INTERIOR DESIGN
STANDARD

The Ultimate Guide to Attracting Luxury Interior Design Clients

By Sandra Funk

Fill your project pipeline with your ideal clients for more profits, more creative freedom and much more joy.

© INTERIOR DESIGN STANDARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

I'm thrilled to share the strategies that not only get you hired by luxury clients, but that keep clients coming back and the referrals rolling in. It's the buzz around town that you are the one to work with.

I've been saying "I must be magnetic" at my home for years. For instance, If I'm in my bedroom, there's a family snuggle (dog included) in my bed. I'm in the attic, the whole damn fam suddenly needs something from the attic. You get the point. To my family, I'm the center of "what's happening" in our household.

You need to be the center of "what's happening" in your market when it comes to luxury interior design. You need to be MAGNETIC.

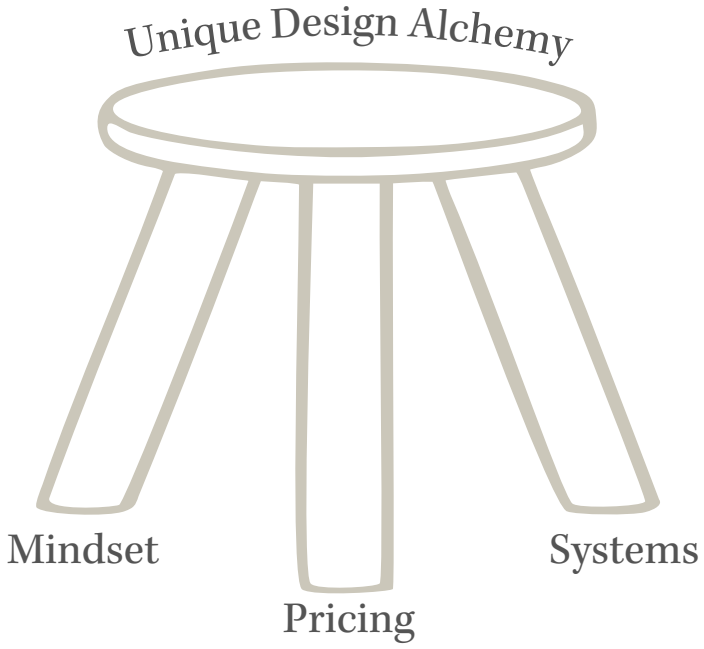
I think of a magnetic design firm as a three legged stool.

© INTERIOR DESIGN STANDARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

The seat is your unique design alchemy. The part that makes you, you.

Your unique design alchemy is derived from your upbringing, education, mentors, travel and experiences. It influences your design vision. It's not only your technical skills, but the alchemy of your every experience that came before. Your unique design alchemy should be infused into your marketing and your design portfolio. That's what initially draws luxury clients to you.

The floor is the business baseline, the absolutes: admin, lawyers, taxes, insurance, etc.



Business Baseline

The three legs of the stool are what takes your firm from survive to thrive. Creating a magnetic design firm requires a client-centric mindset that instills trust, a strategic pricing model that provides clarity and streamlined systems to create a luxury experience.

Let's dive into the three magnetic qualities to sign luxury clients.

© INTERIOR DESIGN STANDARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

CLIENT-CENTRIC MINDSET

Luxury clients seek out the top rated everything; hotels, restaurants, experiences and services. They are attracted to the best of the best.

Step 1 in creating a magnetic design firm is to have a client-centric mindset. Put yourself in the shoes of your ideal, high-end client. In every interaction that you have with your clients, think about elevating it to 5-star status. How can you make them feel truly important, cared for, safe and special whenever they interact with your firm?

The luxury clients that I've worked with not only want a beautiful and comfortable home, they want a bespoke expression of themselves that they are proud of when they are entertaining. They want custom interiors, one of a kind items, as well as art and antiques with pedigree. They want to be working with the very best designer (in their aesthetic, price point and area). So, you need to see your firm this way; as the best of the best.

Luxury clients want to be involved in creating an aesthetic that reflects them, but not in the weeds of execution. Careers, philanthropy, travel and family life leave them with little time to be involved to that level. They want you to take this project off their plate and see it through with every little detail considered, designed, executed and communicated with care.

They need to know that you're the expert they can trust with their project and that the experience will be exciting, personalized, bougie and fun.

© INTERIOR DESIGN STANDARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

STRATEGIC PRICING

Early in my career I had a high end client tell me, “I don’t want to be nickeled and dimed.” Rude at the moment? Yes. The lesson I needed? Yes.

In essence they were saying, “give me the fee up front so I’m not shuffling through invoices for the rest of this project.” Luxury clients are busy, just like you and I.

They aren’t afraid of the big number up front. In fact, consumers tend to assess a higher value to higher prices.

The 2nd step in creating a magnetic firm is pricing your services strategically.

Clients need to be able to understand your pricing model in two minutes or less. If it’s vague or mysterious, you’ll lose their trust and their attention. And, if they sense any insecurity, they either won’t work with you at all or they’ll try to negotiate your fees. (Oh, hell no!)

Provide the numbers upfront: Your client should know an estimated cost of the project (fees and furnishings) before they sign your design agreement. Include all fees into the initial design fee so that the project ends with a turnkey installation and no final invoice due. We even price in tax and freight into the furnishings estimate. Your client is in complete control of their finances the entire time. They always have all the details they need to be able to give you the green light with total confidence.

