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4 project management tweaks to run a job with less stress and more trust



By Haley Chouinard

The design decisions have been finalized, and it's time to bring your vision to life—here's how to ensure this phase is smooth sailing for you and your clients.

If signing a new client is like dating, the project management phase can be like a marriage. Once you've decided that you're a good match and have built a solid foundation, you move on to rockier terrain, one littered with conversations about everything from a client's feelings to their finances. "In the design phase, you're just enamored with each other and happy to be working together, and then the budget proposal drops and it's a reality check that shifts the relationship into a new gear," says Meredith Heron, a designer based in Toronto. "Once the real work starts and we're sitting together with a contractor talking about money, it changes your role." How you navigate that change can make the difference between a one-time gig and a long-term working relationship.

In order to nail the execution phase, designers must fine-tune their internal processes while also managing their client's idiosyncrasies. And developing trust and goodwill early on can help you to handle a crisis down the line. Heron once had a client melt down when a contractor informed her that he couldn't finish her recently demolished kitchen until after the holidays. "She ran out of the room crying," the designer remembers. "I knew it was important to her that she host Christmas for her family every year, and the idea that she wouldn't be able to was really upsetting."

Heron was ultimately able to save the day and get the project finished in time, but the experience drove home how vital it is to sync up with your client during the high-stress project management stage. Having to write large checks while your home is a construction site isn't the most zen scenario to be in, but a skilled designer can keep a steady hand on the wheel and hold their client's anxieties at bay while also doing the hard work of creating a dream home.

PAINT A REALISTIC PICTURE

The surest way to achieve this balancing act is to manage the client's expectations from the start. While project management isn't typically as fun for the client as the design phase (they're paying invoices instead of being dazzled by beautiful finishes and fine furnishings), Washington, D.C.–based designer Catherine Ebert says that nothing deflates them faster than giving them an unrealistic completion date or a budget that you can't deliver on. "Sometimes that puts us in the bad position, at the beginning of a job, of having to break the news that a project is going to take longer or cost more than the client would hope. Being realistic goes a long way toward building trust," she says.

When setting expectations, it's vital to remember that you're the expert. While your client may want their dream kitchen to be ready in three months, there's a lot to be said for teaching them about the time it takes to achieve an incredible result. At first, it might feel like you're letting them down, but scrambling to pull off a project on an unrealistic budget or timeline ultimately isn't going to benefit either of you—or the project—and can make you look like a rookie.

"Early in my career, I definitely fell into the trap of wanting to be someone who could pull a rabbit out of a hat in order to meet the client's wishes," says Ebert. "Now, 15 years later, I know that there's discipline in not rushing to say, 'Yes, we can make that happen.' I would rather be honest upfront and get the client to settle in for a long haul to get a magical result than run into situations where we're disappointing people."

Years of experience have taught Heron that budgets nearly always change. With that in mind, she tacks on a contingency line item to all of her client estimates for 20 percent of their total budget. "I always tell them, 'You're going to spend it,'" she says. "It might be spent on an unforeseen cost during construction, or they might decide to splurge on the more expensive chandelier that they can't stop thinking about, but it *always* gets spent."



Bold, primary-colored artwork sets the tone for this sophisticated home by Catherine Ebert. The designer learned the hard way that it's better to be realistic about timelines and budgets than to placate the client upfront, only to disappoint them later. Stacy Zarin Goldberg

EYES ON THE PRIZE

In addition to providing regular updates, Ebert likes to invite clients along to shop for finishing touches or, particularly on new builds, to come to the site on a day when something really beautiful is being installed. Giving the client opportunities to be part of a unique process helps keep their morale up during a lengthy project that can be both tedious and expensive. “Watching elaborate tiles being installed is an experience that most clients won’t have had before, and it can be really special to include them,” says the designer. “That said, it’s a delicate balance between keeping them entertained and excited about all the stuff that they’re getting, but also saying, ‘OK, these things need to go this way and in this order, and in this timeline.’ It’s easy to get blown off course if you let the client be overly involved.”

Arnold, too, will pepper in the occasional showroom field trip or bring the client along to select a special item like a marble slab, but he cautions against overwhelming them with too many chances to weigh in. “They can be a part of the process, but they don’t need to touch everything—that’s why they hired a designer,” he says.

Wiggins points out a simpler way to get clients excited: Don’t underestimate the contagious power of your own enthusiasm. “This work is based on people investing a lot of money and time, and I don’t take that lightly,” she says. “Whether it’s one of many properties they own or their forever home, there is a lot of emotion tied up in it. If you can stay connected to the joyful part of the work, your clients will feel that, and you won’t be faced with having to keep their energy up. A good, positive vibe goes a long way.”