

DESIGN DIRECTORY

How to choose a designer

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> CHOOSING A DESIGNER

For the uninitiated it can seem a daunting prospect. Choose the right designer and you'll enjoy a long, successful relationship that takes your business to undreamt-of heights. Pick the wrong one and you could be in for a costly and frustrating experience. So how do you shorten the odds in your favour?

To an extent the process is like the one you'd go through to choose any important supplier of a professional service. Ask people you know for recommendations, visit the websites of some of the likelier contenders and look at previous work. Then make up a shortlist of around four designers working in the relevant specialism and invite them to tell you why they're the one you're looking for.

But what are you looking for, and how can you communicate to the designers on your shortlist what it is you want them to achieve?

Prepare a brief

The outline brief you prepare for the designers is vital. The brief must be defined clearly and accurately and it's advisable to get input from others who also understand the company's goals. Make sure it spells out:

- Your project's objectives against the background of your wider business goals, rather than a narrowly focused idea of what you think the output should be
- The project's success criteria and how they will be measured.

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Making a choice - do they deliver?

Many businesses fall into the trap of choosing designers who have already designed exactly what it is they have in mind, or who reinforce their existing thoughts. Instead, they should be looking for the designer who will better connect them to their customer, and that may ultimately mean taking a completely different direction to the one they'd envisaged.

Becky Lambert, Design Council Head of Design Production, says: 'You want a clear feeling that the designer has understood the outline brief and what the issues are, but you also want to see how they'll add value. They may take the brief off in new directions.' For this reason, be prepared for the designer to ask you challenging and probing questions about your business (if necessary, you can request that they sign a confidentiality agreement).

Don't ask that designers prepare fully-formed visuals in response to your problem as part of their pitch, and don't pay too much attention to them if they are presented. They're likely to prejudice you unduly and in any case, meaningful solutions will only start to take shape once the designer has a much deeper understanding of your business issues and your customers. 'It's putting the cart before the horse to offer creative solutions before demonstrating an understanding of your project and goals,' adds Becky Lambert.

Ready for a challenge?

'Designers need to strike a balance between speaking your language and understanding your needs on the one hand, and challenging your preconceptions and exceeding your expectations on the other', says Clive Grinyer, Director of Customer Experience at Orange. 'They have to show they're responsive to client needs and that they can deliver solutions that are viable, but more than that they need to show they've been able to bring more to previous clients' work than they were asked.'

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‘Sometimes, businesses are comfortable with, for example a designer who knows engineering, but they may only be getting half their money’s worth. You’re looking for someone to exceed the current market situation. So, yes - the designer’s solution should be buildable, but they should have new ideas about how to bring you competitive advantage that might mean persuading you to work in new ways.’

It’s important to have confidence in the designer’s abilities. Any recommendations for radical change will be grounded in awareness of business issues, and the designer will have considered the likely implications.

Personalities matter

Finally, personalities can be more important than you might think, and you should not be afraid to let this factor help you decide which designer to work with. It’s important that you have a good working relationship that makes for a ready dialogue at all times. The more insight you can give them into your company and how you work, the better suited their solution will be to your requirements. Often, it’s from a rapport, based on mutual trust and respect, that the right solution to a given problem arises. Conversely, if you have an awkward and wary relationship, potentially expensive and frustrating misunderstandings are more likely to arise.

Becky Lambert says: ‘You could be working with designers for several years if things go well. Who will you be working with from day to day? How important is your project to them? What are the dynamics of the relationship likely to be - and will the designer challenge you? These are all key questions and you shouldn’t be reluctant to probe them.’

So, when assessing a designer, look for:

- A track record of strategic problem solving
- Signs that they have helped clients produce tangible outcomes

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- Evidence that they have achieved agreed objectives or even exceeded them
- References - talk to previous clients about the designer's work.

These are better yardsticks than whether you 'liked' the designer's last corporate re-brand or secretly lust after their distinctively styled toaster.

> WHAT KIND OF DESIGNER?

Often design groups or consultancies employ a range of different individual designers so they can offer a full service to clients. They may also have business connections with other design suppliers which allow them to add to their range of services.

This overview of the major design disciplines will help you understand your own design requirements better.

