

7 PROSPECT RED FLAGS



A COLLECTION OF
SHORT STORIES
~~INSPIRED BY~~
BASED ON
PERSONAL
EXPERIENCES

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RED FLAG

noun: red flag

a red flag used as a warning of danger.

Disclaimer:

All real-life incidents & conversations mentioned in this ebook
are for instructional & learning purposes only.

Red Flag #1

Prospects don't show up on time.

A prospect reached out to me, looking for content for a brochure. I qualified him by using the "Quick Questions" qualification method (you must have already read this in the Money Call\$ ebook). He responded promptly, and the opportunity seemed to be an excellent fit for me at the time. So I booked a call with him, 4 days in advance.

As is my practice, I dropped a reminder email for the call 24 hours prior, and then once again, 2 hours prior. Everything looked great... until the prospect didn't show up for 15 minutes. Around 30 minutes post the meeting time, I received an email, *"Sorry Shreya, got caught up with something. Are you available for a call now?"*

[Red Flag #1]

I was unsure of rescheduling the call. But I thought, "Things happen. At least he has reached out to me again; he must be serious about his need for content. Let me just book another call, it's okay."

I had other calls lined up for that evening, so I confirmed a slot with the prospect for the next day. I also wrote to him, *"In case of any changes, kindly let me know up to 2 hours in advance."*

The next day, I waited on the call for 10 minutes, when I got an email, *"Hi Shreya, I'll be there in 5 minutes."* The prospect finally showed up 25 minutes past the meeting time.

[Red Flag #2]

Yet again, I was unsure of working with the prospect. But as soon as we started talking, things seemed to look better. He apologised profusely for being late; told me how he found me through some mutual online community we are in; and was really excited to begin the project. This led me to overlook the meeting delays. [Mistake #1]

I followed my usual prospect call script to get to know the prospect better. Everything looked great, and the deal was sealed at my quoted price. This made me think, "Okay, he has agreed to my fees. So he's definitely on board and will be a good client to work with."
[Mistake #2]

Here's what followed:

1. We mutually agreed that I would not start the work before the advance payment being made
2. I sent the invoice for the advance payment
3. The payment was made 3 weeks late... which means, the project started 3 weeks late.

[Red Flag #3]

At this point, I should have been more aware of the regular red flags, and should have declined the payment and discontinued the project. But I didn't. Why? Because at that time, they didn't seem like potential red flags

Now, finally, we started the project. I did my research for the content work, created a detailed outline for the brochure, and sent it to the client for review. I proposed a 15-minute introductory call to finalise these details. The prospect readily agreed.

And now?

Back to square one.

The client did not show up.

I had already spent over 2 hours just waiting for the same person to join a call, at three different times. And this would definitely happen in the future too.

So I sent this message to the client,

"Hi, please let me know what date/ time you're available this week.

In case you're not able to make it at the fixed time, please let me know in advance. We had to reschedule our initial introductory calls as well, and the regular delays will make it extremely challenging for us to work together.

I request that going forward, kindly update me of any changes at least 2 hrs in advance.

Thanks."

This was my prospect's reply:

"Don't be so pushy about the time. I wait for my clients for hours in their offices, I'm sure you can wait for yours."

RED FLAG RED FLAG RED FLAG!!!

All this time, it was never about the client's delays or meetings coming up. It was simply and clearly, the lack of value of my time as a service provider.

THIS was the point where I joined all the dots (red flags).

Delayed appearances at meetings.

Last-minute rescheduling of calls.

No responses to texts.

All this, even AFTER he had made the payment.

(Which, turns out, is a rather sticky situation to be in. How do you convince someone to value their own investment? Do you fire the client? Do you refund the money? But you've already put in your

time and work, so would it be okay to just refund the money? Sticky, sticky situation.)

To this date, that project is hanging by a thread.
Somewhere, in the back of my mind.
Somewhere, in a tiny folder in my Google Drive.

All this follow-up,
All this back-and-forth,
All this mental stress,
Could have been prevented only if I had paid attention to the first two red flags.

Of course, this is just one of my many experiences with people who show up late to meetings.

Sometimes things work out.
But most of the time, they don't.

