

ARTICLE e-document

HOW TO HIRE AND WORK WITH A GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Are you planning a brand update or starting a new company? This article is for professionals who have needs for graphic design services, and have not worked in the creative field or with “creatives” before. It is a primer to help you understand what to expect, and it lays out guidelines to help you avoid common pitfalls when working with designers.

About Graphic Designers, and why hiring a good one is important

Graphic designers are a crucial ingredient for the success of any business. They are professionals who provide a critical service needed by companies of all sizes and at all stages. They give a face to your company. They develop credibility and a personality for your brand. All industries are crowded with competition, and your company's brand may be what sets you apart and distinguishes your service or product as unique, memorable and desirable.

A seasoned designer will be able to develop effective creative for you in a reasonable amount of time for a fair price. Working with less experienced designers can be tempting for cost savings reasons, and there are good “junior” level designers out there. If you do take this route, be prepared to spend more time managing the process. In some cases, you may actually end up spending more money than you anticipate to make up for the lack of experience. Having work redone or pulling jobs from a printing press because of unforeseen errors can both be costly.

Qualify yourself: Are you ready to let go?

Are you ready to let go of some control? Like anything else, you hire a designer for their expertise and their insight. If your car didn't run, you wouldn't tell your mechanic how to fix it. Your mechanic knows the best way to make your car go. A good designer will help make your business “go,” and if you are willing to trust in their expertise, they will likely lead your project in a direction that will benefit you. In most cases, your role in the process of working with a designer should be one of information delivery and oversight.

If you, in fact, have a clear and strong understanding of how your brand should be implemented (logos, color pallets, typography, imagery, layout, etc...) then you are better off hiring a production person. You will save money and a headache. But, beware - there really is more to this design stuff than intuition. A designer with years of experience will be able to apply best practices to avoid common mistakes, and they will have valuable insight about how to effectively communicate your brand message. They will also have resources and experience to make the end product happen faster and, in many cases, more cost effectively than a less experienced designer.

A designer should be able to present you with unique and targeted solutions that you would not come up with yourself, and that is where their value is. You have to be open to these new ideas and be able to think conceptually while evaluating them and deciding on the best solution. And remember, effective brands are unique brands. I have had clients tell me “I want to look like this company.” The problem with this approach is that no one is going to listen when you and your competitors speak with the same voice.



Qualify the designer

Having a computer with graphics software does not make someone a designer, just like having a toolbox does not make someone a mechanic.

There are many kinds of designers specializing in different areas. Companies with multiple design needs (print, web, corporate identity) should not hire 3 different designers to complete their communications system. When not managed correctly, this almost always results in an inconsistent application and interpretation of brand, leaving prospective customers confused. If your company needs a range of materials and you don't have someone dedicated to championing and managing your brand, you should really be looking at design shops that can manage all of your needs. Some freelance designers will also have all the skills and experience necessary to complete such a package of services, just make sure their portfolio reflects this.

Specific projects you may hire design help for

Corporate identity: A designer that is good with web or print design is not necessarily going to be able to create a credible, compelling and memorable logo mark for your company. Remember, this is the foundation for all of your communication and promotional efforts. It has to be versatile and strong enough to support all other elements of your communications package and stand on it's own as well. Look through a prospective designer's portfolio for logo work, and ask him to elaborate on what part of the process he was responsible for. Junior designers' portfolios are often padded with work they may have had only a small role in.

Web design: Some people think graphic designers make web sites while others think this is done by more technical types (developers or coders). In most cases, you will need both a creative type and a technical type to develop a successful and effective web site. The creative side develops user interface, helps organize content, and understands usability issues and behavior. The technical aspect involves taking all the content and creative input from the designer, and making it all work across multiple browsers and platforms, while possibly setting up a database to serve up the web site content.

Occasionally one person can do both. More likely, if you hire a creative, they already work with a firm that can build back-end databases or code in PHP. Unless the creative person you are considering has direct experience or resources for development on the back end of things, you may want to continue looking.

Print materials design: This area is probably the easiest to find creative help for. Business cards, brochures, sales sheets and mailers are all pretty standard fare for most designers. Look through prospective portfolios for strong aesthetic and clear and targeted communication of brand messages. Also, look for signs of original and strategic thinking. If the designer's 3 samples of corporate brochures look similar, then it's likely yours will take on this aesthetic as well. Every company or product has a unique personality, so materials that support and promote it should have a unique visual language to deliver brand messages.

