



Gigglebytes: Pulling Teeth (or How to Get Paid)

Professional Surveyor Magazine - December 2005

So, I have this one client. You know who I'm talking about. I call him by an old Native American nickname that they created to describe most all white men ... "checks in the mail." We have all had at least one client like this, and probably more than one for most of us. I'm sure I don't need to describe him to you, but I'm going to anyway. He's the client who we have to call repeatedly to get him to pay his invoices and his response is always the same. The good thing about this client is that he always pays us ... eventually, but it gets to be like pulling teeth.

I, meaning my company, have two problems with him. The first is that I really like him personally. We have a rapport that we have developed over the phone—so each of those calls I make to him ends up being fun, in the end. We give each other an extensive amount of grief about a variety of aspects of the latest survey we've done for him, and he always ends the conversation with the same phrase. I really don't want to repeat it here because it hurts too much. And besides that, it's embarrassing.

Unfortunately, he has developed the same affection for me and he enjoys those conversations just as much, so there isn't any incentive for him to actually send the check— quite the contrary. He looks forward to the next call when I ask him what he thinks could be wrong with the U.S. Postal Service, or some such question like that. Finally, after about the third or fourth call, instead of ending the conversation in the usual manner, he invites me out for a beer after work. Halfway through our beers he produces not only my check but enough cash to pay for both of our beers. I always let him pay for the beers to make up for the late payment and all the games of pool I've won while drinking those beers. The second problem the company has with him is that he's a great client, other than the payment thing, that is. He's a developer, so he's always looking over properties and having us perform a variety of professional services along the way, of which I am sure you are all intimately familiar ... topos, research, ALTAs, boundaries, subdivisions, etc. I would say that about 50% of the time the project doesn't even come to fruition, but he always ends up paying us for the services we render ... eventually of course. So, not only do I not want to discontinue our "relationship" but neither do I think the company can afford to discontinue it.

My quandary is how to turn this situation around. I keep trying to think of a situation wherein I will have to send him a check for something, but the nature of our professions means that I will always be the service provider and he will always be the client. I usually call him once a week when payments are due, so one time I tried calling him on each of four days in a row, but that didn't work. He just waited for the call a week later to have those beers. I've tried putting finance charges on the late notices, but those have never been paid. I didn't really want them anyway. The one time we got paid faster than ever, ostensibly that is, was when I invited him and his wife to dinner at our home. He brought the wine, of course, and about half way through the bottle he produced a check for our latest invoice, making quite a

show of it, of course. Both of our wives are in on it by now, so they were laughing as much as we were. I detected a bit of a twinkle in his eye that I attributed to this unusual tactic of mine. As it turns out, he had put a stop-payment on the check already and we went back to our usual pattern. It was a very good and very expensive wine, though.

I tried pre-billing for "services to be rendered" once. But again, he is in the position of control and it didn't work. So to flip the situation, I came up with a plan to buy one of the lots in one of his subdivisions and then not have the down payment check with me at the closing, using his "receivables" as my down payment. But that's too underhanded, even if I could buy the lot, so I couldn't go through with it.

I've finally come to realize that this situation is not really his fault at all. I'm the one that let it develop into the game that it is. Once it had even partially developed, it grew into a beast of its own. And even though I had the ability to stop it, I was having too much fun. In reality, he's doing me a favor. I will certainly not allow this to happen with any other clients, no matter how close a friendship exists.

So, I've come up with a final tactic. It involves dinner again, but just the two of us so we can talk. I'm going to just come out with it, be honest, and tell him what a burden he's putting on the company. I'll have to eat some crow, of course. I'll tell him I've learned my lesson, that it will never happen again, and that I'm grateful to him for being my teacher in this. Think it will work? If not, my fall back is to challenge him to a game of pool for "all the marbles." He's never beaten me. I wonder if he's just been setting me up all along. Nah! Couldn't be.

About the Author



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