© INTERIOR DESIGN STANDARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

It’s like flying first class and getting charged for a drink. No way. That’s just not how it works. You pay the big bucks up front, then are giddy for bottomless champagne (even though you know it’s included in what you paid). Keep the surprise and delight coming and price in every little detail to create a truly memorable experience.

Keep your discount & markup: Don’t give away your profit or turn off luxury clients by talking about passing along or splitting your discount. Any conversation about discounts is automatically setting you up for failure with luxury clients. They aren’t looking for a discount designer. High-end clients want the best and they have the budget to pay for it.

In addition, when you cut into your revenue this way, you also cut into your ability to be their knight in shining armor if anything goes wrong. I love charging full retail and then being able to say, “I’ll take care of it” with a smile, because it’s the right thing to do from a customer service standpoint and I can afford to do so. Issues occur. You come out with rave reviews if you anticipate them and price in being able to handle them.

Hourly is a tough paper route: The idea that your worth is tied to the time you spend on tasks is the opposite of luxury. When you separate your worth from time, you’re able to factor in your entire value, your unique design alchemy. The combination of all of your experience, history, your natural eye for design, your mentors, your technical skills… all of you.

I've tried all the pricing models over the years and find that a flat design fee plus reasonable retail pricing on products is most palatable and easy to understand for high-end clients. My clients love knowing exactly what they’re getting into up front.

© INTERIOR DESIGN STANDARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

STREAMLINED SYSTEMS

It's storytime.

My business was growing. We'd moved into a great little studio, the employees were multiplying, and potential clients kept the phone ringing off the hook. We were carefully vetting those potential clients to only take on the larger projects with luxury budgets. The dream, right?

At this point, I was charging a healthy hourly rate with a design fee estimate up front (which no one paid any attention to). I did not provide an estimate on furnishings, freight or tax. Looking back, I now see that the clients had no idea what they were truly in for financially.

Every two weeks, I sent out design fee invoices. You know the beginning of a design project; we were hot and heavy into the details. We sure could rack up some bills...

Then, it crumbled. 3 client projects fell apart in a span of a few months (I only took on 9 clients at a time, so this was a significant chunk of my pipeline). They were watching the invoices roll in with no real understanding of what this project was going to add up to. No amount of, "oh, it's lumpy; the invoices will calm down when we get through design, then ramp up again when we start placing orders, then calm down again until construction starts..." You would have fired me, too.

© INTERIOR DESIGN STANDARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

I had bootstrapped my way into the luxury market, but was still pricing my services like they weren't going to add up to some serious cash. The stakes were too high for the ambiguity that used to fly with my mid-tier clients.

There I was. Curled up in a small ball under my desk. Gutted. Swearing that I would change how I ran my business or shut it down. I didn't take on a new project until I revised and refined every single thing in my business. It had come together slowly over time, but it needed my full attention and a complete overhaul.

Now, every single thing that I do stems from the client experience. Every interaction is vetted through the eyes of my clients (hello client-centric mindset).

I turned my processes completely upside down to ensure that I am providing a luxury experience for my clients.

Clients are busy. I've created a streamlined process that uses their time efficiently, communicates with absolute consistency and leaves no balances due.

Step 3 of creating a magnetic design firm is to create a streamlined process for a luxury experience.

I want to share my full-service process phases as a jumping off point for you to begin outlining a process that puts your client experience first.

© INTERIOR DESIGN STANDARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

My Design Process:

The Onboarding Phase exists to welcome the clients and capture their desires. We walk through the project site with the clients to fully understand what they need, how they will use the spaces, their intentions for the space and how they want to feel in the space. We also fully document the site, anything staying and any inspiration images, etc.

The Conceptual Design Phase exists to confirm the scope, layout, investment estimate and aesthetic direction. This phase culminates with a meeting with the client to confirm we're on track.

The Detailed Design Phase exists to turn ideas into orders. In this phase, I'm completing all selections and turning them into proposals. This phase culminates with a meeting with the client to approve and pay for furnishings.

The Purchasing & Execution Phase exists to place and track orders, oversee build or renovation and installation.

One of my favorite tips for providing excellent customer service is sending each client a weekly email with the status of their project. This consistent communication keeps them assured that their project is in great hands and that things are moving forward.

After my 'curled up in a small ball' moment, I turned things around and implemented the three strategies I've outlined above. I went from considering throwing in the towel to consistently bringing in over 7 figures.

© INTERIOR DESIGN STANDARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

In case we haven't crossed paths yet...

I'm Sandra Funk, founder and leader of my boutique interior design firm, House of Funk, and my business master plan, the Interior Design Standard. I am honored to have my work featured in over 30 national press outlets, including Elle Decor, Architectural Digest and House Beautiful.

Today, you can find me speaking about my mission; to empower and educate the next generation of design entrepreneurs. With my turnkey approach, I welcome designers into my inner circle, sharing my signature model to grow a 7-figure luxury design firm.

I'm not here to give just a few tips and tricks. I'm here to help you run such an incredible design firm that your dream clients will be lined up around the block to work with you.

Keep an eye on your inbox. I share my best practices on all facets of running a joyful, magnetic and efficient (read: profitable) interior design firm.

© INTERIOR DESIGN STANDARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.