Saying Yes to Clients

Idea In Short

Saying yes to every client request feels collaborative but it quietly destroys project margins, alignment and trust. Learn to diagnose why the client is asking, then choose between delivering, redirecting or selling more work.

The Comfort of Agreement

It is easy to say yes. Perhaps too easy. When a client asks for new research, an ad-hoc analysis or an extra workshop, the request usually seems reasonable. After all, clients pay the bills and they should get the most from their consultants.

When the consultant agrees on the spot, the moment feels comfortable and collaborative. The consultant feels like she is listening well. The client feels heard. There is no stress and no awkward pause. Agreement is the path of least resistance, like water running downhill.

Experienced consultants and lawyers will tell you that being overly agreeable creates real problems. The friction-free response masks issues that surface later, when the work is overdue or the scope has quietly ballooned. 1

False Promises and Over-Promising

It is easy to say yes in the heat of the moment, then completely forget about it. This is the equivalent of a husband telling his wife "sure, honey" when he was not listening and definitely not writing anything down. Promises made casually become promises broken silently.

Consultants also know the crude but true adage: under-promise and over-deliver. When the client asks for 100, promise less and deliver more. Lowering client expectations gives you a better chance of exceeding them. Call it cynical, call it sandbagging, but it works. Setting realistic expectations protects both the relationship and the deliverable.

Over-promising damages credibility in ways that are hard to repair. The client remembers the commitment you missed long after they forget the analysis you delivered. Trust erodes faster than it builds, and a pattern of casual yeses compounds that risk. 2

The Waste of Misaligned Effort

Clients often give good feedback, especially when explaining the organizational context and the politics underneath it. Every client has something to teach. That said, not every client request is valid. Some are a genuine waste of time.

Consultants are paid for their expertise and often paid by the hour. There is no reason to waste the client's money, waste your own time or, worse, put the project timeline at risk. Discernment is a professional skill. Knowing what not to do is as valuable as knowing what to do.

Every hour spent on a low-value request is an hour stolen from the core deliverable. The client may not see the trade-off immediately, but they will feel it when the final work falls short. Protecting the scope protects the outcome.

Poor Alignment as the Greatest Danger

In my mind, poor alignment is the greatest danger of unchecked agreement. If the client keeps bringing up new ideas and the consultant keeps agreeing to them, something is wrong. It is a symptom of a deeper problem that deserves diagnosis, not accommodation.

On the consultant side, the project plan may be inadequate and key areas may be missing. The right people may not have been involved at the start, so new faces keep appearing. The consultant may be doubting her own plan, looking for a lifeline.

On the client side, the client may not be clear on next steps or may be uncomfortable with the timeline. The analysis may not have been robust or well explained, leaving the client doubting the numbers. The client may even have a pre-defined solution and want the consultant to rubber-stamp it.

Each of these root causes calls for a different response than a reflexive yes. A plan gap requires re-planning. A confidence gap requires better communication. A hidden agenda requires a frank conversation about objectives.

A Framework for Thoughtful Responses

Consultants love a two-by-two matrix because it distills thinking into two variables and forces you to work through the problem. The same approach applies here, mapping effort against relevance to the project.

If the request is minor and useful, say yes and get it done professionally and quickly. Add value and move on. The client's suggestion was helpful and acting on it builds goodwill without disrupting the plan.

If the request will take substantial time but is relevant to the project, look for a simpler and more elegant solution. Ask questions and understand why the client has this new request. One time, a client's concern was resolved simply by adding a short footnote at the bottom of a presentation.

If the request is not relevant to the project, offer to look into it. This can be a good opportunity to sell more consulting work. Offer to explore the issue, run a bit of analysis or do some research. Nothing serious, just some sleuthing on the topic that could open a new engagement.

Provided there is budget, this could be the easiest way to sell new work. It could be the start of a blossoming client-consultant relationship where each project leads to another. Nothing sells work like doing good work. A reasonable estimate is that 20 percent of consulting work is sold this way. 3

Finding a Smarter Way to Say No

Any long-married husband will tell you that saying no directly to his wife's request is neither efficient nor effective for building a relationship. The same is true with clients. No consultant ever won new business by telling a client no to their face.

Find out the reasons why the client is asking the new questions. It might be scope creep, but it could just as easily be something you can solve quickly or even sell more consulting work. The diagnosis matters more than the initial answer.

Are you thinking far enough ahead? If you continuously get new requests, this may mean you are not thinking ahead. Strong consultants think one move ahead of their manager and two or three moves ahead of the client. Anticipation reduces the volume of reactive requests.

You need to understand why the client is asking. Do they lack confidence in your analysis? Are they getting pushback from their own leadership? Get to the root cause of the angst and solve it together. Trust is built through shared problem-solving, not through compliance.

There is also a positive signal here. It is good that the client is communicating with you. It is far better for them to ask you for a favor than to tell their boss, or your boss, that something is lacking. Communication is a sign of engagement, even when it feels like pressure.

Did you forget a prior request? Nothing is more frustrating than a consultant who acts like they are listening but forgets to follow through. If the client asked for something once before and you let it slip, the recurrence of that request is a warning about your own reliability.

Get buy-in on the approach throughout the engagement. Do not assume your client understands the approach after seeing it once during kickoff. Reiterate it during update meetings and at milestones. If the client cannot explain the approach to their cousin, you did a poor job of educating them.

Give the client something to do. Make it easy for your client to succeed and look good, but also give them meaningful work. You do not want a client whose only contribution is to pile on requests or critique the approach. Do not turn your client into a critic.

- 1Projectworks: A Consultant's Guide to Managing Scope Creep
- 2Scopecreeper: What is Scope Creep in Consulting?
- 3LinkedIn: Approaches To Handle Scope Creep In Consulting Projects

Summary

Consultants who say yes to everything create false promises, wasted effort and misaligned expectations. The disciplined response is to diagnose the request, weigh its value and respond with intent. Under-promise, over-deliver and protect the relationship you were hired to build.