

Writers' Red Flags

By Erik Sherman

Writers often talk about red flags - those warning signs that something might go terribly wrong in an assignment or with a client. Although no one red flag is proof of a problem, its existence should at the minimum give you pause to think and consider whether you're about to make a big mistake. Here are some common ones:

- **Client wants to start you at a lower rate.** By itself this is not necessarily a problem, as many editors have been burned and want to limit potential financial damage up front. But you should get an understanding that things will get more expensive for the client the next time around. If not, don't expect any more money.
- **Client is a start-up and can't afford to pay much.** Walk away quickly. Unlike the one that has the money but is wary of a new writer, this one has little. Putting off reasonable pay is a form of investing, except no one is giving you a piece of the company.
- **First job is a rush job.** Not necessarily a problem, but any rush job should command rush fees. Also look for signs of the client being disorganized, as that might be the reason for the rush - and isn't likely to change.
- **Customer refers to writing as *wordsmithing* or by some equivalent term.** This is the client that thinks he or she could do the writing if only there were enough time. All you're going to do is "clean up" what you're given. Of course, that clean up will require a hazmat suit.
- **You hear, "The contract? Oh, it's a good one. Just go ahead and start the writing."** What comes in will be 15 pages of dense legalese that turns you into a bonded servant. Any company that has a contract can send a copy for you to consider. If they don't seem anxious to let you see it, it's probably because they'd rather you get good and committed before they let you have it - in more ways than one.
- **You need to perform a sample assignment.** It's one thing to take a test to check grammar - required by some companies with particular requirements or anal habits. And book publishers usually ask for at least an outline if not a sample chapter. But writing without guarantee of getting paid is called spec, and it's a good way to waste your time.
- **No pay, but credit.** There are occasions when not getting cash for a piece might make sense, but these are few and far between. For the vast majority of the time, there should be money. There's a saying among experienced writers: you can die of exposure.
- **Payment is running slow and the client wants to assign another piece.** Of *course* the client wants to assign something else - while he or she still can until you realize that you're still not getting paid. It's a great way to string someone along.

- **The client is unclear in what he or she wants.** If the client seems to be rushing past the details you'd need to properly undertake the assignment, it's fairly certain that there will be one cycle of change after another, along with a dropping hourly rate that you realize.
- **Client gets hostile about negotiating contracts.** Negotiating terms for a business relationship is a normal and expected part of commerce. If a client gets unpleasant if you ask for changes or the company has a "take it or leave it" attitude, walk away, unless the contract is particularly benign. If they are this controlling at the start, it will only get worse.
- **You get a "fuzzy" assignment.** You always need to get clients to articulate what they want. If they can't say it themselves, then you need to have them agree to a detailed approach that you suggest. That's a law of the writing universe - and if it doesn't happen at the beginning of the assignment, it will have to happen by the end, or the client won't be happy and won't want to pay. It's *much* easier and less time-consuming to do this up front. If the client is resistant, move on to one that isn't.

Avoiding red flag clients won't always keep you out of trouble – and not all red flags will turn into terrible experiences. But unless you have a really good reason to walk across a mine field, a detour is usually smarter.

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