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It's All About Attitude

by Erin Sarpa

In today's economy, designers have two choices—jump ship and get a secure [job](#) at, say, the Post Office, or jump in and take advantage of the dwindling [competition](#).

As the founding principal of a 13-year-old design firm, I've had the opportunity to interview and hire a ridiculous number of designers. All of the people I've hired have been talented, bright and technically far superior to their employers. However, I can count the super stars on one hand. There are many creative types out there who are just loaded with desirable skills, but far fewer who know how to make themselves essential to the success of their firm.

The big difference between a skillful designer and a super star is attitude. It's available to everyone, but a select group take full advantage of this secret weapon. You know who they are: They stand out everywhere they go, even in a roomful of well-groomed designers in black. We'll call them the 'Tudes. They're the people who ignite heated debates or cause gut-wrenching laughter. They're the ones who motivate everyone else in the face of an impossible deadline. They're the people who say "'F' that" to protocol and to failure. They're the people who are finding [jobs](#) in a lousy economy or increasing their profits while those around them close their shops. You can be a 'Tude too.

Here's the true story of how a 'Tude gets a raise: She's been told during her annual review that because the company's profits haven't increased in the past year, she can't be given a raise. She's a valuable asset to the company, though, so she'll keep her current status and when the economy improves, so will her paycheck. This particular 'Tude takes the news very graciously and gives her boss one day of rest before she launches into her game plan.

She approaches her boss the next day and asks "Can you please give me a list of things I can do to increase our company's profits?" Her boss, who absolutely loves people who challenge the status quo and appreciates her employee's investment in the firm, replies, "I'll have a list for you tomorrow." The 'Tude proceeds to tackle the list one item at a time and helps capture lost billings, works more efficiently and proposes that she take on some office-management duties so the firm doesn't have to hire an additional administration person. She could have just whined, "But I need to make more money," to which her boss would have replied, "So do I." This is the difference between an employee and a super star: Super stars make more money.

The best clients are 'Tudes. We currently have the good fortune to work for a client who has an attitude the size of Mt. Kilimanjaro and is a driving force behind his company's success. We'll call him David (since that really is his name). He had an opportunity to help his company win a multimillion dollar account as a lead supplier for a major retail chain. All he had to do was get an entire product line manufactured in its new packaging. In one week. The design for the new package had just been approved and the plan was to release each product over the course of the next year.

David showed up at our office and announced, "You guys aren't gonna believe what I told my boss you could do." Any normal designer would have tried to negotiate the timeline or, at the very least, have a small heart attack when presented with this challenge. Not the lead designer at our studio. She thought it sounded fun. David's absolute faith in our abilities (and slightly crazed expression) inspired her to make it happen. So we stocked up on candy and caffeine and whipped out 21 packages in almost as many hours and helped our client win the account. That's the difference between a senior designer and an action hero: Action heroes get the best clients.

As a principal of a firm I have a lot of opportunity to meet other principals, primarily at functions like HOW's annual [MYOB Conference](#). These functions are an absolute 'Tudefest. They can hardly find ballrooms big enough to accommodate the self-esteem that shows up. Any small-business owner who's succeeding right now owes it to her attitude. When these principals are asked questions like, "Have you lowered your prices to keep your clients?" they reply "My clients value our work. We're just providing more cost-effective solutions so we don't have to lower our rates." To the question, "Are you submitting spec work to get clients these days?" they answer "'F' that. Spec work is for losers." If you are not one of them, then you want to work for one of them. They're the difference between a victim of the economy and a true success story: Success stories smile while they drive their import cars.

No matter where you are on the design industry food chain, you have the option to succeed. The next time you face a challenge, ask yourself which way you want to handle it. Choose the option that makes you nervous and enjoy being a 'Tude.

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