

The customers you should have said no to

Six signals at the enquiry stage, what each one costs, and how to decline without burning anything.

Ask anybody who's been running a small operation for more than a few years about the worst job they ever took, and you won't get a story about difficult work. You'll get a story about a person.

And almost always, somewhere in the telling, there's a sentence like *I knew when I went to look at it*. They did know. They took it anyway, because the diary had a gap in it, or because it felt rude not to, or because it's genuinely hard to turn down money when you're not certain where next month's is coming from.

The expensive part is never the job itself. It's the two weeks you lose, the three good enquiries you couldn't get to, the evenings spent composing messages in your head, and the version of you that turns up on the next customer's driveway already braced for a fight.

None of the signals below mean somebody is a bad person. They mean a particular job is likely to cost more than it pays. One on its own is usually nothing. Two together is worth slowing down for.

01 They lead with price, and only price

The first question is what it costs. Fine — that's everybody's first question, and there's nothing wrong with it.

The signal is when it's also the second, third and only question. No curiosity about how you'd do it, how long it takes, what's involved, or whether you've done one before. Just the number, and then whether the number can be smaller.

What that tells you is that they've decided this is a commodity and you are interchangeable with whoever else answers the phone. That belief doesn't stop when the job starts. It's the same customer who questions every line on the invoice, because in their model of the world they're buying a quantity of stuff, not your judgment about it.

Worth separating from the person who simply has a real budget and says so plainly. That's not this. That's honesty, and it's usually workable.

WHAT TO DO

- Ask them a question about the job and see whether they engage with the answer. Somebody who only wants the number won't.
- Notice whether they ever ask what's *included*. That question is the difference between price-focused and price-only.
- Quote your real price without softening it. If price is the only axis, you'd rather lose it now than at the end.
- If they push, work out which objection it actually is — only one of the five is about money, and the others are worth answering.

Somebody who won't ask what's included has already decided you're interchangeable. That belief doesn't improve once work starts.

02 You're the third one they've had out

Getting a few quotes is sensible and you should never hold it against anybody. This is a different thing, and you can hear it in how they talk about the others.

The first one was a cowboy. The second was rude, or late, or overcharged them. The third didn't turn up at all. You're number four, and the story arrives before you've measured anything.

Sometimes that's genuinely bad luck. But a run of people who all somehow failed the same person is a pattern with a simple explanation, and the uncomfortable part is that you're being interviewed for the role of the next one in the story. Whatever happens on this job, somebody will hear about it.

Listen to what specifically went wrong each time. *They left a mess* is a normal complaint. *They wouldn't do what I asked*, three times in a row, is telling you exactly how this ends.

WHAT TO DO

- Ask what happened with the last one, and listen to whether the complaint is about the work or about being disagreed with.
- Count. Two previous trades is shopping around. Four is a pattern that isn't about the trades.
- If you take it, put everything in writing and keep it there — scope, exclusions, dates, changes. All of it.
- Take photos before you start. Not because you expect trouble, but because you can't take them later.

Everyone before you was terrible? Then you're auditioning for the part of the next one in that story.

03 They won't let you see the job

Somebody wants a firm price without you looking at it. They'll describe it over the phone, maybe send one photo taken from a distance, and ask you to commit to a number.

Occasionally this is a landlord four states away with a tenant who works nights, and it's completely genuine. Usually it's one of two other things: they already know it's worse than they're describing, or they want a number they can hold you to while the actual job turns out to be larger.

Either way, you're being asked to carry a risk you can't see. The honest response isn't to refuse — it's to price the visible job and be explicit that the number only covers what you were shown. Then it's their decision, made with the information in the open.

WHAT TO DO

- Offer an estimate rather than a quote, and use those two words deliberately. They mean different things and it's worth saying which one you're giving.
- Ask for photos from specific angles you name. Refusal to send them is the whole answer.
- Write down the assumptions the price rests on, in the quote, exactly as you would any other exclusion.
- Never give a firm number for something you haven't seen with your own eyes.

A price for a job you haven't seen is a guess you'll be held to.

04 The job grows before it starts

You quoted for one thing. Then there was a phone call adding something small. Then a message wondering whether, while you're there, you could also. And you haven't started yet.

This is the most reliable predictor on the list, because it's a live demonstration. Whatever happens between quoting and starting will continue happening between starting and finishing, except then you're on site and it's much harder to say no with a customer standing next to you.

The additions themselves are rarely the problem. It's that they arrive as assumptions rather than requests — the framing is always *while you're there*, which quietly proposes that your time is free once you've arrived.

