



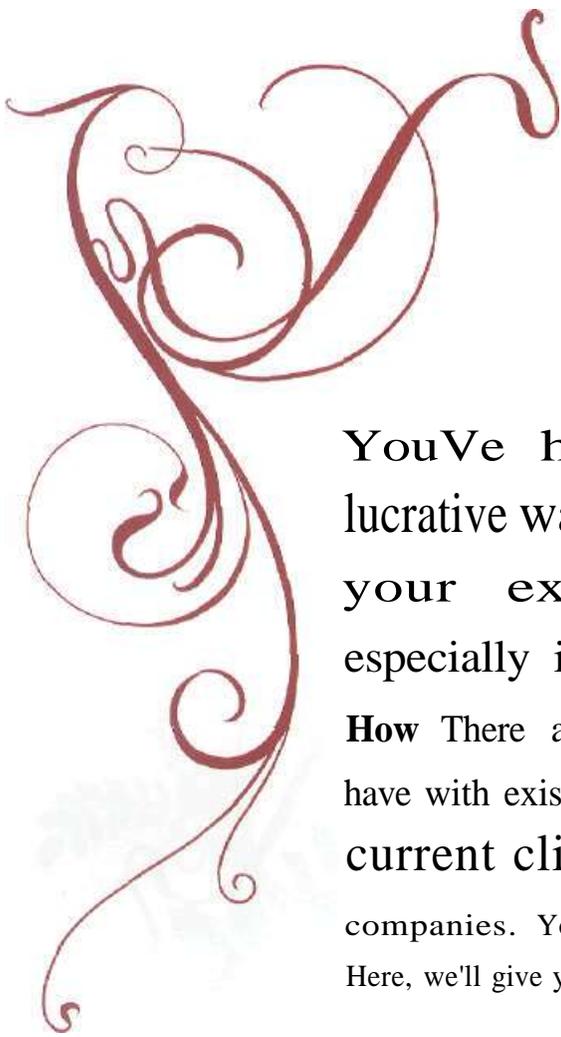
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IN YOUR BACKYARD

BY ILISE BENUN & PELEGTOP

The ticket to landing your next client might be the one you've already got. The keys to getting more projects from your existing clients are knowing which ones to target, when to approach them and what to ask.





You've heard it before: The easiest and most lucrative way to develop new business is through your existing clients — which makes sense, especially in a challenging economy. The question is, **How** There are a couple of ways to mine the relationships you have with existing clients: You can **generate more Work from current clients** or make additional contacts within those companies. You can also get referrals to new prospects from existing clients. Here, we'll give you some tips for making both approaches work for you.

IDENTIFY & FORTIFY YOUR TARGETS

Before you start calling clients and asking for more work and referrals, you need to identify which clients you want more of, because you probably don't want to clone all of them. Be strategic and think clearly about your ideal client. Do they have ongoing work? Do they pay well and on time? Do they value design? This will determine which of your existing clients to pursue for more work.

That last question is especially important. Some companies use a slow economy as an excuse to avoid buying design services because they don't see the value. You must convince them that money spent on design is a strategic investment, even (or especially) when things slow down and their customers become more selective. Now is the time to share your concerns with them and ask how you can help during these bumpy times. Your client needs to know that your best intentions are for their growth. This will make you an indispensable team member, not just a vendor.

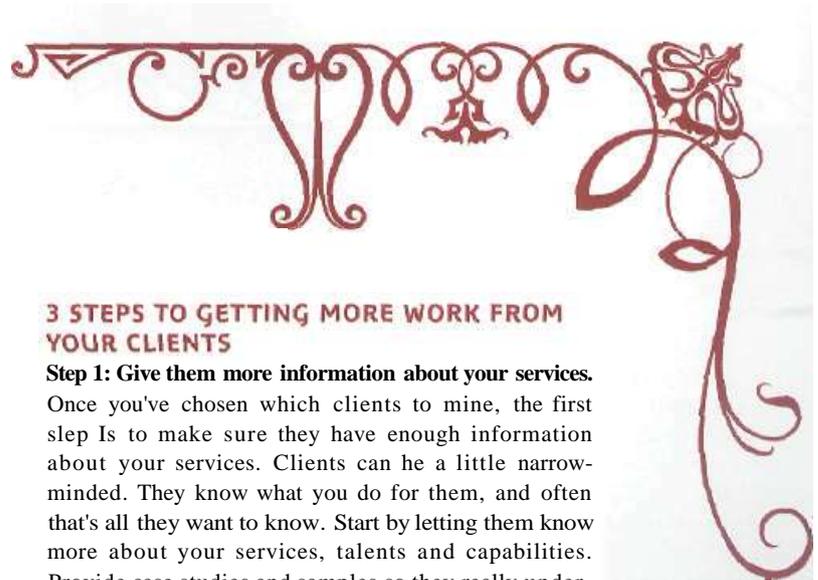
Strong designer/client relationships lay the groundwork for seeking additional projects and referrals. You should practice open communication from your very first contact with a new prospect. For example, always be direct about what you can and cannot do, how long it will take and how much it will cost. This sounds simple and perhaps obvious, but in reality many designers, fearing confrontation, fail to broach or are indirect about topics such as money or scope

creep. As a result, things go unsaid, confusion ensues and communication breaks down. That will make it difficult for you to pursue that client for more work.

