Ep #43: 4 Essential Communication Methods for Client Relationships

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Desi Creswell

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Hey designer, you're listening to episode 43. In this one I'm going to be sharing four essential ways to communicate in your interior design business that's going to reduce frustration, confusion and make the experience of running a project better for you and better for the client.

Welcome to *The Interior Design Business CEO*, the only show for designers who are ready to confidently run and grow their businesses without the stress and anxiety. If you're ready to develop a bigger vision for your interior design business, free up your time, and streamline your days for productivity and profit, you're in the right place. I'm Desi Creswell, an award-winning interior designer and certified life and business coach. I help interior designers just like you stop feeling overwhelmed so they can build profitable businesses they love to run. Are you ready to confidently lead your business, clients, and projects? Let's go.

Hello designer. Welcome back to the podcast. I hope you're all having a wonderful week. As I'm recording this we're headed into the weekend and it is the state swimming tournament. We're pretty excited in our family. My nine year old son, almost 10, has been working so hard and he qualified for state, which is really exciting to see his hard work pay off.

It's also really incredible to see your kid do something that you just really have no skill at. I mean, I can swim, but definitely not a swimmer. So it's going to be really fun to go cheer him on. And actually the other mom that I'm renting the office space from this summer that I've mentioned on the podcast, her son's a swimmer too. And we just got the information on the relays and they're actually going to be swimming one of the state relays together, so we'll be able to cheer both of them on at the same time, which is really fun.

Before we dive into the episode, I have two very important announcements for you. The first is that I am doing a brand new podcast giveaway. So all you have to do is use the link in the show notes to submit your form after you leave a rating and review.

This is super simple, you just scroll down to wherever you listen to your podcasts and click the five star rating, leave me a couple of sentences about

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what you love about the show or why another interior designer should listen to it. And then submit that quick form with your name and email address because otherwise I won't know how to contact you.

And you are going to be entered to win a private coaching session with me. I'm going to be doing these periodically over the next couple of months and I would love to work with you in this way. And all you have to do to be entered in the drawing is leave a rating and review and then fill out that quick form so that I know that you left it.

If I were you, I would go ahead and pause this right now, not if you're driving of course. But pause this and go take care of leaving the rating and review and filling out the form right this second so you're sure to be entered to win that private coaching session.

And speaking of private coaching, that brings me to the second important announcement. I have decided to open up just two spaces this fall for private coaching clients. This is an incredibly intimate, high-touch coaching experience with me where we partner together and work very closely on both mindset and strategy to create a business and life you really love.

This, of course, is going to include things with your business and we talk on the life stuff too. If you want to learn more about private coaching, the link for that is going to be in the show notes.

All right, let's dive into today's topic, communication methods. I'm excited for this one. I think we could all agree interior design is definitely a people-centered business and it requires excellent communication skills. Except we often don't learn them and we have to learn the hard way.

Communication is a crucial part of your business. Think about all of the ways that you communicate in your business between drawings, contracts, POs and specs, you're emailing, phoning, texting, you've got written communication and verbal communication. You're communicating with vendors, your staff, the

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clients, and trades people. There are so many ways communication is essential to bringing a project to life.

I personally did take a lot of communication related classes because they were very interesting to me when I was getting my degree in interior design. But I know that that's not the case for many of you. That you did not get that type of training, whether you have formal training in interior design or training that happened on the job and it wasn't modeled to you.

Communication is a major skill set in every single aspect of your work and I know that you're often ill equipped to really communicate effectively. And when you don't have the skill set. It causes so much emotional discomfort and stress, not just from the uncomfortableness of communication, but the tangible effects of not communicating effectively. Like misunderstandings and mistakes, and deadlines not being held, just to name a few.

So that's why I wanted to bring this topic to you today and give you some key communication methods that are going to both apply to written and verbal communication that you can use in your business to streamline interactions and make the overall experience of running a business and running a project a more positive experience for you and for everyone else you interact with throughout the day.