One thing that separates a professional designer from a novice is their knowledge of the printing process. This is true especially if you will be working with spot color (as opposed to process or full color) or custom printing solutions like embossing, die-cutting and metallic inks. There is a learning curve when working with the printing process, and a designer with knowledge of the opportunities and pitfalls is valuable.

Where to start looking

The best place to find a creative and professional designer is through contacts you may already have. Ask business associates and friends if they have worked with designers and if they would recommend any.

Barring that, just open a web browser, there are many resources out there. If your project requires face to face meetings or onsite work, start by looking through your local chapters of the AIGA (www.aiga.org/), Graphic Artists Guild (www.gag.org) and Society of Designers (gdc.net). If you are comfortable working remotely with a designer, try some of the online directories like DesignFirms.org (www.designfirms.org/) Guru.com (www.guru.com) or Freelance Designers.com (www.freelancedesigners.com/).

Making the right choice

By this point you have some names and contacts for designers, you have seen their work and you have had some preliminary conversations with them about the project. You should have a good sense of compatibility and their level of interest in your project. If you are on the fence about who to hire, submit an RFP (request for proposal) that outlines your goals and expectations, deadlines, and a complete list of deliverables. You can determine many things from the responses to your RFP and narrow down your selection quickly. You will also get a sense of how professional a designer/firm is (Did they answer all your questions and run a spell check before submitting their proposal?).

Your budget: This is often one of the key decision making factors when choosing a designer. You will likely see a range of prices and processes in the proposals you receive, but don't make the mistake of blindly jumping for the lowest bid. The old cliché "you get what you pay for" often holds true when hiring a designer. Remember, when considering your budget, that hiring a designer is an investment, not an expense. Then, ask yourself these questions:

1. Does the designer's/firm's portfolio reflect their price? Even the least creative among us get a sense of the quality of work in a designer's portfolio. That is the power of good design, it resonates with just about anyone on a very instinctual level. And if you don't get that sense, you should probably keep looking.
2. Who do you want to compete with? This is important. If your goal is to compete on a local level and you don't have plans for growth into other markets, then you will probably be fine hiring the less experienced freelance designer. Just remember that good creative can be a major factor in your company's success, and if you are planning on competing on a higher level, even with small to mid-size regional companies, you will likely be better off hiring the professional, even if they charge a little more.

The contract

A contract should be a detailed document outlining what will be provided by you, the client (copy, photographs) what the designer will ultimately produce for you (logo, print materials, web site) and who is responsible for what. A proposal is usually developed by the designer and submitted to the client following some initial conversations or a RFP. Here is a brief list of items that should be addressed in a proposal/contract:

- A brief description of the project: What are the goals and expectations?
- A clear description of deliverables: Including details about sizes, color, quantities and other known characteristics of deliverables.
- Fees and expenses: Some expenses may not be known, but if your project includes print materials, look for printer related estimates in your proposal.
- Process outline: This should cover deadlines for content delivery, concept presentation, final product delivery as well as how many rounds of client edits are included in the estimated fees.
- Terms: Look for details on project cancellation, rights transfer and what happens when a project grows outside of its original scope.

For large long-term projects, designers may break the proposal down into phases based on delivery deadlines. However, be aware that there is a necessary order to developing a series of items. Don't ask a designer to update your logo system AFTER they create that brochure you need for a trade show next week. Be patient and let the horse pull the cart.

Also, be prepared to pay for some of the project up front. Designers should not be expected to float expenses like printing or paying subcontractors prior to receiving payment from their clients.

A brief look at the process that will get you from start to finish

A professional designer will already have a process developed for working with clients. Use the information in this section to help you understand the general steps for getting from a signed contract to delivered materials.

One commonly overlooked stage of a process by inexperienced designers is also the most crucial. The “research and planning” stage sets the scene for all the work to come, and if it is ignored, you may end up with something that doesn’t meet your company’s needs. Like with a garden, if you don’t prepare your soil correctly, all the work you put into seeding, watering and weeding could still result in a poor harvest. So here is an overview of the 3 general steps you should expect to follow when working with a designer:

1. RESEARCH and PLANNING: work the soil

The contract has been signed and you are anxious to get started, to catch a first glimpse of your new brand! This stage is crucial to solidifying your expectations and laying the ground-work for the entire project. If you don’t give your designer clear written objectives and goals for your brand update, don’t be surprised when their “shot in the dark” misses the mark. A professional designer/firm will send you a “client survey” or conduct interviews with you and other key decision makers in your company. They will ask probing questions like “what is the primary message you wish to convey?”, “who is your target audience?”, and “how does your company differentiate itself from competitors?”. Both the designer and you need to know answers to questions like these before any creative can begin. And be prepared to put some time into defining these key directives. Companies often spend a lot of time answering these questions when they find that different people in their organization are coming up with completely different answers. Coming to conclusions that everyone can agree on may be difficult, but doing so is paramount to the success of your design campaign, and your company.

