



# HOW TO SELECT AND BRIEF A DESIGNER

## Choosing the right designer and giving them clear instructions is crucial, yet you'd be amazed how few people get this right, says **Nigel Witham**

### **One of the favourite topics of conversation among designers is just how useless our clients are at instructing or briefing us.**

In my view this is our own fault. Design bodies have never made a good fist of explaining design to business. Interior designers in particular struggle to explain their art to clients who consequently rarely appreciate them and how they can make a powerful impact on ROI.

Many times, when a potential new client approaches me, they haven't prepared a brief. However, this is essential in order to create a sharp definition of what they require, and to foster a design team that understands their objectives and works together happily.

### **EVERYONE'S DIFFERENT**

The first thing to understand is that no two designers are the same. Some will be young sole traders with barely any qualifications or experience but loads of enthusiasm. Others will be large, process-driven partnerships or firms that invest in ongoing professional training and skills. Some are just artists who can create beauty, but it won't be the right type of beauty to help you meet your business objectives. Still others know just how to press the right buttons to create compelling customer appeal. Some create reams of detailed drawings, which you're likely to need, and others just a few sketches. All charge different amounts. So, how do you get the right designer and get the best from them?

It helps if you think that there are two types of suppliers to your business: vendors and people with magical talents like designers. It's a mistake to confuse the two. A vendor is someone who exists to sell you something.

## **KEY CONSIDERATIONS**

REMEMBER DESIGNERS HAVE MAGICAL POWERS AND ARE NOT LIKE VENDORS THAT SUPPLY YOUR COMPANY WITH PHYSICAL PRODUCTS

DON'T TREAT ARTISTS LIKE VENDORS – IT PRODUCES MIDDLED RESULTS

TRUST IS THE KEY: YOU HAVE TO FEEL CONFIDENT ENOUGH TO GIVE YOUR DESIGNER A FREE REIGN

DESIGNERS ARE ALSO HUMAN – RESPECT AND ENTHUSIASM GO A LONG WAY

LIST YOUR TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE REQUIREMENTS. THEN WORK WITH YOUR DESIGNER TO DISTIL THESE DOWN TO THREE OR FOUR CORE BRAND VALUES

It doesn't always matter to the vendor what's being sold, as long as it's bought and paid for. Many people try to treat designers like that. When the first question I am asked by a new client is "How much do you charge?" I know instantly that their project is on the wrong track because the quality of the work you get from the talent changes based on how you work with them, not on what you pay.

That's the key economic argument for the distinction: if you treat an artist like a vendor, you'll often get mediocre results in return. On the other hand, if you treat a vendor like an artist, you'll waste time and money. That said, there's no sense in buying a design on price alone, unless you are rolling out an established format, in which case you're not buying design anyhow, just implementation. Most designers won't charge you more than a few per cent of your budget – even the best come in at around 15%, and for that they'll make a huge effort over many months to get the work right.

### **BRILLIANT BRIEFING**

Having chosen your designer, you next need to tell them what you want. This is another area where people get things wrong more often than they get them right.

I can always tell when a client has had a bad experience because they will be very prescriptive about their needs and brief me to design something that is exactly like something else they know. Setting aside concerns about copyright and intellectual property, this is bound to fail because to successfully enter a new market you need to exceed the standards of the incumbent competitors, not copy them.

The trouble with asking a designer to come up with something unique, however, is that you're going to be buying something intangible. You can't see it and you can't write a specification for it.

Designers, being human, do their best work when they're treated fairly and with enthusiasm. When the designer is also digging deep to put something on the table that you can't possibly write a spec for, you're going to have to respond in kind. They are not going to design on approval for free unless somewhere down the line and possibly when you don't realise they are going to try and sell you a specific product, which might not be right for your business later on.

As a designer, what I need is for my clients to create a relationship in which my art can be used to the full. If you plan to start a new business or open a new venue, your aim needs to be to create a business in which the creativity of others is fully appreciated. Then you can go and tell your designer that they can have full creative

freedom. If you don't trust them with that freedom, it's simple: you hired the wrong designer.

If you give your designer freedom, you'll be amazed how hard your design team will work for you, how enjoyable the project will be, and how amazing the results will be.

### **GROUND RULES**

You're going to need some ground rules, of course, but now that you've got the creative freedom bit sorted out this is much easier. Here's what I suggest:

On a large sheet of paper, make a list of all the tangible requirements your bar or pub needs in order to be successful. These are the measurable things such as how many staff you want to employ; how many tables for customers; what your budget is, what operational equipment you require and so on. It will be a long list, which is why you'll need a large piece of paper. Don't write that you want it in red or blue, or that you want a particular piece of furniture or a certain look. You already trust your designer to make those choices – remember? – and you've got more important things to worry about.

Next, on a small sheet of paper, write down between 10 and 20 adjectives that you think best describe how you want your pub or bar to feel: happy, creative, elegant, colourful, minimalist. These are the intangible requirements.

After you've done this, you can sit down with your designer for a long meeting and refine these intangible requirements until you're left with just three or four. What you're left with are your core design values, and now your designer knows just what it is you're looking for.



Designer Nigel Witham writes a monthly piece for Pub & Bar looking at design and how to get it right. He has run his own practice for 25 years and works mainly in the UK, although he travels frequently to the UAE and Australia. He also has permanent representation in New Zealand, New York and India. Find out more at [www.nigelw.com](http://www.nigelw.com)