Being a great communicator is a way to stand out from the crowd when one design firm's work looks a lot like another's. During the five years that Julie Vail of Boston-based Marquis Design has been in business, she's developed a solid stable of clients in her target market—special events and hospitality design—in part thanks to her strong communication skills. She knows because her clients have told her. One recently wrote, a response to a customer survey, "YOU manage expectations well. You are completely clear at all steps of the process as to scope, time and delivery. I have never felt in the dark." "You pay close attention to detail and you are a really good listener." Another wrote, "I feel like I can always reach you or will at least get a quick return call."

Caring is another quality that makes for strong relationships. If you genuinely care about your client's business and take responsibility for it as if it were your own, they can't help but notice. Vail excels in this area too, and her clients let her know they appreciate it with comments like, "Working with Marquis Design, our project feels like the most important project in the world. We get undivided attention and care."

This doesn't mean most designers don't care about their clients. The difference is that some make it a priority to go the extra mile, while others don't.



3 STEPS TO GETTING MORE WORK FROM YOUR CLIENTS

Step 1: Give them more information about your services.

Once you've chosen which clients to mine, the first step is to make sure they have enough information about your services. Clients can be a little narrow-minded. They know what you do for them, and often that's all they want to know. Start by letting them know more about your services, talents and capabilities. Provide case studies and samples so they really understand instead of just getting "the headlines."

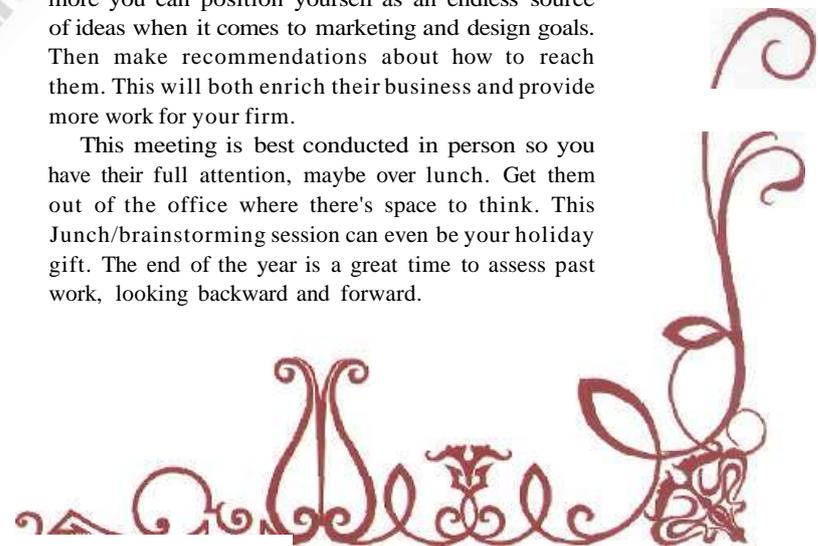
Step 2: Show them you're thinking about them.

Position yourself and your firm as a thought leader and a trusted friend to your clients. Look at your client's business and identify any marketing changes they can make that could result in new work for you. Don't be afraid to share (i.e., give away) ideas that can help your client's bottom line.

Step 3: Find out their goals.

What goals have they set that you can help them reach? To find out, invite them to a "business-growth brainstorming meeting" where you can learn more about their business and come up with even more ideas that will help them generate additional profit. The more you get to know your client's business, the more you can position yourself as an endless source of ideas when it comes to marketing and design goals. Then make recommendations about how to reach them. This will both enrich their business and provide more work for your firm.

This meeting is best conducted in person so you have their full attention, maybe over lunch. Get them out of the office where there's space to think. This Junch/brainstorming session can even be your holiday gift. The end of the year is a great time to assess past work, looking backward and forward.



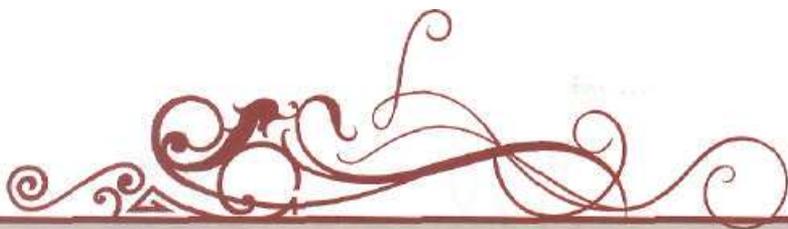
GET MORE OUT OF EXISTING CLIENTS

It's especially important to build your business if you've got one "gorilla" client that represents a majority of your revenue. In fact, any client that makes up more than 20% of your business puts you in a precarious position. If it's a large company with various divisions, one way to expand is to look for additional opportunities within other departments. Think about how you can meet prospective clients in these other departments.

