

# The Red Velvet Rope Policy

*He who trims himself to suit everyone will soon whittle himself away.*

—Raymond Hull

Imagine that a friend has invited you to accompany her to an invitation-only special event. You arrive and approach the door, surprised to find a red velvet rope stretched between two shiny brass poles. A nicely dressed man asks your name, checking his invitation list. Finding your name there, he flashes a wide grin and drops one end of the rope, allowing you to pass through and enter the party. You feel like a star.

Do you have your own red velvet rope policy that allows in only the most ideal clients, the ones who energize and inspire you? If you don't, you will shortly. Why?

First, because when you work with clients you love, you'll truly enjoy the work you're doing; you'll love every minute of it. And when you love every minute of the work you do, you'll do your *best* work, which is essential to book yourself solid.

Second, because you *are* your clients. They are an expression and an extension of you. Do you remember when you were a teenager and your mother or father would give you a hard time about someone you were hanging out with? Your parents may have said that a particular kid reflected badly on you and was a bad influence. As a teen you may have thought about how unfair that felt, but the truth is that you are the company you keep. Let this be the imperative of your business: Choose your clients as carefully as you choose your friends.

The first step in building your foundation is to choose your ideal clients, the individuals or businesses with whom you do your best work, the people or environments that energize and inspire you. I'm going to help you identify specific characteristics of individuals or organizations that would make them ideal to work with. You will then develop a rigorous screening process to find more of them. I'm also going to help you prune your current client list of less-than-ideal clients.

When I began my business I would work with anyone who had a pulse and a checkbook. Then I began to consider what it would mean to choose my clients. What it would mean to work only with clients that were ideal for me. And thank goodness I did. Now I live by what I call the red velvet rope policy of ideal clients. It increases my productivity and my happiness, it allows me to do my best work, and I have more clients and referrals than I can handle by myself. And so will you.

For maximum joy, prosperity, and abundance, think about the person you are when you are performing optimally, when you are with all the people who inspire and energize you. Now think about all of the frustration, tension, and anxiety you feel when you work with clients who are less than ideal—not so good, right?

Wouldn't it be great to spend every day working with clients who are ideal for you, clients whom you can hardly believe you get paid to work with? This ideal is completely possible once you identify who you want to work with and determine with certainty that you will settle for nothing less. Once you do that, it's just a matter of knowing which of your existing clients qualify and how to acquire more just like them.

## Dump the Duds

Author and business guru Tom Peters takes us a step further. In *Reinventing Work: The Professional Service Firm 50*, he challenges us to dump our dud clients. “Dump my clients?!” you exclaim. I can just hear your shocked protestations and exclamations. “I thought this was a book about getting clients, not dumping them!” But Peters is referring to the *dud* clients—not all of your clients. It sounds harsh, but think about it. Your dud clients are those you dread interacting with, who drain the life out of you, bore you to tears, frustrate you, or worse, instill in you the desire to do them—or yourself—bodily harm, despite your loving nature.

I’m well aware of the many reasons you *think* you can’t dump your dud clients, and I know this can seem really scary early on, but hang in there with me. Embrace the concept and trust that this is sound advice from a loving teacher and a necessary step on the path to booking yourself solid.

Why have clients, or anyone for that matter, in your life who zap your energy and leave you feeling empty? In the first year of being in business on my own, I cut 10 clients in one week. It wasn’t easy. It required a major leap of faith, but the emotional and financial rewards were astonishing. Within three months, I had replaced all 10 and added 6 more. Not only did I increase my revenue, I felt more peaceful and calm than I ever had before, and I enjoyed my clients and my work more.

When I asked myself the question, “Would I rather spend my days working with incredibly amazing, exciting, super cool, awesome people who are both clients and friends, or spend one more agonizing, excruciating minute working with barely tolerable clients who suck the life out me?” I had no choice. I knew the temporary financial loss would be worth the payoff.

**1.1.1 Written Exercise:** To begin to identify the types of clients you don’t want, consider which characteristics or behaviors you refuse to tolerate. What turns you off or shuts you down? What kinds of people should *not* be getting past the red velvet rope that protects you and your business?

**1.1.2 Written Exercise:** Now take a good, hard look at your current clients. Be absolutely honest with yourself. Who among your current clients fits the profile you've just created of people who should *not* have gotten past the red velvet rope that protects you and your business?

