



# 7 Key Areas to Strengthen Client Boundaries



# Introduction

Boundaries are a set of rules and limits that can be applied within a relationship to establish behavioral expectations—in other words, what someone is (and isn't!) comfortable with. Boundaries aren't just for personal relationships though. They can—and should—be set within professional and business relationships to help protect the emotional health and productivity of everyone involved. When boundaries are clear between businesses and clients, trust is built and time is saved. What's not to love?

Setting boundaries and communicating effectively with clients shows professionalism and respect, and proves the credibility a business has in the work they do and in their clients. When healthy boundaries are set and maintained, the feelings of resentment, disappointment, and anger that often build up when limits have been pushed can be avoided.

Setting clear expectations not only helps build trust between both parties in professional relationships, but can make client onboarding and retention easier. Clients can't be expected to respect boundaries if they haven't been made crystal clear.

Now, let's discuss the 7 key areas to strengthen client boundaries...



# 1. Set Expectations Early

Boundaries should be set as soon as possible in the client journey to establish great working relationships.

**“Boundaries are super important because they allow you the space and the flexibility to run your practice in the best way possible,” said Nayo Carter-Gray, Owner and Founder of 1st Step Accounting LLC.**

Carter-Gray was named one of the top 50 cloud accountants in North America by Hubdoc, and she takes client boundaries seriously. “It’s very difficult to be able to handle all the things and wear all the hats as a firm owner if you’re constantly being bombarded with requests for information or you’re being called all the time. When do you have the time to actually do the work? If we start allowing our clients to overrule the things we put in place, what happens is they start running our firms for us, not the opposite way.”

When it comes to data retention periods, firms may have different policies depending on their clients and the type of services they’re offering. Firms should always consult with an attorney to understand the laws that govern their firm and its engagement, and share that information with their clients.

In order to set boundaries early, keep an ear perked during the first conversation with a potential client to get an idea of how they work and what they might expect from a business relationship. For example, if a potential client stresses how they “need someone they can count on at any hour,” it’s almost a guarantee that they’ll be the type to send text messages to their accountant’s personal cell at 3 am for a “tax emergency.” With a little expectation-setting, this type of sunrise surprise can be prevented.

“Boundaries start at the initial contact. As soon as your prospective client is looking for your services, that starts the boundary. Are you using your website effectively? Does it have information about your business hours? Does it have some frequently asked questions? Do you have a ‘schedule an appointment now’ button? These boundaries are in place so you don’t have to spend a ton of time trying to find an appointment for a potential client,” says Carter-Gray.

On the following page, we share some examples of boundaries to set as early as possible.



### **WORKING HOURS**

Making it crystal clear that work will only be done within a certain time frame each day can help prevent unnecessarily burdensome communication from clients.

### **METHODS OF CONTACT**

Phone calls and emails tend to be standard communication tools, but some people may be okay with clients contacting them via Instagram, Facebook Messenger, or in other ways. It can quickly become overwhelming if clients use every communication tool available, and too easy to drop the ball on responding when client communication is spread across multiple platforms. Pick one or two methods of secure communication, inform clients, and stay consistent.

### **RESPONSE TIME**

We've all seen it on Yelp or Google business reviews—a business with a bad rating because of their slow response time. Prevent this type of client complaints by first establishing that they should never expect an immediate response. It's perfectly okay—and healthy—to inform clients that emails, phone calls, and messages won't be responded to immediately. Whether a business' response time is 2 minutes or 48 hours, clients should be made aware of that boundary and be able to respect it.

### **SERVICES OFFERED**

Firms should be very clear about the services they offer and what they are or aren't willing or able to do for clients. If this isn't made clear from the beginning, clients may end up asking for—and expecting—more than what they're paying for. As Nayo Carter-Gray says, "Time is one thing you cannot give back. It is a privilege for someone to be able to absorb your time. They should be paying for it."