Psst... presently, I set up my calls manually; my student life does not allow me to create a fixed, automated schedule of my availability.

If you can use Calendly to book your calls, do it. You can then set up auto-reminders for your prospects.

Red Flag #2

Prospects praise you excessively [ahem ahem, patronise you].

This story is about a deal I closed in the first few months of my freelancing career.

The prospect had found me through a post on LinkedIn. (Yes, yes, most of my leads have been inbound and prospects have found me through my narrative, engaging posts on LinkedIn. This will come up a lot.)

He was extremely impressed by my content on LinkedIn.

Within 5 minutes of our conversation, he had already said things like,

“Shreya, you are an exceptional writer... I have never seen content like this before... All the other writers I have worked with have been unreliable and have cheated me and run away with my money... I am looking for someone like you that I am certain will do an excellent job. You are definitely the perfect fit... I would like to work with you for 6 months directly, how do we get started...”

It was a whole pitch from the prospect.

My content on LinkedIn normally receives above-average engagement, and such comments were not uncommon.

So yes, at the time, I was happy with everything this prospect told me.

We discussed the prospect's requirement,
We finalised on 4 articles per month,
We negotiated significantly,
We signed the contract,

And we closed a 6-month deal right off the bat, with a monthly payment plan.

The first payment was made instantly,
The outline was reviewed promptly,
The feedback was provided clearly.

I sent the first article to the client for review, and here's what he said:

"The writing is spot on. Excellent!!! Good to go for publishing. Clearly and effectively message is delivered. Thank you for the article. When will you start writing the next blog?"

The enthusiasm was great to see... but at the same time, I was surprised by such a response. Didn't seem natural, did it?

And then, 5 minutes later, it all made sense.

5 minutes later, I received this email,
"I would be very grateful if you could just edit this 1-page company profile document. I have attached the same."

Free work alert!!!

I reviewed the document and quoted my fees, to which the client replied, *"I'm not sold on this :)"*

I proceeded with the rest of the articles.

That's when everything went downhill.

Now, every single article outline had to be "researched in-depth and rewritten."

Every sentence in my next article was "immaturely put together."
Suddenly I "lacked the business experience to write such an article."

Alright, that's fine. I can edit these things and send revised articles.

Then, a few days later, I received a text at 1 AM, *“This term you mentioned in the contract about your byline does not make sense. Nobody else is doing it. You are cheating me.”*

I kept staring at the message.

I started tearing up in the middle of the night, terrified of how things were working out with this client.

(By the way, that term in the contract was completely fine, and I continue to use it to date.)

But I was still new to freelancing back then,
And this was one of the first times, ever, that something like this had happened.

The client and I had a long-winded discussion over a term that was already agreed, accepted and signed for in the contract.

Not only did the discussion take up hours and hours of our time, but it cost me my mental peace and sanity for 3 full days.

Eventually, we terminated the contract halfway through the first month
... which was one of the best decisions I made.

After this experience, there were a couple of more instances when overly-appreciative prospects became absolutely painful clients to work with. Since then, I have identified this trait as a Prospect Red Flag.

There's a fine line between someone appreciating you and someone patronising you. The sooner you can distinguish between the two, the better off you will be.

Red Flag #3

Prospects undermine your work; subtly and repeatedly.

Let's consider the email from the story I just shared with you:

*"I would be very grateful if you could **just** edit this 1-page company profile document. I have attached the same."*

There have been many more messages like this:

- "Hi Shreya, could you **just** do a **quick** edit of this document for us?"
- "Shreya, this only needs a spellcheck... I'm sure that **must not be hard for you**. Can you send it in 30 minutes?"
- "Shreya, we would need a free sample article from you. It'll need to be **only** 200-words long."

Well, this may not be a blazing red flag,
And you may wish to overlook this initially.

But, this is still one of the many significant red flags that you must be aware of.

Why?

Firstly, because words like "just," "quick," "only," and "must not be hard for you" shows that they think your job is too easy and they don't value your work, efforts and time.

But that's not it.