**1.1.3 Booked Solid Action Step:** Dump the dud clients you've just listed in the preceding exercise. It may be just one client, or you may need another two pages to write them all down. (Did I warn you that I'd push you to step out of your comfort zone? If I didn't before, I am now.) Is your heart pounding? Is your stomach churning at just the thought? Have you broken out in a cold sweat? Or are you jumping up and down with excitement now that you've been given permission to dump your duds? Maybe you're experiencing both sensations at the same time; that's totally normal.

Taking a Booked Solid Action Step is a bold action and requires courage. And courage is not about being fearless—it's about owning your fear and using it to move you forward, to give you strength. There is no more rewarding feeling than the pride you'll feel once you've moved past the fear to do what you set out to do. Maybe you'll find it easier to take it one step at a time. Start by referring out just one of those dud clients. The feeling of empowerment you'll have once you've done it will motivate you to continue pruning your list of clients until the duds have all been removed.

## **What to Do When You Don't (Yet) Have Clients**

*But, Michael, what if I just started my business and don't yet have clients, let alone dud clients?* Ah, yes, excellent point, my new friend. Consider yourself lucky! You'll never have to worry about dud clients because you'll put your Red Velvet Rope Policy in place on Day One.

In just a moment, you'll begin to create your Red Velvet Rope Policy. If you're starting a new business, and don't yet have many, or any, clients to speak of at this point, as you're working through the exercises, think about current or former co-workers, friends, or even service providers that you've hired in the past. To create your future Red Velvet Rope Policy you'll be able to draw on your past experiences—who inspired you and who made you want to do them bodily harm. Refrain. Rewind. Remember: love and kindness. Love and kindness.

## Pruning Your Client List

If you're struggling with the idea of pruning your client list, keep in mind that it's for your client's benefit as much as it is for yours. If you're feeling empty and drained, or frustrated and dreading the interaction with the client, you're giving that client far less than your best, and it's both of you who are suffering for it. You owe it to these clients to refer them to someone who can, and will, do their best work with them. If you are working with people with whom you do not do your best work, you are out of integrity. And as we discussed earlier, you *are* your clients. When your clients go out into the world and speak of you to others, they are representing you.

With whom do you want to be associated—the duds or the ideal clients? It's also the ideal clients, those who are wildly happy with you and your services, who are most likely to go out and talk about you to others, to refer other clients like themselves, more ideal clients. The fewer duds you allow to hang around, the more ideal clients you have room for, the more referrals you'll get, and so on.

Clients are like family to me, so I know this can be hard. I lived through a period of intense and painful negative energy worrying about those challenging client relationships. It exhausted me and took me away from accomplishing the highest good for my clients. It was impossible for me to be productive, effective, or successful when working with less-than-ideal clients.

Let me share a story with you about myself and my former landscaper, when *I* was the less-than-ideal client. For a variety of reasons, my landscaper and I were just not a good fit for each other. One of them being that every so often I'd cut the grass on a whim and then his guys would show up with nothing to mow. Instead, I'd ask them to do other projects on the property, which I thought was reasonable. Anyhow, the point is, he had issues with me; he knew I wasn't his ideal client, but rather than tell me so, he stayed with me while getting more and more annoyed until he blew up and acted like a jerk, forcing me to let him go. More than likely, he didn't feel comfortable dumping his dud clients, or the idea had never even crossed his mind. Granted, pruning his dud clients wouldn't have been as easy as pruning his clients' trees, but had he not allowed the situation to deteriorate and end on such a bad note, I might have been able to refer other clients to him who would have been ideal for him. His inability to take the booked solid action step of letting his less-than-ideal clients go left both of us dissatisfied with the situation and jeopardized his reputation.

This is what can happen when you work with clients who are not ideal for you. At some point, you're going to create a conflict, whether intentionally or not, because you're going to be frustrated with those clients. Those clients will think you're not providing them with good service, and they'll be right. It doesn't serve you or the client when you stay in a less-than-ideal situation. Please don't make the same mistake my landscaper did. If you do, you'll have former clients going out into the world telling anyone who will listen that you're the worst person to work with.