At the research and planning stage, it is also important to layout deadlines for the project (if you have not done so in the proposal). The designer should also spend some time getting to know your company, your competitors, and your industry.

2. CREATIVE: plant the seeds

OK, now the fun begins. The research and planning stage gave your designer some clear directive for his creative work.

Brainstorming/concepting: Now your designer will be off somewhere sketching, clipping images, fanning through pantone color books, and applying concepts to computer models. This is the most visceral stage of the creative process. Most clients are not directly involved in this stage. The possibilities all need to be wide open during this process, there should be no road-blocks or discretion over ideas - this only limits the possibilities for final outcome. If you have ideas you want the designer to explore, be sure to present them prior to this stage of the process.

Refinement: The designer will eventually start to see best solutions and further refine them to meet client objectives.

Presentation: OK, NOW you get to glimpse the future and start to shape it. Designers have different ways of doing this. If you are a very conceptual person, they may present you with a variety of pencil sketches and other unfinished models. Others may present a few of their best computerized concepts, showing color and imagery and typography. In the case of a logo, a designer may wish to work in black and white only until you decide on the form, then move on to adding color. Your logo must communicate in black and white. For a web site, it may also be important to show how interactivity will work (such as what happens when a user rolls the mouse over a button etc).

Edits/reviews: Your proposal should detail how many edits and review cycles there will be. Three rounds of edits is usually enough to finalize a concept. Any more than this, and it is a sign that either something was not decided at the right time, or there is a breakdown in communication. Also remember you have to let go at some point. After multiple rounds of major edits to an original concept, I have witnessed befuddled clients ask “what happened to this project, it was looking so great and now, it’s a mess”. This is a textbook example of too much meddling by the client.

Another thing to remember during this step, if you are responsible for providing content, make sure it is edited and finalized before you give it to your designer. Rounds of edits can be wasted editing text, and it’s no fun finding a grammatical error when a job is on the printing press. Also be sure to compile all necessary feedback into one document. Getting multiple edits from different sources within your organization will result in confusion for the designer and ultimately add time to the editing process.

3. PRODUCTION: cultivate

So now you have “signed-off” the final version. All final proofreading is complete, folding dummies and paper stocks are secured. Most designers will and should manage the printing process and/or development process of a web site. Designers are detail oriented and they see things at press checks and during web template testing that you may not. Still, you should be involved. Just be sure you know that changing your mind during this stage of the process means a lot of backtracking and additional costs.

Print production: Preparing files for printing is a chapter of its own, but suffice to say, a seasoned designer will know exactly what to do and be able to avoid problems once files are transferred to a printer or other vendor. If you have procured the printer, be sure to get your designer in touch with them well before the file transfer date to discuss details about file preparation. You might also request to be involved in reviewing printer proofs for color accuracy, imposition and final content. This is your last chance to review your project before it gets burned to plates and goes on press.

Press checks almost always illuminate something that needs to be addressed. Pressmen can adjust color slightly and eliminate “hickeys” from plates and blankets. Your designer should know what to look for at a press check, so it is not necessary for you to be involved at this stage.

Web production: Seeing your web site come to life is exciting, this is where you see your brand really working for you. The key during this process is making sure it works for everyone else too. Know your audience and how they are likely to access your site. If they are not technologically savvy or they have slow dial up connections, then your site will need to be tested in a similar environment. Additionally, different browsers and platforms display web pages differently. Be sure your designer tests and makes corrections accordingly so that everyone sees your web site in all its glory. Web surfers are very fickle, you have seconds, literally, to make your point, and if your site doesn't display correctly or your navigation only works on Internet Explorer for PC, you've just lost a market segment.

Again, if you are responsible for content, make certain it is final before you deliver it to your designer to flow into their web templates. This will save you hours of future revisions.

To the uninitiated, all of this can seem overwhelming. The bad news is, this isn't the half of it, this is only a very brief overview of what you will need to know when choosing and working with a designer. The good news is a good designer will help guide you through this process and make it all fun and rewarding as well. And most importantly, a designer can help your company grow and prosper by providing you with materials to make your marketing efforts more fruitful. If I could leave you with a key message, it would be this: Spend the money and time it takes to build your brand right, you will only be hurting yourself by cutting corners. When you hire a professional designer, be clear in your directives and expectations, and remember that you hired them for their insight into communicating your brand message.

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