

A Client's Guide to Design:  
How to Get the Most Out  
of the Process



*American Institute of Graphic Arts*

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## A Client's Guide to Design: How to Get the Most Out of the Process

If you represent a corporation, institution, advertising agency, investor or public relations firm, or are an individual in need of graphic design, you've landed exactly where you need to be. Welcome.

Unlike so much in today's business world, graphic design is not a commodity. It is the highly individualized result of people coming together to do something they couldn't do alone. When the collaboration is creative, the results usually are too. This brochure is about how to get creative results. Developed by AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts), the discussion that follows will give you realistic, useful information about the design process—from selecting a design firm to providing a clear understanding of objectives, evaluating cost and guiding a project to a desired end. It is a kind of "best practices" guide based upon the best thinking of many different designers with very different specializations and points of view, as well as clients of design who have a long history of using it successfully for their companies. The fundamental premise here is that anything worth doing is worth doing well, but if it's to be done well, it must first be valued.

### **The Value Proposition**

Design—good design—is not cheap. You would be better served to spend your money on something else if you don't place a high value on what it can achieve. There's a view in Buddhism that there's no "good" karma and no "bad" karma, there's just karma. The same *can't* be said for design. Karma is a universal condition. Design is a human act (which often affects conditions) and, therefore, subject to many variables. When the word design is used here, it is always in the context of good design.

A lot of famous people have written many famous books on the importance of design and creativity. The subject matter ranges from using design and creativity to gain a strategic advantage or make the world a more livable place—and more. Much more. The focus here is on how to make the process of design work in the business environment so that the end product lives up to its potential.

We live in a time of sensory assault. Competing for “eyeballs” — which is to say, customers — is more than just an Internet phenomenon. The challenge for companies everywhere is to attract consumers to their products and services and keep them in the face of fickle markets.

The answer to this challenge starts with each company’s people, products and services, but it doesn’t end there. How companies communicate to their markets and constituencies is becoming the primary means of differentiation today. Never, in fact, has effective communication been more important in business. And it has increased the pressure within companies to establish environments and attitudes that support the success of creative endeavors, internally and externally. More often than not, companies that value design lead the pack.

#### **Books Designers Read:**

- *6 Chapters in Design*, Saul Bass
- *AIGA: Professional Practices in Graphic Design*, AIGA
- *Blur: The Speed of Change in the Connected Economy*, Stan Davis & Christopher Meyer
- *Bradbury Thompson: The Art of Graphic Design*, Bradbury Thompson
- *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual*, Christopher Locke
- *The Death of Distance*, Francis Cairncross
- *Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Corporate Creativity*, John Kao
- *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas L. Friedman
- *Looking Closer: Classical Writings on Graphic Design*, ed. Michael Bierut
- *New Rules for the New Economy*, Kevin Kelly
- *Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool’s Guide to Surviving With Grace*, Gordon MacKenzie
- *Thoughts on Design*, Paul Rand

### **What Design Is and Isn't**

Design often has the properties of good looks, which perhaps is why it's often confused with style. But design is about the underlying structure of communicating—the idea, not merely the surface qualities. The late, great designer Saul Bass called this “idea nudity”—messages that stand on their unadorned own. Certainly, it's possible for a good idea to be poorly executed. But bad ideas can't be rescued. When, for example, a global fashion house put verses from the Koran on the back pockets of its designer jeans for all the world to sit on, that was a bad idea before it was ever designed and produced. And the outcry of indignant Muslims worldwide loudly attested to this. Using a different color or type style wouldn't have changed the outcome.

Ideas give design its weight, its ability to influence audiences positively, negatively or not at all.

### **The Objects of Design**

Design is about the whole, not the parts. If you wear your \$2,500 Armani suit with the wrong pair of shoes, you are apt to be remembered for the shoes and not the suit. Inconsistency raises doubt and doubt makes people wary. This might not matter much if customers didn't have alternatives, but customers do. And they know it.

So?

