

Challenging Clients

Renowned interior designers Robin Baron and Corey Damen Jenkins discuss their approach when having those tough talks with clients about budgets, conflicting design ideas, and respect.



Corey
Damen
Jenkins and
Robin Baron

New York City-based Robin Baron and Detroit-based Corey Damen Jenkins have been conducting their live talk show — *Bringing It Home* — at various markets such as High Point and Dallas over the past six months to help fellow interior designers find solutions to today's challenges while building their brands.

At the High Point Market event, the topic of dealing with difficult clients took center stage in front of a standing-room-only crowd.

Almost like a blind date, the initial client consultation is comprised of both sides sizing one another up. "When I meet with a client I realize that not only are they interviewing me, but I'm interviewing them as well," Robin Baron noted. "I look for rapport; I like to make people laugh. I look to see whether they're the type who is going to overthink everything, and whether they are going to be able to keep the momentum going."

When a "match" isn't made in heaven, it's okay to walk away. "Don't be afraid to turn work down," Baron stated. "I just turned down a job because I could tell the client was not going to be a good fit for me. I like to conduct the interview in their home, so I can see how comfortable they are there. I read between the lines and look at signals."

"I look at body language," Jenkins added. First impressions mean a lot. "If a client doesn't offer me something to drink or eat, that tells me whether they're going to treat me like the help or family," he stated.

Sometimes it's easy to forget where an interior designer stands in the grand scheme of a large construction project. "When a client is building a home, we [can be viewed as] just a cog in the machine. There are so many different contractors involved," said Jenkins, who believes there are four chief executives on every new home construction project: Client, Builder, Architect, and Designer. The interior designer, however, is more influential than is often given credit. "The placement of the sconce comes from me, and even the idea of having a wall comes from me," Jenkins stated. "The designer is the conductor of this orchestra."

THE B WORD

At some point in the conversation, money is going to be addressed. "They have to tell you what the budget is going to be, and you have to hit that target for them financially," Jenkins commented.

While Baron finds the topic to be a prickly one, Jenkins has no problem hitting it head on. "I just point-blank ask, 'What's your budget?' I tell them I have no problem mixing Henredon with Home Goods if that's what the budget is, but if you're going to tell me that you love Baker and you don't give me a dollar amount, then I'm going to design with those names in mind and the next thing you know, we're at seven figures."

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Baron has had some clients ask, "How much do you think the budget should be?" or "What should it take?" The answer: "I never, ever give a number, because they will remember and stick to it no matter what," she explained. "As an interior designer, I have to understand where they're at now. What are their current home furnishings like? Are they downsizing or upsizing?"

There are some clients who hire an interior designer, thinking it will make their renovation process less expensive. That may be true, as in the case of preventing a costly mistake from happening, but the reality may be a little different.

"My job is not to save you money. I'm not a banker," Jenkins explained. "I'm saving you heart-ache, for example, when the sofa you bought can't fit through the door. I'm here to help you spend your money wisely. I'm here to give you professional guidance."

Sticker shock doesn't just happen when buying a new car; it can happen in home furnishings, too. "I always tell clients to pull out a bottle of vodka or whatever their favorite drink is because they're going to need it when we go over the [materials] list line by line," Baron remarked. "They need to trust you."

How does one build trust? Jenkins forewarns his clients about the three steps they will undoubtedly

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experience during the project. “I tell them, ‘First you will love me’ [at the consultation], then you will hate me [in the middle of the project when things go wrong], and then you will love me again [when the project is complete]. I won’t take it personally. They’re only going to hate me for a minute, but by saying it at the outset, they know what to expect,” he stated.

Baron’s clients appreciate her candor, but she also knows when to be diplomatic. “I’m very out there and have opinions on *everything*. My clients like that about me, but I know they also need to feel heard,” she says. “For example, I had a client couple who were emphatic that they wanted to keep the [awful] dining table. Now if I told them right off the bat that the table wouldn’t work, they would be fighting me every day about it. Instead, I let them come to that conclusion themselves as we went along with the project.”

FIRING A CLIENT

Despite one’s best efforts to pay attention to signals, “sometimes the best of us can get married to the wrong client,” Jenkins cautioned. How do you

make the best of a bad situation? “For that less-than-positive experience client, I try to shower them with love and attention,” Baron commented. “I try to get to the bottom of [the problem]. Is it that they’re in over their head, even though they told me they knew they were over their budget?”

Unfortunately, there are times when an interior designer has to “fire” a client. “Before that happens, I give warnings,” Jenkins noted. “For many people who have never hired a designer before, it’s a new experience to them. We – the designer – already know how the project is going to turn out, so we don’t have that anxiety. You have to provide boundaries and tell them nicely, ‘When you do that – for example, micro-manage – it makes me feel this way.’”

That said, it’s important to check your ego at the door. “You have to be extremely humble to do this job. You can’t be a diva. *They* can be a diva, since they write the check. However if they start disrespecting my humanity, I will bow out of a project,” he noted.

What’s the best way to “break up” with a client? It’s not that different from a romantic relationship. “I tell them that we have different ideas of how the project will go, and ‘I’ll leave the color boards and floor plans that you paid for with you and will let you explore doing your vision on your own,’” Jenkins said.

Baron, too, prefers a gracious exit — “except if someone disrespects my staff, then that’s *it*. I’ve had to fire three clients in my life; two were disrespectful to my staff and one was unable to make a single decision in two years.”

REFEREEING SPOUSES

Every interior designer has been in the awkward position of trying to please two bosses: specifically the husband and wife in the client relationship.

“Part of my job is identifying who the ‘power player’ is in the relationship. Sometimes it’s him, sometimes it’s her, and sometimes it’s both of them,” Baron stated. “I always ask right up front, ‘Who makes the decisions?’ If they say they both do, then I need both of them to sign off on everything and they both have to be at each client meeting.”

The trouble starts when the spouses don’t agree. “We all play marriage therapist on almost all of our jobs,” Baron quipped. “Just don’t pit one against the other.” A contentious relationship between the clients requires delicate handling. ❖

