

Working Effectively with Graphic Designers

Working with a designer can be intimidating, but if you are careful in your selection of and forthcoming in your discussions with graphic designers, you'll have a much better chance at getting materials you really like. Not to mention the added bonus of finding a designer for a long-term business relationship.

Before you begin interviewing candidates, keep a file of printed materials you like and don't like. If a design, layout, typeface, or particular format gets your attention, then save it, and jot down what it is you like/don't like. Share this file with your new designer early on. Let him or her know your tastes right from the beginning.

The following guidelines will help you succeed in finding, evaluating and working effectively with a graphic designer.

Finding a Graphic Designer

If you've never worked with a graphic designer before, I recommend you talk to colleagues for referrals. Ask your friends a few key questions, including the following: How did you like working with this designer? Would you do it again? Was he or she flexible? Did the designer stay within your budget? Was the designer accessible and reliable? Did the designer provide proofreading services? How about print production services? And does he design websites?

Evaluating Graphic Designers: A Three-Point Test

Every designer is different. They have their unique styles and pricing strategies. When you've received names from trusted colleagues, meet the candidates face to face. Your goal is to determine whether they have three critical qualifications:

- 1) a style you like
- 2) the credentials you need
- 3) a personality you can work with!

First, do you like their style? Here are some helpful guidelines:

- * Look through their portfolios. Do you like what you see?
- * Do all of their materials look the same? Although each designer has a particular style, each client is different. The materials need to reflect the client more than the designer.
- * Are there samples of projects like yours in their portfolios?

Does the designer have good credentials?

- * How much professional experience does the designer have? There is a big difference between a graphic designer and a "desktop publisher". The more complex your project is, the more important it is to work with a fully qualified designer.
- * Ask each candidate "What are your capabilities?" Large design firms have larger staffs. Some employ proofreaders, illustrators, and photographers. Some work with copywriters. Will all of your needs be met with this designer?
- * Ask for additional references if you like.

Will you like working with this person?

- * Client/designer relationships have to be close. You need to feel comfortable talking with your designer.
- * Do you think this designer will explain things to you during the process?
- * Is the designer putting you at ease or making you uncomfortable?
- * How accessible will the designer be? Will he/she be doing your work - or will it be delegated to an associate?

Defining Your Project (Do You Know What You Want?)

The next step is to discuss your project in greater detail so that you and the designer have a mutual understanding of what you need done.

Describe the project in as much detail as you can. Do you want a catalog designed? Letterhead? A corporate logo? A website? The designer needs to know your audience, too. When creating marketing materials that go beyond the basic corporate identity pieces, be sure the designer understands your market, the type of prospect you are trying to reach, your overall corporate marketing objectives, and your corporate culture. The same information needs to be presented differently to an engineer than it does to a CEO. The most beautifully designed ad going into an engineering publication is useless if it speaks only to a CEO. This becomes even more critical when designing a website because the designer needs to understand how to 'talk' to all potential audiences.

Discuss the estimated shelf life of your pieces. Will they be permanent or do you need them for a specific event? Will they need to be updated regularly, and if so, by whom? Will they be integrated with existing materials?

Be clear about all your expectations. Do you have a specific deadline for your materials? Do you need the designer's help in finding a writer? Do you expect the designer to handle the printing? How about the mailing? The more you can articulate now, the better the estimate will be and the smoother the entire project.

Beyond Print to New Media

Though your immediate need may be print materials, chances are you'll need the same content used (or "repurposed") for newer media, including the Internet and CD-ROMs.

You need to be sure the logo will work with Internet applications. Not only will you need the original color logo, but a black and white file that's usable on a PC, or an EPS file if they work on a Mac or a GIF file in case you need one for a website down the road.

Discussing Costs

It's tricky knowing when to discuss costs. The more experience you have in working with designers, the less you have to reveal about your project budget, because you'll have a sense of the "right" price range.

