

## Operations delayed by a vendor

11/09/09

*I'm afraid that I've been too lax with a vendor's delay. It seems the vendor prioritized others over us as they got busier. The whole experience was especially frustrating because the vendor kept promising us, and then didn't hit those dates. What should I do?*

As the economy warms back up, challenges like this are likely to crop up. Everyone is chasing work and prioritizing opportunities to bring in cash, sometimes taking on more than they can chew. In addition, many business owners are uncomfortable tackling issues with vendors, instead hoping a problem was a one-time event and expecting the best going forward.

When problems crop up it's important to address them head on, to insure they don't continue. Put in place clear conditions of satisfaction, identify obstacles to deliver and ensure everyone is aware of deadlines and able to hit them. Build a system so that similar issues are unlikely to crop up again. And have a back-up plan.

### TAKE ACTION

I'm a big believer in the straight ahead approach to problem resolution. If there's a problem, contact the vendor and make sure they know it. But do so in a respectful, "we're all in this together" manner.

Ask about the vendor's capacity to handle the work they have. Schedule time to have coffee with the owner, or a phone chat, in order to assess what's going on. Inquire about what they're doing to go after new business. Ask about the kinds of responses they're getting to the proposals they're putting out. Are they getting busier? Don't worry that this seems forward - most people still have time to network and just about everyone right now is comparing notes on what they're seeing for work flow.

Some of the following questions might help you get an idea on what's happening:

- Seems like you've been busier lately?
- Do you think it's a blip or do you think things are really starting to pick up?
- Where are you hoping to be a year from now, in terms of business volume?

Bring up your recent experience dealing with delays and ask them to talk about the experience. Make it clear that you're trying to work with them to achieve better outcomes in the future. Don't complain. Focus on working on how to prevent delays from happening again.

Look at how the owner handles the answers: clear or vague assessment of the problem? Takes it seriously or tosses it off as no big deal? Specific action steps going forward or big fluffy promises?

Ask where your company sits on their priority list, at present and going forward. You might try the following questions. "If you get busy, what happens to my account?" "What might get in the way of handling my needs as quickly as you have in the past?"

### GET COMMITMENTS

Ask the vendor if you can agree to specific conditions of satisfaction going forward. You might want to ask for an agreement, upfront, each time you hand them work, on the delivery timetable. Find out who in the vendor's organization would be responsible for keeping the timetable and communicating with your firm about the status of projects.

Bring up the fact that in the recent experience, one of the more troubling problems was that the vendor made promises and then didn't deliver - saying they were working on your project, would get things right over, and then you had to wait longer than you expected. Point out that it would be better if they committed to specific dates and actions in the future, so you are both clear as to what's to be done, by when.

Define a clear set of conditions that you can both live by. Define project milestones and timeframes. Agree that they will inform you, before accepting the work, if they cannot meet your deadlines.

Finally, think back on your coffee chat. Does this vendor have plans to add staff? Or, are they trying to get through a growth bubble with their current resources, which means that there could be more delays on future projects?

If you have any concerns about this vendor's ability to meet deadlines, start to build and qualify an alternate list of suppliers. There are likely lots of vendors out there right now who would be happy for new sources of work and who are willing to make commitments to get that work. Now is the time to expand your resource list.

Looking for a good book? Try "Supplier Evaluation and Performance Excellence" by Sherry R. Gordon.

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