



BUSINESS

## DEFLATE THE TIRE KICKERS

### HOW

Ever jumped through new-business hoops for a prospect who, it turns out, had no intention of hiring you? Here's how you can identify and deal with these time-wasters.

Too many designers are tempted by the dangling carrot of a new project, investing valuable time in preliminary meetings, research and proposal-writing—only to receive from the prospect a brief “Thanks, but we’ll pass” (and sometimes not even that). Learning to vet these tire kickers in advance will save you time, money and lots of disappointment.

Tire kickers bleed your precious creative energy; they ask you to invest yourself in the discovery stage of their project, only to demand more of your attention. Worse than wasting time and energy, these accidental parasites waste your money—because the time you

spend listening to their wants and writing proposals should be spent on revenue-generating projects.

There's an alternative, however, and not only will it increase your odds of landing paying, profitable clients, chances are it will improve the quality of the projects you secure, too. With a little strategic planning and a few thoughtful questions, you can weed out those tire kickers before they take you for a ride.

#### 1: POSITION YOURSELF FOR PAYING CLIENTS

You could conceivably post a sign scrawled with the words “Don't waste my time!” across your studio door,

ILLUSTRATION BY LIZA CORRETT [www.lizacorrett.com](http://www.lizacorrett.com)

*“If someone wants the Ferrari they know what it is and have already made up their mind. It’s the guy looking for the car that’s loaded, gets a ton of mileage and costs squat who will burn you.”*

ANTHONY DEMPSEY

but let’s face it: The time wasters aren’t going to pay much attention. Your best first step, then, is to carefully position yourself to attract more serious buyers and fewer tire kickers from the outset.

Start by refining your online marketing. How much time do you spend explaining your design process, your standard working terms and all the various services you provide? If folks had the ability to access this information on your website from the get-go, you could use phone and face-to-face meetings to address specific concerns and close sales. Providing such detailed information online also sends the message to window-shopping web surfers that you take your business seriously—and so should they.

Next, take a look at who you’re actively targeting. Blanketing every small business within a hundred-mile radius with the same postcard campaign may get the phone ringing, but the proportion of callers to buyers is hardly worth the effort and expense. Pre-qualify mailing lists by sending targeted materials only to companies who you know pay for quality business services. How do you know? Call them and ask.

## **2: LOOK FOR RED FLAGS**

Focused messaging crafted to attract high-paying, serious clientele creates a buffer between you and every tire kicker out there, but it can’t stop them all. You’ll have to learn a few more tricks to weed out the ones that slip through your well-oiled marketing machine. Once a prospect has contacted you, it’s time to play detective. Look for clues that will reveal the true nature of these time suckers before it’s too late. Here are a few questions to ask yourself about these prospects:

**How did they find you?** Although some of your strongest prospects may come from referrals, beware the ones that come from slow-paying, high-maintenance clients, or worse: what San Francisco design-firm owner Deanna Alcorn calls “the friend-of-a-friends” who want a full identity for their “hobby business” but don’t really understand what that entails. These folks either aren’t serious about buying or aren’t serious about paying. In either case, it’s best to identify them early and move on.

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**Do they know the value of good design?** Many tire kickers never sign a contract simply because they decide the cost of quality graphic design isn't worth it. Comments like, "I would've done it myself, but I just don't have the time" or "This really shouldn't take you long" are dead giveaways that the person you're talking to doesn't understand (or care) how graphic design can impact both his top and bottom line.

**What are they really asking for?** Some tire kickers expect the world in exchange for nothing. Keep an eye out for prospects who go fishing for free advice, or who ask you to do a little work up front before they make a final decision. People who try to take advantage like this are unlikely to ever hire you fair and square.

**Are their expectations realistic?** You want prospects who have a clear understanding that tight turnarounds and large projects require a bigger budget. "If someone wants the Ferrari," says art director Anthony Dempsey, a Columbus, OH-based designer, "they know what it is and have already made up their mind. It's the guy looking for the car that's loaded, gets a ton of mileage and costs squat who will burn you."

**Are they making wild promises?** Many tire kickers just want a bargain and will make extravagant promises to get one. They'll shamelessly dangle all kinds of carrots in front of you: more and bigger projects in the future, an unending stream of referrals or big exposure with your name in lights. But if they won't put their commitments into a contract, you'll likely never see them fulfilled.

### 3: ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

When first speaking with prospects, take your cue from Columbo. No matter how many questions he asked his suspects, he always finished with, "Oh, just one more thing ..."

