

Things are going along well with your client until one fateful day when they tell you they are not satisfied with your services. That's one scenario. Another is that you've done a great job on one engagement but you don't get asked back for another.

If you are a consultant or a member of an organization that works with clients, you know that closing the deal is only the beginning. The real work comes in delivering something that the client will think is so great that you are top-of-mind for their future requirements. How can you make sure that they are thrilled with your work? The answer is this: You must become a master at setting and managing their expectations.

Here two keys to making sure you and your client stay in synch:

Be Specific. Make sure you are both in agreement with what is going to occur during the time you work together. That means you need to understand the following and have it in a signed contract:

- Exactly what is in and out of scope for the project
- Exactly what you are going to deliver to the client
- How you will do the work
- Key assumptions that you are both making about the engagement
- How issues that arise will be handled
- How you will keep the client informed throughout the project
- How the deliverables you produce will be accepted by the client
- The estimated project schedule
- How and when you will be paid

Be Consistent. One of the biggest mistakes I've seen consultants make is forgetting what's in the contract once they are on the job. The problem comes when suddenly the client wants something that was not specified in the contract and you decide just to slip-it-in. If you are tempted to do more than the client has agreed to pay you for, let them know that you are doing so. Simply say something like, "This is outside the scope of the contract but we are happy to take care of it as long as it doesn't exceed (whatever number of hours or resources you think it will take)". By doing this you build up good will with the client and make it clear that you aren't an endless source for unpaid work. The next time they request services that are outside the scope of the current contract you can say that you would be glad to provide them with a change request, which will cover the cost of the additional work.

Remember to read the contract on a regular basis. I've known many talented consultants who have gotten themselves into hot water with their clients because they simply forgot what they'd agreed to do in the first place.