

Warning: difficult client ahead

Times are tight. Bills are due – at home and at work – and you need to inject some new client funds into your account. It's during these lean times that you may be tempted to take on any potential client who walks through the office door. But, before you commit your time and expertise to just anybody, take a moment to think about the worst clients you ever represented. Think about the ones who refused to pay, or disputed every penny of their invoice. What about the clients who wanted to tell you how to practice law or refused to let go of unrealistic expectations?

If you think long and hard about these difficult clients, you will probably come to the conclusion that the pay (if you got paid at all) was definitely not worth the aggravation. You can also likely pinpoint that moment during the initial consultation when you questioned whether to take on that person as a client. That was your intuition trying to warn you. While you failed to listen to it back then, you can prevent the same mistake now by looking out for these three warning signs of a difficult client.

Multiple attorneys

Lawyer-hopping can be a huge red flag to the presence of a difficult client. These individuals often go from lawyer to lawyer due to unreasonable dissatisfaction with numerous attorneys. Often times, their discontent stems from the inability to control their attorney's actions. These non-attorneys may feel that they know the law better than a professionally trained legal expert. They become angry when their counsel acts in a manner that they disagree with – even if the lawyer's actions are completely appropriate from a legal perspective.

Lawyer hopping may also signal an unwillingness to pay. Past attorneys may have discontinued representation due to nonpayment of their fees, or the client may have decided to change lawyers rather than pay their bill. When

a potential client comes into your office with a laundry list of past attorneys, take it as a sign to at least proceed with extreme caution.

Special favors

The potential client who asks for special treatment or accommodations should also alert you to potential dangers ahead. They may want you to perform some service for free before officially retaining you, or aggressively attempt to haggle with you about your hourly rate. These "problems in the making" may even ask you to provide inaccurate information to the court, or help them essentially break the law.

The most appropriate response to this type of potential client is an escort out of your office. Not only will this client likely leave you without adequate payment, he or she could also land you in front of your Bar ethics committee.

Desperation

While many potential clients reach out to lawyers during the most vulnerable and distraught times of their lives, sometimes there is a level of desperation that alerts you to potential problems. These individuals may walk in with unreasonable expectations, acting as though you have super powers and demanding that you guarantee a positive outcome. You may also notice a disturbing level of disdain for the opposing party or an obsession with a particular aspect of the case.

Even if a desperate client is willing to pay big bucks for your services, they will likely turn out to be more trouble than you want in your professional life. Taking their case could mean outrageous demands and irrational dissatisfaction with your services. That initial willingness to pay may turn into constant payment disputes and even a Bar complaint. It's always best to beware of the desperate client.

It can be hard turning away potential clients, particularly when profits are on the low side, but it is vitally important to protect your professionalism and your legal practice. It's okay to say no sometimes, especially when your intuition is trying to warn you.

About Erika Winston:

Erika Winston is a freelance writer with a passion for law. Through her business, The Legal Writing Studio, she helps legal professionals deliver effective written messages. Erika is a regular contributor to [TimeSolv](#) and a variety of other publications.