### **PAYMENT TERMS**

Compensation can't be left out in a discussion about boundaries. Firms must be clear about how much services cost, acceptable methods of payment, when payment is due, and finally, consequences for late or missed payment. Put it in writing prior to beginning any work, and side-step any possible money miscommunication.

### **UNPLANNED COMMUNICATION**

Many clients think it's okay to make multiple "quick" calls throughout the day to check on work progress or ask seemingly simple questions. Taking so-called "quick" calls eats into the valuable time needed to complete client work. Creating a policy around last-minute or unplanned communication will save hours—if not days—of productive time.

## 2. Be Aware of Scope Creep

Scope creep is a term for work that goes beyond what was originally agreed upon by two parties.

It's what happens when more services are added to a work project without accounting for the additional time, resources, and money that will be required to complete the project with those new features. Without proper communication and boundaries, it's easy for clients to ask for more and more, which can result in unplanned and unapproved changes and project delays. Here are the best practices that firms can use to manage scope creep before it happens:

### **ADDRESS CLIENT CONCERNS EARLY ON**

Scope creep often happens when clients are asked for feedback when a project is nearly finished. If additional requests are posed or if a client wants to change something, it can cost the firm extra time and money to make adjustments. Communicating early with clients and continuing to check in throughout the whole project can help mitigate this problem.

### **REFER BACK TO THE EXISTING SCOPE REGULARLY**

A project scope statement defines the goals of a project, expected deliverables, tasks that need to be completed, deadlines, and costs. Referring back to a scope statement regularly is critical to staying on track with a project. If a firm discovers they're doing more work than they originally planned for, it's probably time to re-scope.

### **HAVE A CHANGE MANAGEMENT PLAN**

Having a plan in place for when a client requests changes or new services is important. It can include how change requests will be monitored, how much they'll cost, how they'll be carried out, and the expected effect the changes will have on a project or client relationship.



### 3. Trust Check Clients

Trust checking is the process of testing to see whether or not a client will respect set boundaries. It's a great way to see if new clients understand expectations and will be a good fit to work with long-term.

Here's an example of how to trust check: Let's say an accountant sets a boundary that they only respond to emails between the hours of 9 am–11 am. They've discussed this with their new client, but the client starts sending emails at 3 pm each day asking for immediate responses, and gets upset when they don't hear back until the next morning. The client is reminded of the set email boundary several times, but consistently resumes their previous behavior, despite verbally agreeing not to. In this scenario, the client is demonstrating over and over again that they will not respect boundaries and they don't respect their accountant's time. The accountant will need to decide whether this particular client is worth their time, energy, and resources.

Giving second chances in the beginning of a working relationship is to be expected, but giving 3rd, 4th, and 5th chances may lead to an unhealthy dynamic down the line. Decide ahead of time exactly how many reminders a client will receive before they're officially referred elsewhere.