Secondly,
And most importantly,

Listening to words like “just,” “quick,” “only,” and “must not be hard for you” will make YOU believe that what you are doing is easy and can be done quickly. This will lead you to:

- Bending over to your clients’ unreasonable deadlines and inviting stress
- Becoming skeptical about your rates and wondering if you should charge less
- Developing an Imposter Syndrome about you and your services.

Be wary of anyone that uses such words that subtly undermine your work.

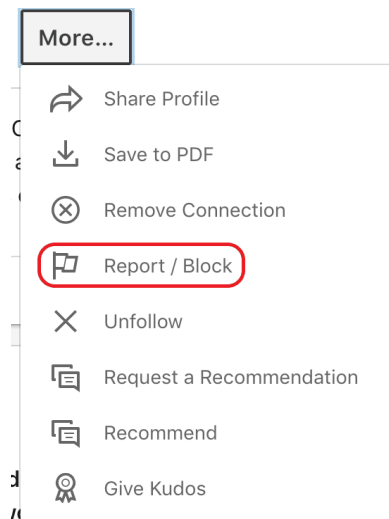
Red Flag #4

Prospects demand a “security deposit.”

Prospect’s text [usually from a company page or page with no profile picture]:

“Hi Shreya, we are looking for someone to write 30 articles a month of 1000 words each. Our budget is INR 1-1.5 per word. The payment will be made every week. You just need to pay a security deposit of INR 1,500 and we can get started immediately.”

My response:



Yes, I just block such accounts.

When I first received such a message, I thought this was a pretty absurd scammer move and no one would agree to it. But, turns out, a lot of new freelancers have been duped by this method repeatedly.

Don’t fall for anyone who asks YOU to pay THEM. When YOU are the service provider, YOU are the one who should be getting paid.

This is one of those red flags that you don’t even need to think twice about.

Red Flag #5

Prospects refuse to commit: No advance payment.

I charge 100% advance.

I have been doing this since the first day of my freelancing career.

Yet, along the way, I've made the mistake of not charging 100% advance at times. And that's exactly how I have the experience of this red flag.

In early 2019, when I was fairly new to freelancing, I discussed working with a prospect for the negotiated fee of \$150 per month.

I quoted a 100% advance.

The prospect insisted on no advance payment: *"No other freelancer has ever charged us in advance."*

I declined the work.

The prospect came back the next day. They liked my work and wanted to hire me, and said that since they were a startup, they would be more comfortable paying a 50% advance. This seemed okay to me, and I accepted their terms.

So, the final payment terms were: 50% advance; 50% at the end of the month.

The client paid the 50% advance, \$75.

I did the work.

I submitted the work.

Now, here's the thing:

When it came to paying the balance for the first month PLUS the advance for the next month, the amount came up to \$150. The client was not prepared for this.

Along with this, the client still needed the work to continue promptly. So I agreed to a one-week extension on the payment, and did the work worth two extra weeks as well. [Yes, yes, even I wonder why I did this. Things happen.]

No payment received.

Not even the balance of \$75 from the first month.

I followed up over text. The client said he was travelling and needed some time.

Two weeks passed, nothing.

I followed up again, frustratedly, for another 2-3 weeks. No update.

At this point, I just decided to leave this client, forego the \$150 and find someone else to work with.

Then, one month later, the client himself messaged me, *"My team just paid \$120 to your account."*

[Yes, he still owes me \$30. Hmm.]

Overall, this one experience was enough for me to never agree to anything other than a full advance payment.

Now, if anyone says anything like, "50-50" or even "80-20", I decline. 100% advance only.

If there's an iota of a chance that I won't get paid at all; I might as well put in efforts to find prospects who will pay me in advance.

Caution: Sticking to a "100%-advance-policy" will *initially* cost you a lot of deals and your income may be hit.

Red Flag #6.

Prospects vanish after confirming the deal.

A prospect saw my work on LinkedIn and reached out to me over email.

He wanted me to write 10 articles for his website every month. I requested more details, understood his requirements and shared my proposal. We had some back and forth over the pricing and terms, and I eventually offered a whopping 50% discount for this content writing work.

I thought this would help me close the deal at the earliest. But, instead, the prospect ghosted me.

This was back in January 2019.

