

## Comment

Designer column



# Nigel Witham

## How to be a great client. You've found a location, decided on a format and hired a top design team to fit it out — so what's your role from here-on in?

As a client, your job isn't to be innovative — your job is to foster innovation. And there's a big difference.

Fostering innovation is a discipline. It involves making difficult choices and causes important things to get done.

Here are some bullet points to help you do this professionally:

- Before engaging with your design team, foster discipline among yourself and your in-house team. Be honest about what success will look like and what your resources actually are. Write the success criteria at the top of your design brief. Next, write down your ground rules and say which are firm and which can be broken on the path to a creative design. If you can't do this how can you expect your designer to figure it out?

- Simplify the problems relentlessly, and be prepared to accept elegant solutions that satisfy the problems as simply as possible.

- After you've written down the ground rules, revise them to eliminate constraints that are only on the list because they've always been there.

- Hire the right design team — after all, you wouldn't ask an electrician to paint your villa. Part of your job is to find someone who is already in the sweet spot you're looking for, or someone who is eager and able to get there.

- Demand brain-storming early in the process. Force innovations at the beginning of the project and then stick with your decisions. Changing bad decisions at the end, when the builders are on site, always makes them even worse.

- Don't expect to get everything right and don't blame your designer if it's not all perfect right off. Give your in-house team the training, time and money to get used to operating your new restaurant before making any adjustments with care; about six months is usually right.

- Be honest about your resources. While bemoaning false constraints may help you once or twice, the designers you're working with deserve your respect, which includes telling the truth.



Be prepared to embrace new design ideas.

- Pay as much as you need to solve the problems, which might be more than you want to. If you pay less than that, you'll end up wasting your money. After all, why would a great design team work for cheap?

- Delegate all issues of personal taste to the design team. I don't care if you hate the curves on the new logo or the colour of the carpet — just because you pay my bill doesn't mean your personal aesthetic sense is relevant. If you don't like my style, don't hire me!

- While admittedly designers won't always have brave new ideas, more often than not it's a case of someone — possibly you — killing them. Make sure you, or your managers, are not tempted to dilute new ideas simply because they'll be hard to operate. Your customers don't care how easy your life is!

- Raise the bar. Over and over again, raise the bar. Impossible a week ago is not good enough; you want to use ideas that are impossible today, because the future begins tomorrow. It's a race and your competitors aren't staying still — especially in this new competitive economy.

- When you find a faux design team, one that just rolls out pat solutions to a budget, run. Don't stick with people who don't deserve the hard work you're doing to clear a path.

- Celebrate the designers. Sure, you deserve credit, but you'll attract more good designers and make an even better restaurant next time when they understand how much they benefit from working with you.

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