

## Making the Choice

John Veverka suggests what clients should consider when appointing an interpretive consultant, and what consultants should consider when accepting a contract.

### For the client

- 1 Give your prospective consultants enough time to respond to your brief, and be clear about what type of tender proposal you want. Asking for unpaid design work puts a real burden on consultants and paying for submissions will result in better tenders.
- 2 Ask whether the consultants have specific expertise in interpretation. Interpretive design is a specialist skill that commercial design practices usually lack.
- 3 Ask to see samples of their products – photos of exhibits, trail guides, panels or interpretive plans. Do they provoke, relate, and reveal? Are they outcome or objective based?
- 4 Ask for references - and call them. Find out how well they met their brief and how well they handled the client relationship.
- 5 Ask for information on their training and professional accreditation. Anyone can call themselves an interpretive consultant, but do their academic and professional credentials back them up? Membership of the Association of Heritage Interpretation is a good guide.
- 6 Ask for information about their project management and reporting processes. Find out who will be their project manager and whether their reporting and approval systems will give you sufficient input to the project.
- 7 Projects will probably cost more, and take longer, than you think. How will the costs be estimated by the consultant? How will you know what is a fair fee to be charged and how will any cost overruns be dealt with?
- 8 Ask how they might have their products evaluated. You don't want to buy something that looks nice but doesn't work. But be prepared to pay for the evaluation work.
- 9 Is the consultant able to handle the size of your project? A large project may get more focused attention from a smaller firm, but smaller companies may be less flexible in dealing with any unforeseen problems.

- 10 Selecting a consultant should be based on a 'value for money' assessment of their skills and demonstrated experience – not on the 'lowest bid'.
- 11 For projects above £10-15K, try to interview a short list of prospective consultants. Interviews for smaller scale projects are not necessary or realistic, and here you should be able to choose by considering portfolios and by asking past clients.
- 12 Finally, do you like them? What does your gut feeling tell you? Selecting a consultant is like appointing a colleague – you have to be able to work together.

## For the consultant

- 1 How clear is the brief and does the client actually know what they want?
- 2 Does the client have a realistic idea as to what things cost and how long projects take?
- 3 Do they have a project manager to make sure that there are no communication gaps between them and you?
- 4 What will the client supply as part of the project – draft text, images, research, visitor use data, maps or in-house experts?
- 5 Do they have a project time-line or task list already in mind? When does the project have to be completed and is that a reasonable time to do it?
- 6 Who will review and approve draft materials and how active will they be in the project?
- 7 Does the client have a project steering group and if so, what involvement will they have in reviewing and approving draft materials? Will you get caught up in a 'design-by-committee' project or be given contradictory instructions by the client and their steering group (it does happen!)
- 8 Does the client have funding 'in hand', and what will their payment schedule be in paying invoices?
- 9 How receptive will they be to new ideas as opposed to thinking about the ways things have 'always been done'?
- 10 Do you think that the project will be fun to do or do you see potential 'problems' ahead with it? Any problem politics involved?

11 Finally, do you feel that you and the prospective client will make a good team and be able to successfully work together?

John Veverka, Certified Interpretive Planner.

“What every consultant needs to know:

- 1) In case of doubt, make it sound convincing.
- 2) Do not believe in miracles. Rely on them.”

*Murphy's Law (Finagle's Rules)*