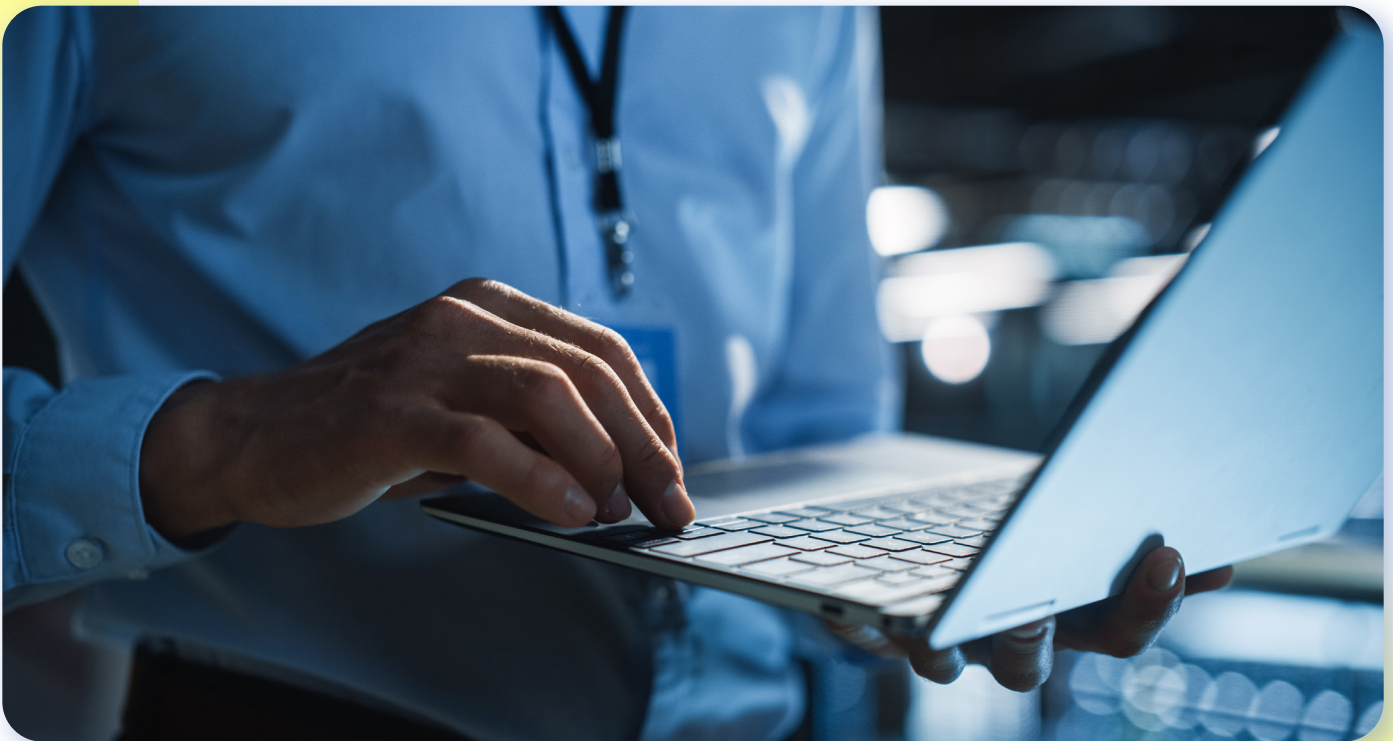


## 4. Refund, Disengage, and Refer Elsewhere

No matter how clear a business is about their boundaries, not every client is going to be a good fit. It's okay to walk away from a client if they can't respect boundaries.

Dream clients who listen and are respectful are out there, so there's no reason to settle for frustration or disrespect, no matter how inadvertent or unintentional on the client's part. If a client isn't a good fit, the professional thing to do is refund their money, disengage services, and refer them elsewhere. Just because someone isn't a good fit at one firm doesn't mean they aren't capable of a healthy working relationship with another.

**“It's okay to say: ‘Thank you for the opportunity to work with you, unfortunately it seems that we are not a good fit. You have needs that we cannot meet. Here is your money back. Thank you so much. Here are a few accountants that would be more than willing to provide the level of communication that you need.’” says Carter-Gray.**



## 5. Use Boundary Building Tools

Technology can help establish client boundaries by making it easier to communicate and set expectations. Here are a few tried-and-true tools:

### EMAIL SCHEDULING

Emailing scheduling within Gmail or a CRM makes it possible to schedule emails to be sent out at predetermined times. This ensures that clients never receive an email outside business hours, which can be a saving grace when working late but trying to stay consistent with set expectations. Besides scheduling outgoing messages, try creating an automatic email response that says “currently out of office” or have business hours listed in an email signature. It’s good practice to not respond immediately to clients—unless they’re paying for immediate communication.

### VIDEOS

Creating short videos can be an easy way to answer questions from clients. Here are some video creation tools:

- [Warm Welcome](#)
- [Loom](#)
- [Slack’s video conferencing feature](#)

### SETTING “APPOINTMENT ONLY” POLICIES

By implementing an appointment-only policy, firms and business owners can more easily block time for calls, focus time, and internal meetings. Because who wants to take calls on a Friday afternoon? Making an “appointment only” policy is an easy way to decide which times of the day will be most strategic for taking external meetings or returning phone calls.

