone and new tools to facilitate the process)
- **Motivated** (committed to the vision of their company and the end goal of the project)

Your list might look completely different.

Take heed: how much money a client has or doesn't have is not what this is about. Your Red Velvet Rope Policy considers *what kind of person* you're dealing with, not how much this person has or doesn't have. People with fat wallets are often the primary consideration for many creatives who wind up working with clients who are less than ideal. Notice that my list considers the *qualities* of my ideal clients first – who they *are* rather than what they *have* or the circumstances they're in.

1.1.4 Written Exercise: Define your ideal client. What type of people do you love being around? What do they like to do? What do they talk about? With whom do they associate? What ethical standards do they follow? How do they learn? How do they contribute to society? Are they smiling, outgoing, or creative? What kind of environment do you want to create in your life? And who will get past the Red Velvet Rope Policy that protects you? List the *qualities, values, or personal characteristics* you'd like your ideal clients to possess.

1.1.5 Written Exercise: Now let's look at your current client base. Who do you love interacting with the most? Who do you look forward to seeing? Who are the clients who don't feel like work to you? *Who is it you sometimes just can't believe you get paid to work with?* Write down the names of clients, or people you've worked with, who you love to be around.

1.1.6 Written Exercise: Get a clear picture of these people in your head. Write down the top five reasons you love working with them. What about working with them turns you on?

1.1.7 Written Exercise: Now go deeper. If you were working only with ideal clients, what qualities would they absolutely *need* to possess for you to do your *best* work with them? Be honest and don't worry about excluding people. Be selfish. Think about yourself. For this exercise, assume you will work only with the best of the best. Be brave and bold and write without thinking or filtering your thoughts.

How different were the last two lists? You may have nailed it the first time. Maybe you're right on track, or maybe you have some perfect client opportunities to uncover.

By knowing who your ideal clients are and selecting only those who have at least 75% of the qualities you identified, you will have more fun, accomplish greater results, and experience incredible joy and fulfillment in your business.

This is beneficial because you'll be able to identify other ideal clients you'd love to work with. People enjoy knowing how important they are to you, and if they know you do your best work with, and for, people like them, they are much more inclined to work with you. It raises the stakes for them.

Look at these requirements and think about how you can start to turn them into filters. Joana takes this as seriously as she takes preparing formula for her baby's bottles. Just as she won't compromise on the quality of the water to ensure her baby's well-being by filtering and boiling it, she is equally conscious when it comes to accepting projects for her agency. Just as contaminated water could be harmful for her newborn, the wrong client can disrupt the well-being of her team. Just like every mother will only give the best to her child, Joana is careful about only bringing in the best-fit clients and projects so that she and the team can perform at optimal level, enjoy collaborations, and produce their best work.

Joana's client filters include these:

- She feels more energized and excited after working with her clients.
- Her clients seek out her and her team's expertise and trust in their creative guidance.
- Her clients are committed to the project and honor their part of the contract such as giving feedback in a timely manner.
- Her clients get along well with her team.
- Her clients are naturally optimistic and do not complain (much).

1.18 Written Exercise: What filters do you want to run your perfect clients through?

Ideal Clients, the Duds, and Everyone Else

As you eliminate the duds, you'll open up room for ideal clients. As you use the Book Yourself Solid system to attract more and more ideal clients, you'll discover that you're happier, more vibrant, more energetic, and more productive. You'll be on fire. You'll be giving your clients the best of yourself and your services, and you'll love every minute of it.

1.19 Written Exercise: Draw a simple table with three columns. Label the first column "Ideal Clients," the second "Duds," and the third "Everyone Else." Now divide your clients into these three groups. Don't hold back or leave anyone out.

As if that weren't enough, you may begin to notice that many of your midrange clients, those who made neither the ideal client nor the dud list, are undergoing a transformation. Why? While you were working with dud clients, you weren't performing at your best. If you think that that wasn't affecting your other clients, think again. The renewed energy and the more positive environment you'll create as a result of letting go of the duds will

most likely rejuvenate the relationships between you and some of your mid-range clients, turning many of them into ideal clients.

1.1.10 Written Exercise: Brainstorm your own ideas for reigniting these midrange clients. Contemplate the ways in which you may, even inadvertently, have contributed to some of your clients being less than ideal clients. Are there ways in which you can light a new fire or elicit greater passion for the work you do together? Do you need to set and manage expectations more clearly right from the beginning? Can you enrich the dynamics between you by challenging or inspiring your clients in new ways? Go ahead – turn off your left-brain logical mind for a moment and let your right-brain creativity go wild.

Carefully observe the ways in which your relationships with your clients begin to shift as you embrace the Book Yourself Solid way. Some of your midrange clients may fall away. Others may step up their game and slide into the ideal client category.

When you're fully self-expressed, fully demonstrating your values and your views, you'll naturally attract and draw to yourself those you're best suited to work with, and you'll push away those you're not meant to work with.

A Perpetual Process

The process we've just worked through is one that you must do on a regular basis. Pruning your client list is a perpetual process because all relationships naturally cycle. The positive and dynamic relationships you have now with your ideal clients may at some point reach a plateau, and the time may come to go your separate ways. You'll get more comfortable with the process over time. It's one that has so many rewards that it's well worth the effort.

Let author Tom Peters sum it up for us: “This is your life. You *are* your clients. It is fair, sensible, and imperative to make these judgments. To dodge doing so shows a lack of integrity.”

We’ll go one step further and say that doing so is one of the best and smartest business and life decisions you can make. It’s crucial to your success and your happiness. Prune regularly, and before you know it, you’ll be booked solid with clients you love working with.