So, it isn't enough for a company to have a great logo if the communications effort isn't carried out across the full spectrum of the company's interaction with its marketplaces—from how the telephone is answered to corporate identity; branding; packaging; print materials; advertising; Internet, intranet, interactive multimedia and web-related communications; and environmental graphics. The “swoosh” didn't make Nike a successful company. Nike made the “swoosh” an iconic reflection of a carefully orchestrated approach to the marketplace. (For better or worse, the marketplace is now deluged with “swoosh”-like shapes, identifying companies ranging from sportswear to software. It's the frame of reference for what many think of when visualizing the word “mark.”) It's unlikely the “swoosh” would be so memorable had it stayed confined to, say, hangtags on shoes.

## Finding the Right Designer

People with a great deal of experience—both as designers and as clients—will tell you that if you really do your homework in the selection process, the chances are excellent that what follows will bring about the hoped-for results.



### **Where to Look**

There are more than 16,000 members of AIGA, and there are hundreds, if not thousands, of other businesses providing graphic design that aren't members. There are also other graphic design associations with their own memberships. And this is just the U.S. It's a big community and, as with all businesses, design is increasingly global. Where do you start?

The membership lists of AIGA and other design organizations are available to the public. They are a good place to begin, especially if you're starting from ground zero. You will find the lists arranged by city and state, so that if location is an issue for you, you can define your search geographically. Start with AIGA's online membership directory at <http://member.aiga.org>.

Design industry publications are another source. They are both numerous and accessible. Not only do they publish the work of designers on a regular basis, many also publish design annuals that display what the publications judge to be the best design in a variety of categories. These publications will not only show you what designers are capable of producing, but also how companies of all sizes and from every sector of industry are using design to communicate effectively.

Reviewing them is a fairly easy way to see a lot of work quickly. Doing so may also tell you something about where your own design comfort zone lies. And while your personal comfort zone isn't necessarily the right yardstick for making a selection, knowing it will help you in the "briefing" process (more on this shortly).

Still another way to find designers is to look around at what other companies are doing; call the companies whose efforts you admire and ask for their recommendations. Companies that are doing a good job of communicating are companies who care about it, and they're typically willing to discuss the subject. Furthermore, if they're doing good work, it usually means they are good clients. Find out from them what makes a design client a good client.

Designers themselves are also good sources. Ask them whom they respect within their field. There's nothing wrong with getting them to name their competition. While it might make choosing tougher, when you make the final selection from among designers who are peers, you usually come out better than when you don't. (And if the relationship doesn't work, well, you have some future contenders you already know something about.)

### **What to Look For**

Locating designers to interview is a fairly uncomplicated proposition. What to look for among the potential candidates—what makes one or the other the right firm for you—is more complex. It's not a beauty contest. Seeing work that you like is important and altogether appropriate as a point of departure. But it's not enough to warrant a marriage proposal.

The nature and technology of what is designed today is changing and expanding, and so is the discipline of design. As with many businesses and professions today, there's more to know and the knowledge itself has a shrinking shelf life. Some design firms have organized themselves to do everything, adding new capabilities as the demand warrants. Others do related things, such as corporate identity and annual reports. And still others do one thing—interactive multimedia, for example.

If you have a retail packaging project, a firm that designs only environmental graphics might not be your best choice. Why? Well, the reasons have less to do with design than with technical requirements, vendor knowledge, pricing and scheduling. The designer who knows how paint and materials hold up in weather or how signage is viewed from a moving vehicle may not know a thing about seam wraps and how products are treated on retail shelves.

Still, there is no litmus test to say one firm can do the job and the other can't, or that a firm without a certain kind of experience can't learn. In fact, some companies see a real benefit in hiring a design firm that brings neither prior experience nor preconceptions to their project. If you've identified a firm you'd like to work with and are comfortable making a leap of faith, you probably should.

The “discovery” process is where you can make that determination. And the more thorough you are, the more likely you are to find a firm with whom you can achieve great—who knows, perhaps even spectacular—results. So ask questions. Lots of them.

What’s the design firm like to work with? What is its culture and how does that match up with your company’s? How flexible is it? Does it want lots of direction? Or lots of latitude? And how much of either are you prepared to give? Who are its clients? And how did it get them? Does it have a thorough understanding of their businesses? What kind of working relationships does it have with them? And with its vendors — from writers to photographers, printers, web consultants and fabricators? Is it a specialist? Or generalist? Does it have the manpower and technical capabilities to do what you need? How does it arrive at design solutions?

And don’t stop here.