To really understand a potential buyer's motives, you have to dig deep by asking the right questions, like these:

**Do you have a budget set aside for this project? What's your range?** These two questions are the scariest to ask for many designers, but it will help separate realistic design buyers from the tire kickers who, for whatever reason, aren't willing to fairly compensate you for your hard work.

**Are you getting quotes from other designers for this project?** This is an often overlooked, yet simple question that tells you if you're one of many. If it turns out the prospect is shopping around, follow up with, "What will be driving your final decision?"

**What's your timeline? What are the project objectives? Has content been developed?** All of these questions can reveal the project's scope and can tell you if your prospect has thought through her needs. If she seriously resists these questions, odds are high that she's not going to give you what you need to successfully complete the job.

**Who will be making the final decisions?** It's essential to know from the beginning whether or not you're dealing with the right person. London-based freelance designer Aidan Walsh learned this the hard way. He thought he had a branding project in the bag until

## SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME ON TIRE KICKERS?

It's all well and good to vet your prospects, but how can you tell when you're doing it right? While every designer's intake and bidding process is different, Cameron Foote recommends the following guidelines in his book "The Creative Business Guide to Running a Graphic Design Business."

- The time you spend bidding on projects should average 1% to 2% of all hours worked, with more profitable projects commanding up to 8%.
- The labor cost of bidding on a job (excluding the initial sales call) should equal 1% to 2% of the job's estimated revenue.

This means that if you work a 40-hour week, you should be spending anywhere from 30 minutes to three hours creating estimates and proposals (if you have staff, don't forget to multiply labor hours by the total number of employees). Seem low? That's why it's so important to weed out the tire kickers, so fewer bids land more projects.

the third client meeting—when an unfamiliar project manager arrived unannounced, expecting to see Walsh's portfolio. Of course, he'd left it behind, having already shown it to the contacts he thought were heading the project. Had he known who the decision makers were from the beginning, things might have turned out differently.

### 4: LET THE TIRE KICKERS SELF-SELECT

You can often use a prospect's lack of commitment to your advantage by creating small obstacles that encourage him to pull out of the running. This leaves you time to spend with the serious buyers who recognize those obstacles as part of the hiring process.

Noah Scalin, principal of the Richmond, VA-based design firm Another Limited Rebellion, always requires a phone call to kick off the bidding process. "E-mail is cheap and doesn't take much effort to send," he says. "Moving immediately to the phone cuts out a percentage of the chaff."

Another technique Scalin uses is to discuss price up front, being clear that he's offering estimates and not firm quotes. Most tire kickers will let you know right away if your price is beyond what they're willing to spend.

Many designers also find it effective to require potential clients to fill out an abridged creative brief before getting too involved in the bidding process. Web designer and programmer James Tadeo has seen a notable drop in tire kickers since he implemented a 30-question online form.

"If they take the time to fill out the form," notes Tadeo, who's based in Brampton, Ontario, "they're pretty serious about what they're proposing to do." While Tadeo's survey may seem long and potentially off-putting for prospects, he often fills out the form himself during his initial telephone conversation with his potential clients.

### 5: CUT THEM LOOSE (GENTLY)

So you've positioned yourself to attract only the most serious design buyers by carefully refining your online and offline marketing. Your intake questionnaire has reduced the number of frivolous e-mails and go-nowhere phone calls you get. You've even learned to spot the telltale signs of the tire kicker from a mile away and to ask pointed questions to reveal the less obvious ones.

But how do you cut the conversation short without creating ill will?

Start by using the tools already at your disposal. If your prospect seems like she just isn't serious enough, request that she review your working process on your website and get back to you. Or, ask her to fill out your questionnaire so you can get can back to her. This should be enough to send her packing without making her feel rejected.

Another common response is to try and outbid the tire kicker. Be aware, though, that your prospect might just agree to your higher fee, so make sure he's more "tire kicker" than "troublemaker."

Your best option, though, is to confront unwanted prospects with the truth, which will likely vary case by case. Perhaps you're just too busy right now and aren't taking on new clients. Or you don't feel that the project is a good fit for your studio—just be sure to explain why, whether it's the size of the budget or the unrealistic timeline.

Being forthright but firm with these unwanted prospects demonstrates your professionalism and tact. It also leaves the door open—should they ever want to walk through it at some point in the future (under your terms, of course). **HOW**

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