

## Working With a Designer

Working with a designer is like a relationship. And like any relationship, it's all about finding a partner who can share your beliefs and interests. It's also about setting boundaries, listening and communicating, managing the relationship, and, most importantly, having fun.

So, when so many relationships fail, how can clients work with and get the best from their designers?

### Finding a partner

Finding a partner takes time and effort. Start by creating a long list of possible designers for your project. Museum Suppliers Yearbook, Museums Journal, New Heritage and Museum Practice provide a good starting point and can be supplemented by talking to colleagues and professional organisations<sup>1</sup>. To refine your list, visit examples of designers' work. Try not to rely on reviews – these are not always impartial and may not provide the answers you seek. Finally, take up references.

When tendering, select designers whose portfolio demonstrates an affinity with your project and whose service areas, working methods and general design approach suit your needs.

### Setting the boundaries

Setting out the nature of the client:designer relationship is just as important as defining the aims and objectives for the project. All too often clients fail to establish boundaries with designers, leading to lack of clarity about responsibilities, programme slippage and budget overspend.

To avoid such problems, identify and agree which partner is responsible for which elements of the project and, having agreed these responsibilities, stick to them. Any subsequent changes should be agreed by both parties.

This is critical when working with interpretive designers where responsibility for research, interpretive planning and content creation should be clearly spelt out. Small organisations without resources to carry out these tasks will benefit from additional support. However, larger clients, including those with in-house interpretive teams, may prefer to undertake these works themselves.

### Communicating

Listening and questioning are two of the most powerful tools available to the client in getting the best from their designer.

By listening and questioning the client can assess how well the designer is developing their understanding of the project and is assimilating this knowledge into a design solution. At the same time, the designer has the opportunity to articulate and explain their design.

It is vital that the client fully understands and is able to sign off designs without reservation, allowing the designer to deliver the scheme through specialist suppliers. If you have any doubts – raise them! Don't harbour concerns which can be easily addressed or may expose real weakness in approach or specification.

Throughout the design process it is vital that both partners are afforded opportunities to listen, question and learn. By creating a forum for open and honest communication between client and designer, the chances of achieving a successful project through a sense of shared responsibility are maximised.

### **Managing the relationship**

The key tool in managing the client:designer relationship is the project programme. This should be jointly created at the beginning of the project with contributions from both partners. By creating the programme in this way it is possible to build a sense of shared responsibility for the project. The programme should identify individual tasks within the project; the partner responsible for each task; the order in which tasks should be carried out; and deadlines for each task within a broader project programme.

Thereafter it is the role of the Project Manager to ensure each partner is made aware of their responsibilities and deadlines and to incorporate any additional tasks into the programme, ensuring that both partners are informed of such changes.

Whilst this may seem overly formal, it enables the client organisation to manage both the designer and itself! Bear in mind that the client team may be complex, drawing on input from several departments. It can sometimes be harder to manage an internal client team than the client:designer relationship.

### **Having fun**

Finally, working with designers and getting the best from them is about having fun. Taking a project from an initial idea to opening can be hard work, with difficult decisions to be made along the way. It is important that these difficulties do not override the inherent fun of the creative process.

Working with a designer is like any relationship; not always easy or comfortable, but ultimately worth every effort to make it a success.

**Genevieve Adkins, Head of Interpretation, Historic Scotland.**

<sup>1</sup>See page 8 for further guidance on where to find prospective consultants and designers.

“The difference between a great design and a lousy one is in the meshing of the thousand details that either fit or don't, and the spirit of the passionate intellect that has tied them together.”

*Ted Nelson, software designer*