Then, out of the blue, this prospect wrote to me again in December 2020 -- *"Hey Shreya, are you still available to write articles?"*

I recalled conversing with him many months ago, and was skeptical about working with him.

But then I thought, "Hmm, he reached out to me again after all this time. Maybe he is serious about it now?" So I shared a revised proposal.

This time, my rates were 5X of our initial conversation back in January 2019.

I used the "Exchange Estimates" method to qualify the lead (you must have already read this in the Money Call\$ ebook). He was open to considering this revised rate, and we spoke over a Zoom call to finalise things.

He was happy with the conversation and asked me to send him the invoice, which I did.

Then?

Gone.

After confirming the deal and requesting an invoice, the prospect that I had spent so much time on... vanished... again. Just like that.

I was upset for a few days after having been ghosted twice by the same person.

Then I realised that I'm glad I didn't end up working with him.

So, if your prospect vanishes (or basically, ghosts you) after speaking with you, take it as a red flag.

Steer clear of such people even if they approach you again.

Red Flag #7

Your intuition says “No!”

Most of the stories that I've shared above involved this red flag as well.

Each conversation that involved this red flag ended up in either of the two ways:

1. I declined to work with the prospect
2. I regretted working with the prospect.

The first one is always the best way to go.

If your intuition (or gut or vibe or feeling) says no, Listen to it.

Don't argue with your intuition.
110% listen to it,
And say no to the prospect.

Note: Your intuition or “gut feeling” is very, very subjective. It has to be, because it pertains to *your* gut. There's no “right and wrong” here; but there is a “safe and unsafe.” You will develop this gut feeling over time, through a combination of *your* experiences, *your* mistakes, *your* values, and *your* agency in life. Just be aware of it.

Now, let's say your gut says no and you decide not to work with the prospect.

Ghosting your prospect is not the right way to decline the work.

I have heard stories from countless freelancers: *“I didn't want to work with that prospect, so I just stopped replying to them.”*

They've done this even with prospects they really wanted to work with, and then lost the opportunity because they didn't have the confidence to respond to them with a "No."

Don't run away from such situations; deal with them professionally and gracefully. Such small actions will *train* you into becoming an exceptional freelancer.

Here are 2 things to keep in mind about declining a prospect's work:

#1: Decline the project clearly:

"Hi [name], I am unable to take up this project at this time. I thank you for your consideration, and wish you the best with your project. Thanks, Shreya."

#2: Don't mention anything about the "future":

Have you watched F.R.I.E.N.D.S.?

Well, there's an episode in the show where Chandler ends his dinner date by telling the woman, "This was nice, we should do this again sometime!"

The problem?

Chandler doesn't even like this woman,
And he was definitely NOT planning to "do this again sometime."

But, he still ended up giving them hope of a future date... which led him to go on a date with the same woman again.

And again.

And again.

Don't let this happen with your prospects.

If you text them something like this...

*"Hi [name], thanks for reaching out. I am fully booked for the next 2 months and am unable to take up your project at this time. **I hope we may work together in the future!**"*

... then they might just expect to work with you 2 months down the line.

If you don't want that to happen, avoid the entire situation by not giving any false hope. Refuse work tactfully.

Reminder: These are tips for dealing with prospects that you are **not** comfortable working with.

Bonus Red Flag in a Bonus Guide?

Yes!

Notice how most of these deals were (significantly) negotiated, either in terms of price or the terms of the contract, or both.

Based on the pattern you've just observed, it may be wise to mark "negotiation" as a prospect red flag.

With that being said, here's how one of my prospects negotiated with me:

"Shreya, I don't want to start with the amount you've quoted right now... what can you do for me for 75% of that amount? I'm not asking for a discount; I am asking for lesser work at my preferred price point."

Such a negotiation was a win-win for both, the prospect and I. He would get an offer within his budget, and I would offer him services worth his budget.

I instantly created a customised offer for him, and he paid the first month's fee in advance, while on the call. To this date, he is one of the best clients I have ever worked with.

So, pay attention to the manner of negotiation, and pitch your offer accordingly. **And be aware of prospects who negotiate steeply.**