Product design/industrial design

Product/industrial designers are involved in the design of every type of manufactured product, whether for mass manufacture or small quantities and design products to appeal to users' needs and desires. Product/ industrial designers generate new product ideas from conception through to production, and have an extensive knowledge of materials, engineering production processes, finishes and how people use products. They tend to have specialisms, so you may want to choose a designer who has worked on projects in a specific sector.

Environment or interior design

This discipline deals with internal environments - the spaces in which we move, shop, play, live and work - and the arrangement of furniture and other elements that surround us. Specialisms within this field include retail environments, leisure spaces, workspaces and home interiors.

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Packaging design

Packaging designers specialise in how items are contained - from the washing-up liquid bottles on the supermarket shelf to the wrapper on a bar of chocolate. Their work maximises the impact of a brand and product at the point of sale and their expertise in materials, design for production, safety and ease of use is of critical importance in consumer goods.

Graphic design

Graphic designers use visual design in all types of printed materials for a wide array of tasks, from creating a provocative advertisement hoarding or providing clear signage systems, to laying out books or communicating a set of brand values through a corporate identity.

Interface design

This is a relatively new discipline, concentrating often on how people interact with products, software and websites. In a world where products, software and websites have increasingly complex functions, an interface designer can help make them simple, understandable and easily usable by your customer.

Web design

Web designers create online business communications. They develop online environments to convey information and sell products and services, aiming to create a quality of service and experience that can form the basis of a 'virtual' business, or add value to an existing bricks and mortar operation.

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'If you think good design is expensive, look how much bad design costs.' says Martyn Denny, Sales & Marketing Director, Aqualisa.

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The cost of design will vary according to who you employ, what they do, how experienced they are and where they're based.

Design skills are available from many types of providers, ranging from individuals to large agencies capable of providing a wide range of specialisms, such as graphics and product design, 'under one roof'.

The way those services are charged for will depend on the type of project. You may pay a day rate, for instance, for work on an advertisement, while a more complex fee structure would apply in the case of product development, accompanied by a brand review. In certain cases, help is available to fund design costs. Contact your local Business Link for more information.

As with other professions, you will find that fees vary according to factors such as location - London, for instance, may be markedly more expensive than other parts of the country - specialism and experience. Nevertheless, it's possible to give general guidelines based on types of service provider.

Large agencies

Large, well-established agencies usually provide and, more importantly, integrate, a variety of design disciplines. For example, they could provide an integrated response to a brief combining contributions from hardware and software designers, design psychologists and researchers. Agencies usually have brand and business expertise rolled into their design process as well.

Having an interdisciplinary design staff allows agencies to offer one-stop product or service development. They are able to deal with the research, concept development, testing and engineering of the product or service. This 'one stop' approach can offer considerable communication and time saving opportunities.

Such agencies tend to represent the upper end of the market, with fees averaging £700 to £1,000 per person per day. Naturally, you would expect to pay more for very

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senior, renowned or experienced staff, but these people are unlikely to bill large numbers of hours for a project, delegating most of the less strategic work to less senior (and less expensive) staff.

Single discipline agencies

Well-established, single discipline agencies tend to charge day rates at around £400-£600 per person. They specialise in a particular field, but most are able to bring in suppliers with different expertise should the project require it.

Newcomers

Another option is designers who are just starting out in their careers. They can provide good value for money at rates of perhaps £200-£300 per day. However, you are likely to have to work hard at briefing them, as well as paying close attention to the project management process.

In the ball park

Design fees are usually quoted in advance as either an estimate, fixed price or on a 'price-not-to-exceed' basis. These prices usually relate to the amount of time a consultancy thinks it will spend on a project, multiplied by an agreed day rate. Fees are then usually billed in day or half-day increments. Make sure you discuss with your chosen designer how they will tell you about any additional costs they may incur, as although costs may be agreed at the outset, you may discover that additional services are needed later.

To estimate how much a design project might cost, discuss with your designer how long a person or team might need to:

- Understand the background, context and goals of the project
- Carry out research
- Generate early design responses

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- Refine the design
- Validate the design.

You may not need all these services - and the list isn't comprehensive - but it should provide a starting point in your calculations.

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