



How to Give a D.A.M.N. About Your Stakeholders

Instructional Designers walk a fine line between providing what stakeholders want and what learners need. On top of that, we have to create engaging content that gets results. It ain't easy wearing so many hats, but if you give a D.A.M.N. about your stakeholders, you can make your job a lot easier. So, how do you do that?

DON'T overpromise

In our excitement to attract or keep customers, we can get so caught up in wanting to please that we commit to things we're unable to do. Whether it's purposeful or it's simply miscalculating your capabilities, overpromising can have detrimental effects on your relationships with your stakeholders.

Overpromising can cause distrust and lack of confidence. When done repeatedly, it can irrevocably damage your credibility. In extreme cases, it may even have financial impacts that jeopardize a department's bottom line or a company's reputation.

Examples of Overpromising include:

- Overstating your talents/knowledge/resources
- Agreeing to a deadline you know you cannot meet

Perhaps you've heard the adage, 'underpromise and overdeliver.' There's a school of thought that advises designers to "pad their promises" to give extra room for unforeseen delays. Who doesn't want to impress stakeholders and look like a hero when you exceed expectations?

Examples of Overdelivering include:

- Completing a project before the due date
- Coming in under the projected budget

However, overdelivering can cause unintended, negative consequences. Your stakeholder may be wondering why you came in so far under budget? Why were your numbers off to begin with? Can you be trusted to be accurate next time?

Instead of underpromising or overdelivering, don't do either. Be honest and transparent to begin with. Use whatever tools are at your disposal to give stakeholders a realistic indication of what you will do and when you will do it by. Put your efforts into delivering the best product/service you can and let your work speak for itself. In other words, make a promise and keep it. Anything other than this is doing yourself and your stakeholder(s) a disservice.

ALWAYS set clear expectations

Setting clear expectations is the cousin of *keeping your promises*. Aligning on expectations up front saves a lot of heartache on the back end. When everyone is aware of what's expected, it's easier to keep each other accountable.

Examples of setting clear expectations include:

- Defining project roles and responsibilities
- Providing a detailed communication plan
- Creating a course blueprint

A Statement of Work (SOW) is a great tool for documenting expectations. The project's purpose, roles, milestones, approvers, and deadlines are clearly spelled out. Some people prefer using a project plan for this same purpose. Others opt for an informal email

listing the high-level details. No matter what method you use, when everyone knows what's expected of them, it keeps people *and* projects on track.

MAKE sure to listen to their needs

A few years back, a video went viral of a little boy pleading with his mother, "Linda, Linda. Listen, Linda!" It was cute (at least those of you who don't have kids probably thought so). This poor little fellow was trying so hard to be heard that he kept repeating the phrase over and over, not really listening to what his mother had to say.

Your stakeholders might not plead with you to hear what they're saying. If you don't listen to their needs, they may get angry. They may yell at you (or complain to your boss). Even worse, instead of giving you an opportunity to fix things, they may walk away and refuse to work with you again.

It's critical that you take the time to actively listen to what your stakeholders are saying. Listening doesn't just involve hearing what they have to say and then repeating it or using clarifying phrases. By the way, you can tell when listening is 'artificial.' For instance, I hate it when people tell me, "So what I hear you saying is..." That language sounds so scripted. Don't treat stakeholders like a script. Treat them like humans who've come to you for a solution. They chose you. Look at it as a privilege that you're able to lend your expertise.

Examples of listening to stakeholders include:

- Paying attention to what they request, whether on a phone call, in person, or when reading/responding to written communication
- Completing a needs analysis to help pinpoint what they need
- Accepting feedback graciously—even if you don't agree. Focus on the behavior, not the person. Don't take it personal. Designers must have thick skin.

NEVER say no

In my decades of designing training solutions, I've had some weird requests from stakeholders: Design an entire eLearning course for one learner. Create a training video with a *House of Cards* theme. Convert a classroom ILT to an outdoor skills-based obstacle course. For each of these requests, my first thought was "Aw, hell no." And my second thought was, "Hmm...is there a way we can pull this off?"

I like solving puzzles. Sometimes, the challenge of attempting to fill these unusual requests piques my interest and takes over my common sense. But even for the most diehard puzzle-solver, there are some instances where things simply can't be done.

Whether you design for internal or external customers, the art of saying no is a trait that is tricky to cultivate. Nobody likes the word, no (unless it's *no* tax or *no* stress). Instead of telling stakeholders what you can't do, tell them what you can do. Focus on the positive.

For example, if a stakeholder requests an eLearning module in 24 hours, try these tips:

- Tell your stakeholder what you can do (“If you need something created within 24 hours, I can design a fantastic job aid.”)
- Offer other options (“If you want a simple, level 1 eLearning course, it will take 80 hours to complete. A level 2 course with more interactivity and engagement will take 150 hours to create.”)
- If you already have a project in progress and the stakeholder wants to add on (what I affectionately call scope-creep), remind them that any significant changes will impact the final deadline. Many times, the mention of a deadline makes people think twice about if the change really needs to be made. Handling scope creep is another fine art that I’ll cover at a later time.

In case you're wondering, the example of the stakeholder who demanded an eLearning be created in 24-hours is real. In her defense, she'd been put on the back burner multiple times, and her team had suffered a massive restructure during a department consolidation. She wanted training—and she wanted it yesterday. I learned all of this simply by asking the reason for her urgent request.

In the end, we agreed to a hybrid solution of proficiency testing (testing out) and a series of microlearnings with satisfactory deadlines for her team. Sometimes, not saying no involves having a deeper conversation with your stakeholder and listening to find out why they need what they need.



Now you know how to give a D.A.M.N. about your stakeholders. I hope you found these tips helpful and you're able to put them into practice.