There are four communication methods and I'm going to be sharing what they are, what they might look like, and how you could start playing with these methods yourself. The first method is making requests. So many of you forget that your needs and preferences are important, that they matter. Even though you are a service provider, or you are working with others on a project, your needs matter. And making a request of someone based on what you want to happen or what would work well for you, is completely legitimate.

And I don't know about you, but I want to know the other people when I'm working with them, what their needs and wants are too so that it's a positive experience for everyone. The other thing I see with this is requests are often very indirect and they're kind of apologetic. Oh, well, maybe could you do this? I

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don't know, would it be okay? Right? So let me give you some examples of what a request could sound like.

Would you be willing to put your phone away when we meet so I know I have your full attention? This really helps our meeting go more quickly and then I know we're both focused on the task at hand. Another way a request could sound is maybe to a builder you're working with. You could say, when you email the client about this thing, can you please cc me on the email, then I'll be in the loop and I'll be going to my next meeting with the client with the latest information.

The request is direct and it's also sharing the benefit of them meeting the request. Now, just like people make requests of you and you don't always go along with them, when you make requests of others they might comply and they might not. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't ask in the first place. And if somebody does not want to honor your request, you get to decide then what you want to do about it.

It might mean opening up more conversation with the other person to either negotiate a possible request that they would be willing to say yes to. Or get a better understanding of why they aren't saying yes so you could make it easier for them to say yes, with understanding what they want to get out of the situation as well. We'll talk more about negotiation in a bit.

And if that request is really, really important to you, you might want to consider the next communication tool I'm going to share. And that, my friends, is boundaries. Boundaries I see as often being confused, and it's why there's an entire module on them in Out Of Overwhelm and I'll probably do an entire episode on boundaries in the future.

But for today, what I really want you to understand is that boundaries are about what you, you are going to do. The other person or persons involved still have free will, you cannot control them. I hope you're hearing that loud and clear. If you can control other people, let me know, because I'm pretty sure there's no way to do it.

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The way that I define a boundary is with this statement. If you do this thing, then I will do this thing. Let me give you a few examples of what that might sound like. If you don't pay this invoice by this date, then I will stop work on your project until payment has been made in full. Or it could be if you contact me outside of my stated business hours, I will return your message the following day within these hours.

You can see in those examples that boundaries are all about you, which means that when you set a boundary, you need to make sure you're willing to follow through on what you say you're going to do because, for sure, people won't follow them. Let's take that as a given, so make sure the boundary you set is one you're going to follow through on, otherwise, no one is going to take them seriously.

The next communication tool I want to share is negotiation, I mentioned it a little bit before when we talked about requests. Negotiation is all about finding a solution or a plan that's mutually agreeable. I really encourage you when you're negotiating to think about yourself and whoever you're negotiating with as being on the same team. There doesn't have to be a winner or loser. I want you to consider how it could be a win for both of you.

A simple example of this might be something along the lines of my ideal timeline for this deliverable is four weeks out, yours is two, how about we do three weeks? Or negotiation could happen internally between business partners or members of the design team. Someone might say, normally I do this, but I have a deadline this week. What do you think about deferring this task to next week or possibly having another person help out?

Negotiation is always going to be the most effective when you're clear on your most important needs, what you want to prioritize in that negotiation, and what you really want to get out of it, and being clear on the other person's needs and wants as best you can so that you can find the win/win which definitely could exist. I will say, if in a negotiation you can't come to the win/win, then it might be an opportunity to look at other solutions that are completely outside of what you

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were originally negotiating, or bringing someone else in that could help with that communication process.

The last communication method I want to share is expectations. So many misunderstandings and misinterpretations can be prevented by setting clear expectations with others. And there's also setting clear expectations with yourself, but that's a whole other episode.

As much as possible you don't want to leave others guessing. That could mean your junior designer guessing what level of done in quotations they need to be at by a certain time, or even guessing when something needs to be done by. Or it could be your client thinking, there's no rush to review this proposal, you'll for sure be able to get us started whenever we get around to it.

When you don't set clear expectations, you give others the opportunity to fill in the gaps. And because we're humans, we are self-interested or self-focused and the gaps are going to then get filled in ways that are most convenient and beneficial for the person who's interpreting whatever information it is that they received.

