

Should = No

By
Mariette Edwards

There is more guilt and angst over saying, “No” than perhaps any other issue in business. Take, for example, the new client prospect you really don’t have a good feeling about. You don’t want to work with him, but you “should” take him on. After all, you need the money or maybe the knot in your stomach is just what you had for lunch. Pay attention! That “should” is your new best friend! It’s telling you that somewhere deep inside yourself you have already said, “No”.

What happens next? You prove you could have had a brilliant career as a trial attorney as you make compelling arguments on behalf of saying, “Yes”. Since most of us are pretty good persuaders, the chances are excellent that “Yes” wins. The problem, of course, is the consequence. “I should have listened to my gut”, you say at the first sign of trouble. Now it’s even harder to say, “No”. You’re already in too deep.

I recently received a frantic call from a client. Her customer had left her a voice mail changing the terms of their deal. She launched into all the reasons she “should” have said “No” to the client in the first place. Of course, she was right. Her decision to shout down that “should” was turning into a nightmare. Getting out of a situation like this is much harder than not getting into it at all. In the end, she decided to refund the unused portion of her fee and move on.

The Art of “No”

There are many ways to say, “No”. One very effective way is to deflect your response away from the issue at hand. I was recently invited to be a part of a new venture a business associate was starting. Instead of saying, “No” I first requested a thorough review of the project (just to be sure I wasn’t missing an opportunity). That review reinforced my original conclusion that the direction was not aligned with the direction my business was heading. Here’s what I told him . . .

“Thank you so much for inviting me to work with you. Based on my review I can see you have a well thought out plan for this business and it would be an excellent opportunity for someone who is focused on your market. There is someone I know who could be a good prospect for your venture.” I went on to describe that person’s background, experience and goals.

Here’s another way to handle this type of situation . . .

“Unfortunately, I’m fully committed on current projects”. (It’s always useful to have a network of colleagues you can refer business to when the occasion presents itself).

It’s never too late to bail

Stuck on a committee? Can't get off the newsletter you said you'd write for?

“You know, when I accepted the role of _____, I greatly underestimated the time (money/energy/resources/staff) I could commit to it. As a result, I am not able to give it what it deserves. I am resigning (will be leaving/stepping down from) my position effective as _____ on _____.

Saying “No” to your boss

This is tricky and depends on what you are being asked to do. A client was recently in this dilemma. She already had a full plate of responsibilities but the additional work would increase her visibility, influence and network. Instead of saying, “NO” she leveraged her boss's request to ask for (and get) an assistant to do the simpler tasks.

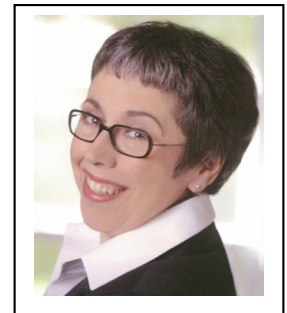
A final word on “No”

- Resist the temptation to justify your response. The more explanation you give, the more power leaks out of your “No”.
- Always convey your gratitude for the invitation to participate, do business with, work for, etc.
- Don't blame anyone else for your decision.
- Don't blurt it out. Take enough time to think through how you will say “No” before you do.

Knowledge is power! If you are telling yourself you really should, you've already decided not to.

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Mariette Edwards is a business and career strategist, consultant, speaker and writer. Mariette publishes Star Maker News, a free monthly on-line newsletter dedicated to professional success. Visit her web site at www.starmakercoaching.com for more information.
<mailto:mariette@starmakercoaching.com>
www.starmakercoaching.com



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