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Dear Client: You're Fired!

Most small business owners have had at least one experience with a client who has not lived up to expectations of professional interaction. We would like to believe that our first impressions of new clients are realistic, and that contact will remain cordial and openly communicative throughout the working relationship. But sometimes the honeymoon phase wears off rapidly for one reason or another, and we find that the evil and bad-tempered Dr. Jekyll was lurking beneath the calm and courteous façade of Mr. Hyde.

Perhaps my problem is that I am not mercenary enough to put up with a client's discourteous behavior. Having survived a period of stress in 1989 that hospitalized me for a week with a complete failure of the gastrointestinal system that was blamed on stress (apparently the usual diagnosis when all else fails), my awareness of the intensity, duration, and types of stresses I experience as a matter of daily life has sharpened. Definitely there are both good stresses and not-so-good stresses. A good stress is the impatience of waiting for a really wonderful vacation, such as this summer's hiking tour through the Czech Republic that I had dreamed of for so long. A not-so-good stress is finding out that the client I had trusted to give me all the information he had about a situation he wanted me to analyze was instead picking and choosing which documents he would release to me. Suddenly I had an ethical problem at hand: if I based my report on what he had provided, it would be a biased view, once that I knew that other



Dear Client:

After months of observing continued and **increasingly bad behavior** on your part, including shouting and harassment, I have decided that our working relationship **cannot continue**. This past week was the second time that you knew of a deadline that you chose not to inform me of until just a few days beforehand, despite your own advance knowledge far ahead of that time. I am sick and tired of having to drop everything, including family time, to meet your arbitrarily and capriciously shortened timeframes. Calling me on Friday to tell me you have a Monday noon deadline that you knew of for nearly two weeks is **unfair**, not to mention inefficient. When the brain cells weary after hours (and days) of no respite, the work progresses more and more slowly. The physical wear and tear makes me more than merely cranky, and now my family is angry with me not only for my bad mood and temper, but also for breaking a date I had with them. **I have given them your number** to let them vent directly at the source of my frustration. Please be near your phone tomorrow morning at 10 to take their call.

Since **you requested my expert opinion** on a matter, that means that you cannot tell me what to write or what not to write, and it means that if I come to a different conclusion than you would like, you cannot tell me I'm wrong and expect me to suddenly change my tune. Perhaps I could, but

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I would have to clearly state that the report was dictated to me by you, like those tell-all biographies “as told to” the so-called author.

I do appreciate that you always pay on time. However, **you may have hired me, but you have not bought me.** My opinion is my own, and it is based on my own analysis of the documents. Incidentally, I have, from my own investigation, found that the material you provided under the guise of being “everything” you had on the issue I am reviewing is in fact not only not “everything”, but carefully chosen to present **only the facts that you want me to know about.**

For your deceit, for your disrespect, for your consistent pattern of volatile behavior, **I am hereby breaking off our relationship.** Simply put, you’re fired. When I have threatened to end our working relationship before, you have begged and pleaded, promising to behave better next time. You have reached your last “next time.” I never went back to old boyfriends, either—**when it’s over, it’s over.**

Incidentally, enclosed please find my final report and your final bill. Please pay as promptly as you have in the past, or I will have someone even meaner than I am contact you to make sure you do so.

Cordially yours . . .

relevant information existed and was in his possession. How many disclaimers and hedging phrases could I load into anything I wrote for him? Surely not enough to soothe my growing doubts about knowing the entire situation.

The client who had contacted me earlier this year with an interesting problem began to display some other burgeoning characteristics that eventually created an overwhelming sense of dread each time I recognized his voice on the other end of the phone. It became clear that his rapidly shortening fuse was directly related to my growing doubts about the validity of his case. For the professional advice that he requested, my rewards were loud interruptions and an insistence that I didn’t understand the point he wanted to present and believed to be self-evident. After three such situations,

followed by knotted stomach and migraine, it was clear to me that the time had come to divorce this client, even though he always paid on time and never complained about the cost. But how to do it? Not in person, for a four-hour round-trip drive would not be safe in such mental and emotional turmoil. Not by phone, since he could talk louder and faster than I could, and often did, right over me. I decided on a letter.

Because it is always better to throw away the first draft of letters written in the heat of emotion, particularly anger, the following has never been carried by the United States Postal Service or by my e-mail service provider. However, there may be some points that resonate with other small business owners, and for that reason, I share my experiences in empathy—or is it commiseration?