

## You Can Manage the Design Process!

Does this sound familiar? You've been working on a publication for weeks or months and now it's time to go to print or onto the web. Of course, your managers and colleagues agree that you should be the one who manages the process. You can't go down the hall to an in-house designer since she has too much on her plate. So now you've got to find your own designer and see the project through to completion. Sound hard? It doesn't have to be. Just follow these steps:

Gather a list of candidates. Start by combing your network for people who have had good experiences with designers. You can query a list-serve such as Ask Liz Ryan ([asklizryan@yahoo.com](mailto:asklizryan@yahoo.com)) or a LinkedIn group. You can also look at design organization websites such as Chicago Creative Coalition ([chicagocreative.org](http://chicagocreative.org)), AIGA Chicago ([aigachicago.org](http://aigachicago.org)), or Communication Arts ([commarts.com](http://commarts.com)) where designers host online profiles and work samples.

Review some portfolios and narrow your list to candidates whose work combines marketing sense, strong imagery, and evidence that they can handle your type of work. Lots of designers make pretty images, but you want one who will create pieces that communicate specific messages in ways that are appropriate for your audience. Yes, look at the pictures, but also read what the designer wrote about each. Do the descriptions clearly articulate the goal of each piece and how it reached its audience? Is there any evidence that the work resulted in higher sales figures, greater attendance at events, or other concrete result? Finally, do you like their style and does the portfolio show they have handled your type of project before?

### **Interview some candidates and look for these qualities:**

Is the designer a good project manager. A designer who is a good project manager will help you get the job done in a timely way with a minimum of fuss. She'll move your project along according to a schedule. She'll check in often, resolve problems, stay on top of details and make the best use of your time and money. Conversely, a designer who is a poor project manager will blow deadlines, miss details, avoid dealing with problems, waste your time, fill you with anxiety, and possibly expose you to unexpected costs.

You'll need to probe to understand a designer's project management skills. Ask if they can give an estimate. A good manager should be able to provide an estimate upfront. Ask about their relationships with other providers. The person you are interviewing should be able to talk about printers, web developers, and writers with whom she works. Ask how they work with timelines. Particularly on large projects (3-6 months), competent designers provide timelines of when they will provide certain deliverables and when you are expected hand over copy, images, and other components. Finally, ask candidates to explain their design processes. Their answer should involve a process of questioning and research, offering choices of concepts, a period of design/production, procedures to make client changes, and finally the way the piece gets into print, or onto the web. If a candidate can't articulate the process, best to avoid him or her.

Is this person a real designer or just someone who knows how to work a few computer programs? Good graphic design will boost the effectiveness of your written communication. It maintains your identity, helps you make a sale, and reflects well on your organization. Definitely find a designer who also understands the latest

technologies but don't get stuck with a software geek who knows nothing about design. Is this person someone I can get along with? It sounds obvious, but you'll be much happier if you hire someone you'll enjoy partnering with and who exhibits a professional demeanor.

Dig a little deeper: If you have found someone who satisfies the above requirements you are probably set, but just to be sure, dig a little deeper with the following situation-specific questions:

For web projects: Does she do both the design and the coding? If not, does she handle the design and work with someone who does the web-development? What is their business relationship? Finally, how will the web hosting work for your website? What will the process be for future changes and updates?

For print projects: Does she have printers and/or paper vendors she works with and recommends? It's great if she has a variety of vendors to choose from, since printers specialize in particular projects and price them differently. Is she willing to work with your printer if need be? Is she willing to look at proofs and/or go on a press check?

In an in-house environment: When you work with an in-house designer, you most likely don't have a choice of who you'll work with. However, it's still beneficial to check the considerations above to get an idea of how the process will work beforehand and let the designer know if you have any concerns in the beginning.

If you are overseeing multiple pieces: If you're working on several marketing pieces, try to use the same designer for all of them. There's nothing worse than seeing company branding go through different hands and different looks. Not only do you want a professional look, you want a consistent look!

Once you choose your designer, the process will go smoother if you can articulate what you want. The information you offer your designer will help her target what you want and prevent a lot of wasted time. As much as you can, have the answers to these questions ready.

- What is the goal of your project? (To improve sales, increase awareness, promote a product, etc.)
- Who is your target market? (The more detail you can provide, the better.)
- Who are your major competitors?
- What is your budget for the project?
- Do you have existing identity elements for her to work with? (Logo, color schemes, existing brand look, style guide, etc.)
- What are some design pieces or web sites you like? What are some you don't? (This will give the designer an idea of your particular style)
- How will you measure success? (Increased sales, increased traffic, etc.)
- What's your preferred final delivery date for the project?

During the process: Work to adhere to the timeline you have agreed on. That includes your deliverables as well as what your designer has promised you.

Conclusion: When you are looking for design services, you don't have to know exactly what you need; that's what a design professional is for. We will offer specific solutions according the needs you articulate. Your job is to find a professional and know how to work with her. Start by gathering candidates. Before making a decision, view their portfolios, ask a lot of specific questions, and discuss your budget. If you're happy with the solutions they've provided other clients, comfortable with the way they present themselves, and think you'd enjoy working with them, hire them! Finally, keep the process flowing by being able to articulate what you want and having your deliverables ready to go.

Want to talk to Susan Marx Design about your upcoming projects? Contact us at: [susan@susanmarxdesign.com](mailto:susan@susanmarxdesign.com)