For example, Tara Curtis, a sales representative for Los Angeles-based printer Challenge Graphics, hosts a barbecue lunch for all the employees of her company's best client. It's held at the client's office so she can meet the other players in the building. They even give each employee a custom notepad with their own name on it. "Hosting a companywide luncheon and giving even person in the organization a personalized printed notepad helped us meet new people who we would never have access to," Curtis says. "Oftentimes they

- would remember they had printing jobs Co outsource just by meeting us, which would result in new business." You could do something similar, perhaps on a smaller scale. That way, when one department's budget shrinks, you already have an entree with additional familiar prospects.

Asking for more work isn't about calling a client and saying, "Do you have any more projects for me?" Additional work reveals itself through conversations with your clients



A Case Study: Asking for Referrals

(adapted from "The Designer's Guide to Marketing and Pricing: How to win clients and what to charge them")
by Peleg Top

When I was running Top Design, I realized that most good clients came from referrals. Clients and colleagues were sharing their good experiences with their friends, which helped grow my business. Word of mouth was happening without me doing a thing. But I wondered, if this is happening without any action on my part, what could happen if I got a little more proactive? That's when I saw a great opportunity to grow my business by asking for referrals instead of waiting for them to come to me.

My first step was to identify the people who were most likely to refer my firm to others. According to "The Anatomy of Buzz" by Emanuel Rosen, friends and relatives are the No. 1 source of information for referrals. So I took a closer look at my Rolodex and identified the top 12 clients who have become good friends. I only chose clients who provided the best work with the largest budgets. It was their circle of friends I wanted to tap into. The list was short but powerful.

I planned the first phase of this "referral marketing campaign" to start in February, on Valentine's Day. My team and I went to the local mall to see what could inspire us. We walked out

of the mall with 20 oversized Chinese food take-out boxes and 20 pounds of Hershey's Kisses. We knew that no one could resist chocolate!

Next on our list was creating the "asking vehicle" for the referrals. We designed a custom greeting card that read, "Refer Your Love" on the front. Inside, the personalized card told the clients how much we enjoy working with them, thanked them for their business and asked them for names of a few people who might enjoy our services. We included a self-addressed response card (yes, using old-fashioned snail mail) so they could give us names and contact info for their friends. We delivered our packages by messenger on Valentine's Day.

Within a week, the response cards started coming back. Of the 12 we sent out, we received six back—a 50% return. Of the six cards we received, we got 12 referrals to new prospects. From those 12, we cultivated eight relationships and closed approximately \$160,000 in business in the following two months.

Our cost: \$330, which included messenger services to deliver each package.

Our takeaway: Sometimes you have to ask for the business rather than wait for it to come to you.



ASK FOR REFERRALS

Getting referrals via word of mouth is, of course, the most effective marketing tool. But you can't really call it a "tool," because it's mostly passive. Your clients or vendors pass your name along in response to someone's stated need, which means that the prospect who calls you is in their moment of need, trust is established (through your referral) and all you have to do is say, "Yes, we can do that."

Asking for referrals is different, and it's not something most designers are trained to do. The hardest part is usually finding an appropriate way to broach the topic. Timing is important: A good time to ask for referrals is when you've just completed a project and your client is happy with the deliverables. You'll know they're pleased because they'll usually tell you. And when they do, you can respond with, "I'm thrilled that you're happy with the project. We had a great experience working with you and would love to work with more clients like you. Can you think of anyone who would enjoy the same level of service and creativity?" (This is also the right time to ask for a testimonial.)

You can usually garner a mime or two each time you do this; then, it's simply a question of adding those leads to your active pipeline for follow-up. Keep in mind, however, that responsibility comes with asking

for referrals. Clients won't share their address books and refer you to their colleagues unless they trust you. Your clients need to know that the referrals they give you will be treated well, because you indirectly represent them. If you lack follow-through or you make a mistake, you may make your client look bad. Because there's a lot at stake in this arena, pay close attention to how you treat these corners and how you manage these relationships.

These are just a few of the ways to build your business without launching a major marketing effort. Note that the common denominator is that they all require you to be proactive. You can't sit around hoping your clients will dream up more work for you or wishing that one of their colleagues will walk into their office looking for a designer. You're the one who has to make the phone calls, ask for help and information, and follow through to make it happen. ■■■

Hise Benun and Peleg Top are the co-founders of *Marketing-Mentor.com*, a resource for creative business growth, and co-authors of "The Designer's Guide to Marketing and Pricing: How to win clients and what to charge them" (HOW Hoob, 2008).
TARA CURTIS LOS ANGELES www.challenge-graphics.com
JULIE VAIL BOSTON www.marquisedesign.com