So if you don't give a due date, it's probably going to be longer than you want. If you don't tell others how and when you want to be communicated with, they are going to choose communication methods they prefer and do it when it's convenient for them. I see so much frustration and resentment built up in clients because they're leaving others to read their minds or just know, when setting a clear expectation could clear up so much.

Which brings me to if being clear and direct with your expectations makes you uncomfortable, it's time to get curious. Why is that? Are you worried that they're going to think you're bossy? Or maybe you're automatically assuming that whoever you're setting an expectation with will reject it and so you don't even try. Take a look at what's coming up for you around this, it will be really beneficial.

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I personally find that the people that my clients work with when I'm leading my own team, they want to be led. It makes things easier for them. Setting expectations and also letting people know what to expect, actually really builds trust and strengthens the relationship.

Think about this in the designer/client relationship. If a client is unclear on what's going to happen next, how their money is being spent, where the budget is at, they're going to be stressed out. And then they're going to start to question what you're doing and start to feel a little bit fearful and anxious. And that erodes the trust in the relationship. And so when you set the expectations ahead of time and are clear about this is the next time we're going to be in touch, this is what's going to happen at that meeting, it puts them at ease. It helps establish you as the expert in the relationship.

So I really want you to consider that other perspective I just shared with you. Before we talk about how to use these tools, let's recap just to make sure that you've got them all. The first one is requests. Second is boundaries. Third is negotiation. And fourth is expectations.

As I said, before we wrap up I want to give you a few ideas of how to use these different methods, especially if these are feeling new to you and a little bit edgy when you think about implementing them. First, let's talk about using these communication tools in a written format. Templates are a great way to do this, especially if you're feeling uncomfortable about using them. That way you type it out once and you can modify it a little bit if you need to, but then it's set and you don't have to think about it again.

Another great place to use these is through your onboarding documents or putting this information in contracts or email signatures even, such as putting your office hours to remind people or setting that expectation of when you're going to respond to them. The other way you can experiment with these tools is by first writing out what you want to say, even if it is something that you're going to verbally communicate. And then you can kind of sort it out in your head before you practice verbally delivering whatever you need to communicate.

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Which brings us to verbally integrating these tools. A great way to practice these communication tools if you're feeling a little shaky with them is through mental rehearsal. So essentially, I want you to picture yourself communicating whatever words you want to communicate or information, and interacting with the people you're going to communicate with in your mind, you're imagining.

The really cool part of this is that when we do mental rehearsal, the brain can't actually tell the difference between what you're rehearsing and imagining and something that has actually happened. So it is, in essence, actual practice without having to be right in front of someone. You can, of course, also practice saying things out loud on your own by looking in the mirror or just as you're walking around. Or you can use someone you trust, to start to say these things out loud and hear yourself with someone else in front of you.

Another way you can practice the verbal communication methods is through standing meetings. I love this because it sets you up for regular communication practice and a reason to use these tools. You know the communication is going to happen, you know when it's going to happen, and you can be prepared and decide which of these tools is going to be best for that particular meeting.

I know that learning to communicate effectively and confidently can feel sometimes challenging, it can stretch you out of your comfort zone. But it really is a crucial skill when it comes to being the CEO of your interior design business. You need these skills.

So this week I want you to think of a situation that has felt challenging or maybe you've been stressing about something, and consider which of these communication methods could be used to address the issue now, and then also be used to prevent something similar in the future.

All right, that's what I've got for you today. As a reminder, go to the link in the show notes and leave a rating and review and enter in the giveaway for a private coaching session. I am really looking forward to working with you in this way. And, of course, it just makes my day to see those reviews posted. I love to hear what you're loving about the show.

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In the next episode I'm going to be sharing some truths about to-do lists. I can't wait to dive into that one. And until then, I'm wishing you a beautiful week. I'll talk to you in the next episode.

Thanks for joining me for this week's episode of *The Interior Design Business CEO*. If you want more tips, tools and strategies visit www.desicreswell.com. And if you're ready to take what you've learned on the podcast to the next level, I would love for you to check out my signature group coaching program, Out of Overwhelm.