



9 Time-Tested Expert Tips For Coping With Scope Creep

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When clients want more, it can be an opportunity in disguise

Scope creep! Those two words can strike fear and trepidation into even the boldest of business hearts. It can feel tricky, uncomfortable, or even risky to navigate unexpected requests from clients after fees and a timeline have already been agreed on.

Fortunately, there are ways to prevent scope creep in the first place — and methods for dealing with it when it does come up. In fact, according to some of the experts we consulted, scope creep can actually be a wonderful opportunity in disguise.

Here are 9 time-tested, professionally vetted recommendations to help you prevent, manage, or even make the most of scope creep on your next project:

1. Realize that scope creep is an opportunity

If you're attuned to your client's needs from the beginning of a project, you'll recognize when they start to express a need that goes beyond what you've agreed to deliver. Don't avoid those moments. Seize them.

You already understand your client's problem, so if you believe your team can deliver value beyond the agreed-upon work, offer to help. The trick is to make the client aware and ask them to assess the value of the new deliverable. This allows them to have empathy for your team and creates an understanding that there will be an additional investment (in time, money or resources) on both ends.

Of course you'll want to be as clear as possible about deliverables and timeline in your initial scope of work, but no contract can take the place of good relationship management.

2. Send a "zero invoice"

The best strategy for handling and preventing scope creep is to send a "zero invoice." When a new client makes a small request, you should fulfill the request, create an invoice for what it would have cost and then zero-out the cost. Send the invoice to the client and have them sign it, acknowledging they've received it. Do this every time they ask for something outside the scope of the project.



the value of what they've received. It also helps the agency owner track spending on non-billable projects and minimize profitability leaks.

3. Build it in from the beginning

I believe that scope creep happens either when the client adds tasks to or tries to negotiate down the value of the contract without reducing the

In consulting, it is expected that often both of these will happen, and they account for both while developing the initial budget. In other words, if your operating margin is 20%, you need to actually budget at 30%. By doing this scenario materializes, you are at least not losing money. And if it doesn't, you have a slightly higher operating margin.

4. Collaborate with the client on expectations

Be sure to lay out requirements for a project — have this be a collaborative process between both the client and the internal team. Ensure everyone understands and signs off on this requirements list, and that this is a document that the client has and can refer to in the future. As scope creep begins to happen you can reference back to the document that they helped to create, setting expectations about what the “finished” product will look like.

The process can be extremely iterative, so the client needs to understand what they will be receiving. Additionally, having weekly status meetings will ensure that the client knows what is being done each week. If they ask about additional features, you will be able to realign expectations early.

5. Invest in crystal-clear communication

Often clients say that they want five items appraised and you provide an appropriate quote. But when you arrive onsite, they have often discovered several items in the interim that they'd also like to have appraised. After a few years of dealing with this problem (poorly), I eventually developed a system which has worked very well.

When I am hired, I draft up a contract that is very specific and lists the number of items to be appraised along with the fees. The contract explicitly states that if the client requires additional items to be appraised there will be an additional fee. The contract is emailed to the client a few days before the appointment so that they have a chance to review it and ask any questions.

When I arrive on site to meet with the client, the first thing I will do is pull out the contract and review it with the client. If I've noticed that additional items are already out to be appraised, I will remind the client that an additional fee will apply and quote it there. This gives us the chance to alter the contract as necessary before signing. I have found this business practice to be particularly effective at dealing with scope creep and I find that many clients appreciate the clarity and transparency.

Messaging





something at the last minute without first asking what the additional fee will be.

6. Think strategically about what you bill for

Like many other companies, our knee-jerk reaction was to create extremely detailed contracts that specifically outlined every last detail of a site build or marketing project. This only over-complicated the entire process and led to haggling over deliverables.

To avoid this, all of our contracts are now based strictly on time and materials. If a client wants more than was previously communicated, we will gladly provide them with the corresponding service as long as they have time budgeted for the work or are willing to purchase additional time.

7. Offer up a high-quality referral

I find the best way to push back on this is to very nicely explain that these aren't included and then offer up a solution to getting them done, usually recommending another consultant in the field they are trying to creep me into. So I am not saying no, I am saying "here's a way to get it done." Sometimes it takes more than one attempt for this to be understood, but it usually works.

8. Be open to creative evolution

I am a big believer in limiting the scope of the consultant in the written fee agreement, defining what the scope is, and allowing for a process if the parties agree that the scope should be expanded.

Often times the consultant acts more like an artist than an engineer. Some people look at a business problem the same way Michelangelo looked at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and the project takes on a life of its own — sometimes for the best. A good attorney will change the agreement to suit the needs of the parties before advising the parties to adhere to the agreement.

9. Keep learning and iterating

You have three defenses:

- (1) your terms of service, i.e. consequences for deviating from the brief,
- (2) your project brief, i.e. detailed expectations for the deliverables and timeline, and
- (3) your pricing structure, i.e. financial incentives for alignment on the client side upfront.

Every time you do experience a scope creep problem with a client that wasn't prevented or solved by these defenses, that means they weren't robust enough. Go back, understand where the loophole was and close it up. If you're disciplined about that, you'll only ever experience a scope creep problem once.



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