Managing the Client Relationship

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Other chapters in this book focus in detail on the rationales and mechanics of professional practices—the day–to-day steps involved in managing a career in interior design, from making sound choices about education to specialization to business development to working on a project. In each of them, design professionals will find themselves reading often about a central character, "the client," and they will find it easy to imagine who clients might be, what they are like, what their needs might be. Designers think that they must know how to handle clients and their relationships with them; they do it every day, and firms have institutionalized, in varied ways, many aspects of relating to clients. Yet if client relationships are so easy and natural, why is it that bad client relationships develop, that clients do not return, and that often *good* client relationships may seem to depend on personality, "fit," or chance?

Designers may not think of themselves primarily as people who, like other professionals, are in the business of managing relationships. They manage ideas, vision, space, and their relationships with peoples' needs; in its best moments, their work is an art form. Yet relationship management is an art form as well, and one that designers would do well to study—and master. When designers know how to assess just who the client is, just what the client's needs are, and just how well they have been satisfied by design services, they will be designers who can sustain a business that delivers meaningful results for human beings. This chapter will look first at the "ideal" client relationship, from both the client's view and the designer's view, in terms of a feature important to both parties: total satisfaction. It will then go on to discuss how designers can manage the client relationship to best ensure that the client has a quality experience of total satisfaction. Finally, it will introduce a method designers can use to measure whether they have indeed provided total satisfaction, and how they can adjust to better provide it in future client relationships.