There's nothing *wrong* with your dud clients, of course. They're just not right for you. Clients who are not ideal for you could be ideal for someone else. So keep in mind that you don't need to fire clients; you just need to help them find a better fit. You can be tactful, diplomatic, and loving. You can even attempt, when appropriate, to refer them to a colleague who might be a better fit. Whenever possible, keep it simple. Try, "I'm not the best person to serve you." Or "I don't think we'd be a good fit."

Are you always going to get a positive response when dumping your dud clients? Probably not. If the first thing that comes to mind is, “I don’t want anyone out there thinking badly of me,” I’m with you. I want everyone to love me, too. But living life fully requires difficult conversations and you can never please everyone. To even try is an exercise in futility, as the following fable demonstrates.

### **The Old Man, the Boy, and the Donkey**

An old man, a boy, and a donkey were going to town. The boy rode on the donkey and the old man walked beside him. As they went along they passed some people who remarked it was a shame the old man was walking and the boy was riding. The man and boy thought maybe the critics were right, so they changed positions.

Later, they passed some people who remarked, “What a shame! He makes that little boy walk.” They then decided they both would walk.

Soon they passed some more people who thought they were stupid to walk when they had a decent donkey to ride. So they both rode the donkey.

Later, they passed some people who shamed them by saying how awful to put such a load on a poor donkey. The boy and man said they were probably right, so they decided to carry the donkey. As they crossed the bridge, they lost their grip on the animal, and he fell into the river and drowned.

The moral of the story? *If you try to please everyone, you might as well kiss your ass goodbye.*

The point is that you are looking for qualities in a person that you resonate with, so don’t limit yourself to just thinking about the clients that you don’t yet have. Your Red Velvet Rope Policy is a filtration system that lets in ideal clients. However, you can choose to loosen or tighten the rope at will. I’m not (necessarily) asking you to turn away your very first clients. I understand what you’re up against. When you start your business, if you feel that you’d like to keep your red velvet rope a little looser so you can work with more clients, go ahead. Just make sure

you know what is ideal and what isn't ideal about the people you're letting into the VIP room. As you become booked solid, you'll tighten your red velvet rope and become even more exclusive so as to work only with those that energize and inspire you—and most important—allow you to do your best work.

## Creating Your Red Velvet Rope Policy

The benefits of working with ideal clients are many and meaningful:

- You'll have clean energy to do your best work.
- You'll feel invigorated and inspired.
- You'll connect with clients on a deeper level.
- You'll feel successful and confident.
- You'll know your work matters and is changing lives.
- The magic of you will come to life.

My ideal clients have these qualities:

- Bright (full of light and easily excitable).
- Resilient (keep coming back).
- Courageous (face their fears).
- Think big (their projects benefit large groups of people).
- Value-oriented (they gain value from relationships with me and others).
- Naturally collaborative (they contribute to and focus on their solutions).
- Rapid responders (talk today, done tomorrow).
- Positive (naturally optimistic).

Your list might look completely different. Maybe you only want to work with certain types of clients. Maybe reliability or long-term goals

are important to you. Maybe your top priority is how often a client works with you or how many projects they do with you. The economic status of a client may be one factor, but remember—it's only one of many. In fact, it's often a primary consideration for many service professionals who wind up working with clients who are less than ideal. So take heed—the economic status of a potential client should be only one of many considerations. Notice that my list considers the *quality* of my ideal clients first—who they *are* rather than what they *have* or the circumstances they're in.

**1.1.4 Written Exercise:** Define your ideal client. What type of people do you love being around? What do they like to do? What do they talk about? With whom do they associate? What ethical standards do they follow? How do they learn? How do they contribute to society? Are they smiling, outgoing, creative? What kind of environment do you want to create in your life? And who will get past the Red Velvet Rope Policy that protects you? List the *qualities, values, or personal characteristics* you'd like your ideal clients to possess.

**1.1.5 Written Exercise:** Now let's look at your current client base. Whom do you love interacting with the most? Who do you look forward to seeing? Who are the clients who don't feel like work to you? *Who is it you sometimes just can't believe you get paid to work with?* Write down the names of clients, or people you've worked with, whom you love to be around.

**1.1.6 Written Exercise:** Get a clear picture of these people in your head. Write down the top five reasons that you love working with them. What about working with them turns you on?

**1.1.7 Written Exercise:** Now go deeper. If you were working only with ideal clients, what qualities would they absolutely *need* to possess in order for you to do your *best* work with them? Be honest and don't worry about excluding people. Be selfish. Think about yourself. For this exercise, assume you will work only with the best of the best. Be brave and bold and write without thinking or filtering your thoughts.