Conversely, the less experienced you are, the more important it is to talk about costs early. Business people with no prior experience are often shocked at the combined costs of graphic design, printing, and mailing. Better to get a sense of the price tag early on, don't you agree? What if you're thinking that you can get 15,000 full-color brochures for \$2500, and in reality it will cost you four or five times that? Discuss this "cost expectation" with your designer-candidates before they spend time preparing a proposal. Designer Kreindel says he will occasionally "prequalify" a project with the prospective client by asking about the budget, in case the client's thinking it will cost "X" and he knows it's likely to cost "10X."

Every designer charges differently. The very large, full-service design firms are more likely to have higher fees. Large and small firms generally charge by the project, not by the hour.

A Designer's Proposal

Now you're ready to request a written proposal. A good proposal will specify what "deliverables" are and are not included. It will confirm the agreed-upon project scope right at the beginning.

The proposal should divide the work up into natural stages with accompanying cost estimates and dates. For instance, it might say that the designer will show you three or more initial comps (design ideas) by such-and-such a date. In this way, the proposal becomes a preliminary schedule, allowing you both to manage the project.

A proposal will also help define who does what. Who's writing the copy? Who's taking or supplying photographs? Who's proofreading? If the designer handles the printing (very likely, unless you have the expertise), how much or how little will you be involved? Will the printer's invoice come directly to you or will it be channeled through the designer?

Proposals should give you a clear sense of what the designer will do for you, for how much money, and by when. As detail-laden as it seems, it's smart to spell out the specific steps that will be part of the process and also to assign responsibility. If not, there's a good chance you will assume that the designer is taking care of something and he or she is thinking that you are.

Let the Fun Begin

Once you've chosen a designer, the fun can begin. Expect to meet with him or her several times in the beginning stages to talk about concept, layouts, and schedules. Make sure the writer is part of these meetings. Set up a workflow process so that the job stays on track.

Have the designer help you prepare a production schedule. These schedules always change - a day here, a week there - so be flexible, especially when you're the one holding up deadlines. When dates change, make sure the key people are told. Keep in mind that it could take weeks to get your materials printed and delivered, so always work backward from the day you need delivery.

Your Feedback is Vital

Your primary responsibility during the design process is giving constructive feedback to your designer, who expects and needs your approval every step of the way. From comps to layouts to typefaces to photographs to the ink colors and the paper chosen for printing: your role is to review what the designer's selected and decide if you like it.

Now is not the time to be intimidated! You certainly don't want to end up with a job you dislike, nor do you want to make design changes at the 11th hour, which is just before the job goes on press. If you don't tell your designer that you're not crazy about the colors or the typeface, you're to blame. The process is truly a collaborative one.

During the design stage, the designer will send you numerous proofs (digital and/or paper). Make sure you know exactly what's expected of you with each proof. Are you looking at layout? Are you proofreading word for word?

Since the Mac is the industry standard for design and printing, most graphic designers work on Macs as opposed to PCs. Make sure you maintain all the rights to your work and that you keep copies of their files on a floppy disk, a Zip disk, CD-ROM, or other removable storage medium.

Trust, Respect, and Communicate

The above guidelines stress the most critical part of working with a graphic designer: communication. Now I recommend you do something just as important: trust your designer. Don't interfere with the creative process. If you've communicated well with your designer and developed a mutual understanding, let the designer design!

I'm not suggesting that you accept every design without question. After all, you are the client, and you need to be happy with the finished design. I repeat: it is your right (and your role) to critique the designs created for you.

What I am recommending is that you avoid micromanaging the designer. I've known people who were determined to redesign everything they were shown - and the resulting projects looked like ransom notes, filled with a hodgepodge of disparate elements. It completely destroyed the beauty and the integrity of the design.

The client/designer relationship is not about control. It's about trust for the creative talent and respect for the designer's professionalism. As long as you keep this in mind and remember to communicate regularly with your graphic designer, you'll both be pleased with the result. It should be the start of a great working relationship.

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