WHAT TO DO

- Re-quote every addition, in writing, however small. Not to be difficult — to establish that additions have prices.
- Do it the first time it happens. The first one sets the rule for all of them.
- Say the sentence out loud: *"Happy to do that — it'd be another \$X and about half a day."* It's not confrontational, it's just information.
- If the scope grows twice before a tool comes out, expect it to grow five more times, and price or decline accordingly.

What somebody does between the quote and the start is a free preview of the entire job.

05 The favor that isn't a job

A friend of a friend. Somebody's brother-in-law. A neighbor who's been very kind about your parking. It's only a little one, they'd pay you obviously, but you know — mates' rates.

These are the jobs that go wrong most often, and the mechanism is always the same. Because the money is vague, nothing else gets defined either: no quote, no scope, no dates, no written anything. So when it takes three times as long as anyone thought, there's no document to point at, and there's a friendship in the room making it awkward to start one now.

Then it's finished, and you have to name a price to somebody who's been thinking of it as a favor. Whatever you say is too much, because they never had a number in their head to compare it against. You end up charging half, resenting it, and the friendship is worse than it was.

The fix isn't refusing to help people. It's refusing to do it vaguely. Either it's a gift — free, on your terms, when you have time, and you say that plainly — or it's a job, with a quote, like anybody else's. The trouble lives entirely in the space between.

WHAT TO DO

- Decide which it is before you agree, and say which out loud. *"Let me do this one as a favor"* or *"I'll send you a proper quote"*. Never neither.
- If it's a gift, define its edges: this specific thing, on a Saturday, and materials at cost.
- If it's a job, quote it in writing exactly as you would for a stranger. A discount can go on the quote; vagueness can't.
- Watch for the favor that arrives with a deadline. A gift with a due date is a job that isn't paying.

Make it a gift or make it a job. Everything that goes wrong lives in the gap between the two.

06 The emergency that keeps changing

It has to be done this week. Then it emerges that it's actually because of a party, or a viewing, or a relative arriving — and then the reason changes when you ask about it.

Real urgency is specific and it stays the same. A burst pipe is a burst pipe. A closing date is a closing date, and it'll be the same date next time you ask.

Manufactured urgency has a purpose: it's there to stop you thinking carefully. People in a hurry don't get a proper look at the job, don't write down the scope, skip the deposit, and agree to a date they'll have to break something else to keep. Every protection in this guide gets skipped under time pressure, which is exactly why the pressure is being applied.

You can absolutely take urgent work. It should just cost more, be written down faster rather than less, and never require you to move an existing customer.

WHAT TO DO

- Ask what happens if it's next month instead. The answer tells you whether the deadline is real.
- Have a genuine rate for dropping everything, and quote it without embarrassment.
- Never move a booked customer for a new one. You'll trade a reliable relationship for an unproven one.
- Keep every step you'd normally take. Urgency is the reason people skip deposits, and the deposit is the test.

Real urgency has one reason and keeps it. Manufactured urgency exists to stop you doing the things that protect you.

Now the other side of it, because a list like this can turn into a reason to suspect everybody, and that's a worse business than the one you started with.

Plenty of things that look like red flags aren't. Somebody nervous and full of questions is usually about to be an excellent customer — they're anxious, not difficult. Somebody with a small budget who says so honestly is easy to work with; you either have something at that price or you don't. Somebody who was genuinely let down by the last trade and is wary of you is fair enough, and one good experience usually fixes it entirely.

The signals above are about a specific job being likely to cost more than it pays. They're not a character test, and treating them as one will lose you good work.

HOW TO ACTUALLY SAY IT

The hardest part isn't spotting any of this. It's the sentence.

Don't invent an excuse — excuses invite negotiation, because every excuse has a solution somebody can offer. *I'm too busy* gets you *when are you free?*. Be brief, be warm, be final, and give them somewhere to go:

"Thanks for thinking of me, but I don't think I'm the right fit for this one. I'd rather tell you now than halfway through. Try [name] — this is much more their kind of thing."

That's it. No reasons, no apology, no critique of them. Send it the day you decide rather than sitting on it for a week, because the week is the only part that's genuinely unfair to them.

And pass them on to somebody real where you can. It costs you nothing, it's the difference between declining and rejecting, and the person you refer them to remembers it.

One signal is noise. Two is a pattern. Say no the same day, warmly, and give them a name.

The best filter for wrong-fit customers is a website that's clear about what you do, who you do it for, and roughly what it costs — so the mismatches never call. Send me yours and I'll tell you what a stranger can and can't work out, along with what I'd fix. Free, within two business days, and it obliges you to nothing.

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