Innovation Support // Selecting a Designer

Good design can have a significant impact on the success of your project and your business, so it is important to choose your designer wisely. This guide will help you to prepare for engaging with and selecting a designer to work with.

Finding the right designer for your project is vital for success. Many small businesses do not have design skills in-house and will commission an external consultant or agency to deliver their design project. Using outside skills is no disadvantage and even larger organisations with in-house design resource may choose to use an external designer for a variety of reasons: to bring in specific expertise, to offer a fresh perspective, or to draw from their experience operating across a wider range of markets.

The first step in identifying a suitable designer is to create a draft design brief for the project (see Guide 1: Preparing for Your Design Project). This process will help you to clarify the requirements of the project, identify the type of designer you need, and will allow the designer to respond appropriately if invited to pitch.

| Create a draft brief | Clarify skills and experience needed | Ask your network for recommendations | Invite up to 3 designers to pitch | Use the draft brief to guide your decision | Nurture trust and respect for success |

Types of Designers

There are many different types of designer, which can be confusing. Some specialise in particular design skills and applications such as User Experience Design (UX, UXD) or Service Design, while others offer a broader range of services. Branding agencies, for example, may provide packaging, print and digital services, and exhibition design as well as branding. It is advisable to select a designer who specialises in the design skills that you need.

Finding a Designer

The most popular way of finding a designer is through personal recommendation. You could consider asking professionals in your network, peers, business support organisations such as Business Gateway or membership organisations such as your local Chamber of Commerce. There is no reliable directory of designers and searching online can be time-consuming and frustrating as you try to identify the best designer for your project.

Use your draft design brief to guide your decision making and to be clear about the type of design skills you need. Look for designers that meet both the requirements of the project (eg graphic, product, digital) and who have experience in the sector that you operate in (eg food and drink, software development, tourism). Consider whether they have the specialist skills you need to deliver the project (eg working with technology or in the

medical sector). Use online searches to give you an insight into the type of design work a designer does, their client group and whether they are a good fit for your project. You could ask for an informal meeting to get a sense of the fit for your project before asking them to respond to a brief.

Some clients look to design awards for a steer on choosing a designer. If you take this route, be sure that you are clear on the rationale for the awards (eg aesthetic appeal, innovation, etc). Client-facing awards such as BCO and the Design Business Association Design Effectiveness Awards ask for evidence of the commercial effectiveness of the design work rather than prioritising a particular aesthetic or contemporary appeal. Some designers choose not to enter awards for a range of reasons (eg time involved, cost, criteria that have an aesthetic focus). Do not be put off using a designer if they have not pursued awards.

Whether you choose to commission a freelance designer or an agency will have important considerations for your budget. Agencies tend to have higher fees as they have more overheads to cover than a freelance designer. It is important to be clear about the budget you have allocated for the design work (see Guide 1) and to share this when approaching a designer to avoid wasting your time or theirs.

Selecting and Commissioning a Designer

You might decide to work with a designer who is easily accessible from your premises. Proximity has the benefit of making face-to-face communication easier, helping to build rapport and understanding. However, video calls can help keep the connection if you select a designer located further away.

The best way to assess the designer's suitability for your project is invite them to pitch. There are two main types of pitch – a credentials pitch and a creative pitch. A credentials pitch is where the designer shows a portfolio of previous work, introduces their approach and shows solutions developed for relevant clients. At the pitch you will want to establish what the design challenge was that the client brought to them, what they did, and the effectiveness of the final solution in meeting user needs and business goals. No fee is required for a credentials pitch. A creative pitch, on the other hand, is where the designer is invited to develop conceptual designs in response to an outline brief, allowing you to gain a deeper understanding of their competency and skills. In this case, the designer should be paid a fee for their time and creative work in putting together the pitch, and the amount should be stated in advance. As with the credentials pitch, you will still want information on their track-record in creating and delivering effective solutions. It is usual to invite no more than three designers to pitch for a project.

Following the pitch, you can ask the designer to prepare a proposal in response to your project brief (see Guide 1: Preparing for Your Design Project). The designer's proposal should document their understanding of your requirements, the process they will undertake, the schedule of activity, the number of iterations (if applicable), the date for delivery, fees, intellectual property rights, and terms and conditions. The proposal should also contain information on whether expenses are included or how they are charged, and VAT should be stated separately if applicable. Remember that the amount of detail in the proposal should reflect the scale and complexity of the project. This written response, together with your draft brief, can be used to finalise the details in the brief and the resulting contract for the project. Remember to tell the unsuccessful designers of your decision. They may request feedback, so be prepared to respond – be generous and constructive with your comments.

Managing Relationships

Personal relationships are an important aspect in the success of creative projects. Building rapport and developing mutual trust and respect are widely recognised as the strongest basis for a successful working relationship. Part of the designer's role is to challenge the brief and aspects of the project as they arise. Think about how comfortable you would feel working with the designer, particularly if tensions or challenges arise in the project, as these can lead to misunderstandings and poor results if the parties cannot work well together.

When setting out on a design journey, it is important to reflect on what kind of relationship you want to nurture. Do you need a one-off piece of design work or are you looking to develop a longer-term working partnership? This will have an impact on the time and effort you invest in building the relationship.

Top Tips

> **Draft a brief** – create a draft design brief to help you clarify what kind of designer you need

> **Designers are many** – there are multiple types of designers with specific skills and offering a range of experience: be clear on what you need

> **Getting the right designer** – it is important for success to find the right creative professional to work with, so do your research and ensure they have the skill, experience and sector knowledge your project needs

> **Ask someone you trust** – personal recommendation can help you find the right designer

> **The pitch** – a credentials pitch is free and includes examples of previous work. A creative pitch includes conceptual creative work for an agreed fee. Usually no more than 3 designers are invited to pitch.

> **Relationships** – feeling comfortable with the designer and having mutual respect and trust are vital to keep things on track. Consider what kind of relationship you want to nurture.

This guide was created by Journey Associates Limited.