

How to Land A Big Client ... Not Doing the 'small' stuff just doesn't pay off most of the time.

Dear Howard,

I've been trying to get my foot in the door with a big corporate client who does a ton of major events, including many big product launches, which are right up our alley. I've been calling on them for almost two years, and have even been in to pitch them in person. Finally, they gave me an event to work on, only it's so low-end I don't know if I should take it. It's a retirement cocktail party for 50 people for a low-level executive, with a budget that is paltry. On the one hand, the client says it's a way to get into the organization. On the other hand, I'm concerned that if I accept this job I'll be pigeonholed into more small gigs. What should I do?

Confused About My Client

Dear Confused,

Although you can find people who'll argue the opposite, my advice is to turn it down. In my 20-plus years of running an event company rarely—scratch that, never—have I seen this strategy work. Why? Let's say you're the client's boss and you're given two companies to choose from for a major product launch: a company that focuses mainly on product launches and other similar events, and a company that did a kick-ass job on the retirement party of some VP. If your job is on the line, would you hire you? No way. The safe bet is the other firm.

Let's say you do get the job and you need to hire a caterer. Would you pick a vendor who's done a ton of product launches, or someone who only catered your office holiday party but gosh-darn-it he wants to work his way in?

“Simply taking on that much smaller event lowers your stature in the client's eyes. It's not fair, but it's reality.”

Let's say you're being sued for \$5 million by a client that claims his VIP guests got food poisoning at your event. Do you bring in someone who defends these cases routinely, or hire an aggressive attorney who really wants your business and successfully argued a parking ticket for you?

Surely the client's boss will see and appreciate how Confused did that VP's retirement party as a good faith gesture, right? Sorry, but no. Simply taking on that much smaller event lowers your stature in the client's eyes. It's not fair, but it's reality.

Once you're in and have done the big product launches, if you're asked to do the retirement event, you can take it on and it won't

hurt you. But as your calling card for moving up, it's a tough sell. You get branded as the small job vendor, and you're likely to get requests for more of the same. Then what?

Years ago, I took on a high-profile fundraiser for a new client's non-profit for next-to-no money. The client was a well-connected Park Avenue socialite and she swore she would introduce me to her friends. And she did. You know what they said? “I hear you gave Penny a great deal. I want the same thing.”

If it really kills you to walk away from this opportunity, here's what I would suggest: Bump up your fees by at least 30 percent.

Then, in the proposal or contract, type in a line showing a discount for that exact amount. Write something like, “Special discount in exchange for allowing our firm to bid on your next product launch.” Then you're at least spelling out your quid pro quo: I'm doing this event solely to get a chance to bid on a bigger event. They're now obliged to let you bid on their next launch event. They're under no obligation to hire you; just to give you a chance to bid on the kind of work you want.

If they push back at this language, that's your cue to run for the hills.

Tell your client/prospect that, “as much as we'd love to work with you, we'd rather wait for the right project. Perhaps (insert name of your biggest competitor; let them be the sucker) might be interested in this smaller event?.” **es**

Howard Givner is a strategy and growth consultant to event business owners.

Email: HowardGivner@gmail.com.

Blog: www.HowardGivner.com

