

[What Should You Never Say to a Client?](#)

By [Cordell Parvin](#) on October 24th, 2012

When I was a young lawyer, my first mentor gave me a great deal of advice about clients. Among the many things he told me:

- Clients want to work with lawyers who have confidence inspiring personalities
- Clients do not want lawyers to talk down to them and tell them (before being asked) what they should do
- Clients do not want to work with lawyers who are either needy or greedy

Sometimes lawyers do not think about the words they use when speaking to clients. I recently read an [American Express Open Forum](#) blog: [The 8 Things You Should Never Say to a Client](#). It is really on point. Before you read it, think about what you would put on that list.

When a client has thanked you, have you ever responded: “No problem?”

Which of those two words do you think the client heard most clearly? What did the client think when hearing “no problem?” At best the client likely thought there was almost a problem. At worst the client thought it was a problem for you to help the client.

When I practiced law, it always drove me crazy when I heard young lawyers tell a client “no problem.” I decided to do some research to find out if I was the only one put off by that phrase.



I found an interesting article by [Howard Brinton: 7 Phrases to Avoid with Clients](#). The article was for realtors, but the phrases also applied to lawyers. I liked the article because not only had Brinton chosen “no problem.” He also included several other phrases that will not help with clients. I will paraphrase some of them.

Phrase 1: “Here’s your problem” Clients generally know they have a problem. They would not be visiting with you if they didn’t. As Brinson suggests, a better phrase might be: “Here’s our challenge.” A challenge is better than a problem and our is better than your because it denotes we are in this together.

Phrase 2: “I’ll Try” Clients do not have confidence in lawyers who try or even try their best. “I’ll try” is code for I won’t succeed. Whenever I hear “I’ll try” from a lawyer I coach I know they will probably not do what they say they will try to do. Instead of “I’ll try” use the phrase “I will.”

Phrase 3: “But” or Yes, But” Once again this is code for it won’t happen. “We can offer that much to settle your case, “but” I can’t guarantee we will be successful.” If you say that you have already decided you won’t be successful. As Brinson suggests use the word “and” instead. “We can offer that much to settle your case “and” if we are not successful we can take another look at it.”

Phrase 4: “You should” My daughter, Jill taught me it is a mistake to use this phrase. She told me that when she was a teenager if I told her what she should do, she decided to prove to me I was wrong. “You should offer \$1000.” Instead, Brinson suggests saying: “If we offer \$1000...” or “We may be able to settle this for \$1000.”

What other phrases do you and other lawyers use with clients that convey the wrong messages?

Cordell M. Parvin built a national construction practice during his 35 years practicing law. At Jenkins & Gilchrist, Mr. Parvin was the Construction Law Practice Group Leader and was also responsible for the firm’s attorney development practice. While there he taught client development and created a coaching program for junior partners. In 2005, Mr. Parvin left the firm and started Cordell Parvin LLC. He now works with lawyers and law firms on career development and planning and client development. He is the co-author of *Say Ciao to Chow Mein: Conquering Career Burnout* and other books for lawyers. To learn more visit his Web site, www.cordellparvin.com or contact him at cparvin@cordellparvin.com.

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