How different were the last two lists? You may have nailed it the first time. Maybe you're right on track, or maybe you have some perfect client opportunities to uncover.

By knowing who your ideal clients are and selecting only those who have at least 75 percent of the qualities you identified, you will have more fun, accomplish greater results, and experience incredible joy and fulfillment in your business.

This is beneficial because you'll be able to identify other ideal clients you'd love to work with. People enjoy knowing how important they are to you, and if they know you do your best work with, and for, people like them, they are much more inclined to work with you. It raises the stakes for them.

Look at these requirements and think about how you can start to turn them into filters. As for me, I'm like a giant generator—the more gas (meaning projects or clients) I take in, the more power I create. But the wrong kind of fuel causes me to sputter and conk out. Think about a hot sports car running on diesel fuel—not pretty. Neither is this roadster when he gets the wrong kind of energy. Every engine needs a filtration system to keep the system running smoothly and cleanly, just as you need to create a clean system of clients that will filter out the imperfections.

My client filters include these:

- I feel more energized and excited after working with my clients.
- My clients seek open feedback, and better yet, they take action when they get it.

- My clients have faith that leaves some people bewildered and some astonished.
- My clients are not victims; they hold themselves accountable and think about the betterment of others.
- My clients continually seek out and develop valuable personal and professional relationships.
- My clients feel stimulated and energized by the input and collaborative efforts of others.
- My clients use anecdotes and colorful speech, and they share personal stories.
- My clients do not procrastinate; they respond quickly to new opportunities.
- My clients are naturally optimistic and do not complain.

**1.1.8 Written Exercise:** What filters do you want to run your perfect clients through?

### *Ideal Clients, the Duds, and Everyone Else*

As you eliminate the duds, you'll open up room for ideal clients. As you use the Book Yourself Solid system to attract more and more ideal clients, you'll discover that you're happier, more vibrant, more energetic, and more productive. You'll be on fire. You'll be giving your clients the best of yourself and your services, and you'll love every minute of it.

**1.1.9 Written Exercise:** Draw a simple table with three columns: Label the first column "Ideal Clients," the second "Duds," and the third "Everyone Else." Now divide your clients into these three groups. Don't hold back or leave anyone out.

As if that weren't enough, you may begin to notice that many of your mid-range clients, those who made neither the ideal client nor the dud list, are undergoing a transformation. Why? While you were working with dud clients, you weren't performing at your best. If you think that that wasn't affecting your other clients, think again. The renewed energy and the more positive environment you'll create as a result of letting go of the duds will most likely rejuvenate the relationships between you and some of your mid-range clients, turning many of them into ideal clients.

**1.1.10 Written Exercise:** Brainstorm your own ideas for reigniting these mid-range clients. Contemplate the ways in which you may, even inadvertently, have contributed to some of your clients being less than ideal clients. Are there ways in which you can light a new fire or elicit greater passion for the work you do together? Do you need to set and manage expectations more clearly right from the beginning? Can you enrich the dynamics between you by challenging or inspiring your clients in new ways? Go ahead—turn off your left-brain logical mind for a moment and let your right-brain creativity go wild.

Observe carefully the ways in which your relationships with your clients begin to shift as you embrace the Book Yourself Solid way. Some of your mid-range clients may fall away. Others may step up their game and slide into the ideal client category.

*When you're fully self-expressed, fully demonstrating your values and your views, you'll naturally attract and draw to yourself those you're best suited to work with, and you'll push away those you're not meant to work with.*

## A Perpetual Process

The process we've just worked through is one that you must do on a regular basis. Pruning your client list is a perpetual process because all relationships naturally cycle. The positive and dynamic relationships you have now with your ideal clients may at some point reach a plateau, and the time may come to go your separate ways. You'll get more comfortable with the process over time. It's one that has so many rewards that it's well worth the effort.

Let Tom Peters sum it up for us: "This is your life. You *are* your clients. It is fair, sensible, and imperative to make these judgments. To dodge doing so shows a lack of integrity."

I'll go one step further and say that doing so is one of the best and smartest business and life decisions you can make. It's crucial to your success and your happiness. Prune regularly and before you know it, you'll be booked solid with clients you love working with.