### CLIENT MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Setting regular meetings with clients and communicating efficiently is critical for a healthy working relationship. These tools can make that process easier:

- [Pixie](#)
- [Karbon](#)
- [Aero Workflow](#)
- [Client Hub](#)





## 6. Boundaries Go Both Ways—Firms Have A Responsibility To Protect Client Data

Accountants and their clients have to give extra attention to data responsibility and should make a point to talk about it when setting boundaries. If an accountant is managing a client's file, they're responsible for compliance and regulatory responsibilities that inherently come with being in the finance industry. It's an accountant's obligation to secure their client's data, and the extent to which it's secured should be thoroughly discussed with the client—not only is trust on the line, but professional reputation and federal compliance rules as well.

Since the [Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act](#) was passed by the Federal Trade Commission in 1999, all financial institutions are required, through the Safeguards Rule, to maintain a written [information security plan](#) that “describes their program to protect customer information.”

Firms should be very clear about when their clients should be submitting documents and how they can submit data securely. It's also important for firms to be transparent about how they store, save, and backup their clients' data.

### THE [3-2-1 BACKUP RULE](#) CAN BE HELPFUL IN REGARD TO DATA STORAGE:

- Keep at least 3 copies of a client's data
- Store the data on two different storage media
- One of the data sets should be located off-site or on a cloud-based back-up service such as [Rewind](#).
- Rewind allows firms to protect clients' sensitive financial data in a secure, foolproof way.

**“Rewind offers its customers the ability to manage team member and client permissions across the QBO company files that are linked and backed up by Rewind. As the Rewind account Owner, you can add, remove, and change permissions for your team members and clients in Rewind. This provides you with complete access control over your data backups,”** says Danny Grenzowski, Rewind's Senior Project Manager.

When it comes to data retention periods, firms may have different policies depending on their clients and the type of services they're offering. Firms should always consult with an attorney to understand the laws that govern their firm and its engagement, and share that information with their clients.

## 7. Allow Exceptions to Boundary Rules

Setting healthy boundaries can strengthen client relationships, and while it's important to learn to say “No” for emotional health and productivity, it's not a one-size-fits all policy. Making exceptions to certain policies can be the right thing to do.

Making an exception for a client should always be a conscious choice. Clients are people, and “life happens” to all of us.

**“When I make exceptions, they are a conscious choice. I am not being forced into it, it's just the extra layer of service I want to provide for these particular clients. I've decided that I'm the one who's in control of who I work with and who my team works with,” says Carter-Gray.**

Occasionally, breaking a boundary rule can actually strengthen client relationships and help clients feel heard and understood. For example, say a boundary has been set that clients can only make contact via an instant messaging system, but a less-than-tech-savvy client is having trouble with the technology. It might make sense for the main method of communication with that particular client to be phone calls—not for everyone, just for that particular client.

Strong client relationships that grow and withstand setbacks are built on genuine connection, not just transactions. When setbacks occur, it can be helpful to remember that clients are human beings who deserve compassion just like everyone else.



### ABOUT THE EXPERT

Making Accounting a Little Less Taxing® for small business owners is Nayo Carter-Gray's goal as owner and founder of 1st Step Accounting LLC. A self-proclaimed techie, Mrs. Carter-Gray decided a virtual accounting practice was the best way to experience her love of travel and still help small business owners across the US to reduce the stress of managing their disorganized financial systems.

Mrs. Carter-Gray is an Enrolled Agent and a QuickBooks Online Advanced Certified Pro-Advisor. She was named one of Hubdoc's 2017 and 2018 Top 50 Cloud Accountants in North America and handpicked to sit on the 2018–2019 Intuit Accountant Council. Mrs. Carter-Gray was also recently named one of Forbes Top 100 Tax Twitter accounts to follow and one of the Top 50 Women in Accounting by Practice Ignition.

## Ready to build your firm's backup strategy?

[Learn more](#) about implementing Rewind for your QuickBooks Online clients.

