



Design Node Document

B02 Building Trust

B02.01 The Client Comfort Zone: Find it, and keep your project within it

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10.2013

We know, but tend to forget, that a new project is one of the biggest investments a private client will ever make. We know, but tend to forget, that a public new project involves a range of political issues that can carry big and diverse risks.

We “manage projects”

In a small practice, where we are often both Principal and Project Manager, we think about the client a lot until the project starts, and then tend to shift our focus to the project.

If we are in a Project Manager role in a bigger practice, chances are that somebody else “sold” the project, and it’s given to us to “manage”.

The name says it all: “PROJECT Manager”, not “CLIENT Manager”.

The reason these issues are important is that while we are in “project management mode”, we tend to see the client as somebody performing their side of project realization: providing information, answering questions, approving designs, paying invoices, and otherwise staying out of the way.

In short, if we are highly project-focused, we are not very client-focused.

Client fears

Many clients come to projects with a lot of “baggage” – fears that the project will run over budget, not be finished on time, not be what they want, etc. Many have heard horror stories about working with designers. Some think that architects only want to use their money to win design awards. Others are sure that if they admit to having a contingency allowance, the architects will use it all.

All this baggage is shoved into the background once the “go” decision is made - but it does NOT go away. It waits, lurking in the shadows, for some sign that the fears were justified.

That is the picture in a big share of projects, for all except seasoned, sophisticated, experienced clients who’ve “been there” before. Largely, we are unaware they feel that way unless and until they kick up a fuss.

What’s important is the *detail* of where a client is coming from: Which fears are major, which are minor? For the most part, we don’t know, because generally they don’t tell us unless we ask. They may not even be consciously aware of some of these fears; they simply have morphed over into “attitudes”, like the one about “all architects just want our money so they can win design awards”. This attitude simply masks fears that the designers may not be adequate stewards of their hard-earned money.

Every client will consciously or unconsciously assign different values or importance to different fears in their set. Some might be deeply concerned about union issues; for others it isn’t even on their radar. Others may have concerns about site or soil conditions; it wouldn’t even occur to others. Others may worry about trouble from stakeholders and public opinion; others will simply assume that the lawyers will take care of it.

The Client Comfort Zone

Package all of these together, and you get something I call the Client Comfort Zone. Think of this “zone” as a map of the client’s complex set of attitudes about the project. The things they feel they can cope with and handle are inside the zone; the stuff they worry about and aren’t confident about is outside the zone.

If you can keep a project inside the client’s Comfort Zone from start to finish, you will have one very happy client. This means you deal differently with issues inside and outside that zone.

First, you have to know something about where the edges of this zone are – and they will be different for every client, even within the same building type. There is one simple way to find that out, which is to ask a lot of thoughtful questions, as early in the project as possible.

If this thinking resonates, you’ll need to start to erect a framework to describe the Client Comfort Zone, so you’ll know what to do to live within it.

The Client Comfort Zone is a factor in most facets of the design & delivery process:

1. Creating the Project Management Plan
2. Writing your proposal
3. Creating the Project Risk Plan
4. Creating the Project Quality Plan
5. Creating the Communication Plan / Client Care Plan
6. Providing ongoing advice to the client
7. Managing design change orders
8. Setting up project delivery
9. Managing construction change orders

There isn’t room in this article to discuss exactly how your knowledge of your client’s Comfort Zone should guide the way you develop each of these steps. Generally, in each you need to cover any scope item that reflects a factor in the Client Comfort Zone. What this does is to show clients that you have an appreciation of the their thoughts about the project, and that you will be focused on creating a project that minimises their discomfort and is more likely to achieve their goals.

In short, you are CREATING CONFIDENCE in your approach to the project.