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How to Choose the Designer Who is Right for You

January 2005

My days are filled with meeting people and learning about what kind of marketing materials they need. The meetings are interesting and I learn a lot about their companies and what they offer. Then I pull out our portfolio and start talking about our services. Often at about the time I pull out the third sample I notice a look I can only describe as pure terror cross their faces.

At first this reaction baffled me because, frankly, I don't think I'm a particularly frightening person. Over time I realized it's not me, but rather the notion of hiring a design agency that has my prospects shaking. I don't blame them. **Buying something when you aren't really sure what you're paying for is scary.** Unless they've worked in a corporate communications department, most business owners don't know what to expect when they hire a graphic designer. Or, I think more accurately, they don't know what exactly they are buying.

Relax. Hiring a designer is not really complicated or scary if you know what to ask for. The following four tips will help you choose the design agency that is right for you.

- Know how this piece should support your marketing and sales goals and your budget.
- Look at the designer's portfolio.
- Get a detailed proposal that clearly states what the design costs include.
- Map out a schedule at the beginning of the project.

Let me explain what I mean with each of these steps. If you do these things the next time you need to hire an agency, the project will be a fun and rewarding experience.

Know how this piece should support your marketing and sales goals and your budget.

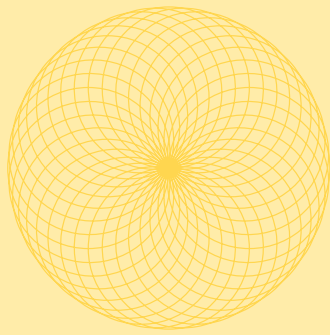
Many times the reason a design project doesn't go well is because nobody involved really knows what they want to accomplish with the piece. This sounds crazy, but it's true. Developing a company brochure just because you want one is not a good reason to do it.

Ask yourself why you need this piece and how, exactly, it will further your business goals. Do you need a professional brochure that will legitimize your company because prospects expect you to have one? Do you need to attract attendance to a show? Do you need to explain how your service works? Who will get this information? Why do they need it? Do they want it? Have you done research to determine how this audience prefers to receive information from you?

Once you know what the piece needs to do for you, determine what kind of investment you are willing and able to make. A piece that could help generate \$2m in new business is a different investment than a piece that announces a change of address. Knowing whether you are willing to spend \$2,000 or \$20,000 to meet your objective will help you choose a designer who has the right qualifications and experience.

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If you have answered these questions and know exactly what your business objective is and how much you can invest, you will be able to assess whether the agency you are meeting with will be able to produce the right product for you. Sadly, we have taken on projects where the business objective was not clear or the budget was not in line with the project goals. Not surprisingly, those are the only projects that left our client, and us, disappointed with the outcome.

Now that you know what you want to achieve, how will you know whether the designer will be able to deliver?

Look at the designer's portfolio.

I am shocked by the number of smart business people who ask me to bid on projects with out ever having met me, let alone seen my agency's portfolio. **Trust me, hiring a design firm based on cost alone is an excellent way to be disappointed.** While you may have a tight budget, it is still imperative to work with a designer whose work you've seen...and like.

Design is subjective. You like what you see or you don't. Every designer has his or her own style. You will like the that style or you won't. That doesn't mean they aren't good designers doing good work. But if you don't click with the designer or you don't really like what you see, you will have a hard time working together. And you won't be happy with the finished product.

The only way to know whether you like the designer's approach is to see examples of their work. They may not have done the exact type of piece you need. That isn't what you are looking for. You are looking at their overall body of work and determining whether you like the way they use images, type, paper—all of the components that go into a design job. If the answer is yes, then you will like what the designer does for you. If you look at their portfolio and say "bleck," you won't like what they do for you. Simple. Look at their work.

Now you've seen their work and discussed your needs for this job. What's next?

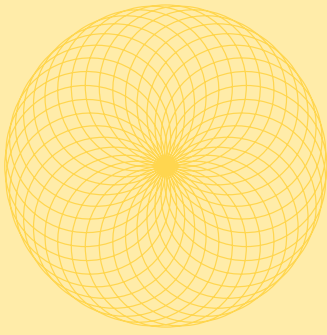
Get a detailed proposal that clearly states what the design costs include.

Designers put together proposals in many ways. Regardless of how the designer presents the information, the proposal should address the following questions:

- *What are the deliverables?* A tri-fold brochure, an electronic version of the logo, a web site template? Find out what you are getting at the end of the project. Typically the designer retains ownership of the electronic files and the artwork (except for logos). If you want to own the files, you need to discuss that with the designer. It could impact the final cost.
- *How many design comps will you get?* Comps are the initial representation of the design concept for your project. One of the biggest parts of the design cost is the idea generation and concept development the designer does. These ideas are also what differentiate designers. The

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industry average is three comps. Sometimes if budget is an issue for the client, the designer will offer only one or two comps. For my agency, approximately 50% of our design costs are for concepting.

- *How many rounds of revisions will the designer make to the design option you select?* We typically offer two rounds of revisions. That means we will tweak the design based on your feedback twice. Any amount of revision beyond that we will do at an additional cost. This is important. These costs can add up very quickly, so know when they kick in.
- *How many rounds of revisions once the copy is placed?* Again, it's important to put parameters on this so both you and the designer know how much tweaking they'll do before charging more.

This information pertains to the design cost only. Printing is an extra cost. And unless you supply the artwork, that will be an extra cost too. For your budgeting purposes, keep that in mind. Also keep in mind that until you have approved the design concept, your designer will not be able to provide an accurate print estimate. There are simply too many factors involved in print estimating to be able to provide an estimate until all the specifications are determined.

Map out a schedule at the beginning of the project.

The last thing to do is map out a schedule at the beginning of the project. This will keep your project moving forward. There is nothing more frustrating for you, or the designer, than a project that drags on forever. By putting it aside, stopping and starting, you will lose momentum and

interest in the outcome. In the end, you'll be disappointed. If you are working with a schedule and deadlines, you'll keep your excitement level high and have a beautiful piece in hand pretty quickly. If you need the piece for a particular meeting or trade show, that is also something to share with the designer. They'll be able to help you map out particular milestones based on the required delivery date.

Following these four steps will help you develop a successful relationship with your designer and get the product you want, when you want it. For more information about hiring creative services firms and what to expect, visit the American Institute of Graphic Artists web site, www.aiga.org/, where you will find several articles and resources to help you choose the right designer for your needs.

I have one last bonus tip.

Have fun.

Most designers got into this business because creating beautiful work that helps their clients achieve their marketing and sales goals is fun. If everyone is excited about the project and the relationship, you'll have a good time. An informal study of our clients revealed the amount of laughter we shared during each project was directly proportional to how satisfied they were with the product. If you are having fun with your designer, I guarantee you will love the piece you get.

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