

||| DILEMMAS

She uses sarcasm, she knows all the tricks



SUSAN PINKER
PROBLEM SOLVING

Dear Susan:

Over the past three years as a new entrepreneur in the high-tech sector, I have worked with a whole gamut of clients -- from the overly controlling to the laissez-faire. I've only recently encountered a new species: the jerk. She demands my constant attention but, worst of all, can be very rude. She often blurts out comments that sound like accusations. Implying that she does not have my undivided attention on the phone, she said aggressively: "What are you, multitasking over there?" Or at the beginning of a meeting, instead of hello, she said, "It's okay, don't get up," suggesting that I'm not up to her standards of courteous behaviour. If I say "that's great" about her project, she replies: "Don't get too excited." I could go on and on, but my question is simple: How do I handle a disrespectful client?

--Barometer Rising

Dear Barometer,

Bob Dylan may have been referring to a higher power when he sang, "You gotta serve somebody," but he could just as well have been singing about your client.

It may seem as if she's explicitly trying to bait you, but sarcasm is just her way of talking. You have to decide what it's worth to put up with what sounds like sneering. If she's one of your best contacts, then keep your eye on the prize.

You can always take her literally -- as good a way as any to defuse her

form of ridicule. If she gripes about multitasking, take her at her word: "I'm listening. Please go on." Try not to mirror her with sing-songy irony, a misplaced emphasis or a pregnant pause that says the opposite of what you mean, as in puh-lease (pause). If she says "don't get up," you say: "It's a pleasure. How have you been?"

With impeccable manners you can glide right past the mockery. The worst that can happen is that she'll think you're humourless. You get to keep her account and you get the last laugh.

But there are several caveats.

Your client may be a clunky communicator, but she also may be trying to tell you something. If you can see past her mild contempt, you could glean something from her gibes that might help you with other clients.

Her theme seems to be that you are too relaxed, not crisply on the ball. Ultimately there may be no pleasing this one, but you'll want to make sure you please the rest before they very politely take their chequebooks and go elsewhere.

If you haven't done it yet, solicit structured feedback about customer service from your client base, or hire a consultant to do it for you via one of those scorecards.

Next, establish better boundaries, or a client like this can inhale your most precious resources -- time and patience. I say this after having been neatly hooked and landed by a business associate who managed to hijack entire days with relentless and escalating demands before I realized what was happening. Decide in advance when it's best to return her calls, set them up as firm appointments and then give her your full attention for that prescribed time.

If after all this you still cannot stomach her style, try to find a partner in your firm with more forbearance. Explain to this client that your duties in

the company have shifted, unfortunately (no pause), and that your partner is taking over some of your files. Then, at her next outrageous demand, you can hum a different Dylan line in your head: "It ain't me, babe. It ain't me you're looking for."

Dear Susan:

With my brothers, I own a large independent supermarket and am about to open another one in a different part of town. This is a full-service store that serves a multiethnic clientele, with a butcher counter and staff serving customers cheese and gourmet items, such as olives, coffee, etc. We like to provide excellent service. My problem is that I am having trouble finding and keeping staff. People lie about their experience. Or, they'll start and then later ask to be paid in cash. Some arrive on their first day with someone else's social insurance card. Others leave right after the training period. How can I tell who's serious and who isn't?

--Revolving Door

Dear Revolving,

I don't know where you're recruiting, but the best places are within your network and where you do your own shopping. Why? Lying is the natural state of affairs for most of us, with people fibbing an average of twice every 10 minutes, and 81 per cent of people lying during job interviews, according to a 2006 study by Robert Feldman, a social psychologist at the University of Massachusetts, and his former student, Brent Weiss.

Who is most likely to pull the wool over your eyes? Strangers, people who think they'll never meet you again, extroverts and people who lack the technical skills you're asking for.

Lying is nothing unusual, just a slice of everyday life, Prof. Feldman says. Women lie more often than men, probably because they're more sensitive

to others' needs and reactions and adjust their behaviour accordingly, he says. "Women use lies to make the other person feel better, to smooth over the social situation. Men lie to make themselves look better and to exaggerate their accomplishments."

Thus, expect more tall tales from men in job situations. And unless you're offering fabulous incentives, don't expect anyone to stay very long. Retail and consumer services have the highest turnover rate of any sector, according to Statistics Canada. Most sales clerks and cashiers stayed in a job between one to three months in 2006 (compare that to the majority of Canadians with other jobs, who stayed an average of one to five years).

That turnover rate is one reason why Starbucks, with 2,100 stores opened in 2006 and another 2,400 targeted in 2007, recruits 200 employees a day through personal outreach, using interviews with coffee-tasting sessions, follow-up phone calls, handwritten notes and Starbucks gift cards, whether or not an applicant gets hired. The idea is to generate goodwill and loyalty by treating "candidates as well as we treat our customers," according to Jason Warner, the chain's director of North American recruiting.

If you hire people in your network and add personal touches to the interview process, employees will be less likely to scam you and you'll know more about their background.

Anonymous recruiting -- through newspaper ads, flyers or job sites -- won't necessarily pick up the people who care what you think, who reflect the character of your business or who are already in other jobs. Add in a structured interview -- the same questions and scoring grid for everyone -- says Vic Catano, a professor of psychology at St. Mary's University, and you'll be better able to assess your candidates.

All this will cost you, but not as much as it's costing you now.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.
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