How effective has the design firm’s work been from project to project? Does it even know? And does it know why? Can the firm demonstrate that it has done what it promised in terms of budgets and schedules? Are you talking with the people who will do the work for you? Are they the ones who did the work you liked? If not, have you seen their work? Does the firm share the credit—good and bad—for its work? Does it exhibit a good grasp of business and does the condition of the company reflect this? Do you feel that you will enjoy working with the people you’ve met?

Some of these questions are subjective, intuitive. Most have concrete answers. If, for example, a firm can't tell you what its clients were trying to achieve or how it arrived at its solutions, chances are it doesn't deal in ideas. If it isn't adept at running its own business, it probably won't be good at running your project. If it talks only about itself, it may not be a good listener.

To get your answers, go first to the design firms you are considering. Then check out external references, especially clients—and not just the references provided. Get comfortable with the honesty of the firms you are talking to. Find out if their experiences and those of their clients gel. Trust is essential when you are handing over your wallet and your image to someone else.

If you find yourself wondering whether all of this is really necessary, ask yourself how seriously you want to compete in the marketplace. Because that is exactly what a good designer will help you do.

#### **Top 10 Questions**

1. How does the firm like to work?
2. Who are its clients?
3. How knowledgeable is it about them?
4. How is it viewed by them?  
By its peers?
5. What is its design process?
6. What kind of design experience does it have?
7. What kind of results has it achieved?
8. Who will work on your project?
9. Does the firm understand the business?
10. Do you like the people you've met?

### **What About Design Competitions and Spec Work?**

There are differing views on these two closely related subjects. Some designers are absolutely opposed to design competitions and speculative work. Period. Others are open to them, provided they are compensated fairly for their work (i.e., according to the market value of the work).

The design competitions being discussed here are those that require design firms to do original work for a company in an effort to get that company's business—not the kind held by nonprofit professional organizations, such as AIGA, for the purpose of recognizing design excellence.

Consider this real-world scenario: A multibillion-dollar, publicly held global corporation with huge brand awareness surveys the work of several dozen graphic design firms for the purpose of selecting one to design its annual report. After narrowing the field to a half-dozen candidates, the company offers each design firm \$25,000 to provide it with a mock design of the report, issuing well-defined design parameters. Assuming the compensation reflects the effort required (it did), this isn't an unreasonable way to approach the selection process. And many designers would opt to participate. Yes, speculation is involved, but so is reciprocal value—up front. Real though it is, however, this scenario isn't the norm. There aren't that many multibillion-dollar companies, for one thing. For another, few companies cast such a wide net in search of design. The more common speculative scenario includes noncompensated competitions and work that's commissioned but paid for only upon approval. In either case, the situation is the same: little or no value is placed upon the designer as a professional, as someone whose purpose is to give trusted advice on matters significant to the company.

### **Egalitarian or Just Too Eager?**

A typical design competition can be drawn from experience with the International Olympic Committee, the U.S. government or even business enterprise, and it usually goes something like this: A competition is announced for a new logo and identity. No creative brief outlines the communication challenges or objectives from the perspective of the client. A jury will select the winner and a prize may be given (recent examples include a color TV and stipends of \$15 and \$2,000). Often the client indicates one of the “rewards” will be the use of the design by the client—i.e. exposure. The rules of competition include granting the client ownership of the selected entries. (In one recent competition, the client asked for ownership even of designs that were not selected.) Once a design is chosen, development of it may or may not involve the designer.

A competition like this prevents the client from having the benefit of professional consultation in framing and solving a communication problem. The client receives artwork at a cost below market value, owns the intellectual or creative property and can exploit

the work without involvement from its creator. Who loses? The designer, the client and the profession. The designer gives up creative property without a fair level of control or compensation. The client fails to get the full benefit of the designer’s talent and guidance. The profession is misrepresented, indeed compromised, by speculative commercial art.

Unpaid design presentations are fraught with economic risk—risk that is absorbed entirely by the designer. Why, then, do some design firms agree to participate?

Sometimes a new firm or a firm without strong design abilities will offer the excuse that this is the only way for it to get work or exposure. A slump in business might make a designer more willing to gamble. Whatever the reason given, this short-term approach to hiring a design firm is not in the best interests of either party.

But the issues go beyond economics. The financial burden borne by the design team translates into risk for the client. To protect their “investment” in a design competition, competing firms often play it safe, providing

solutions that don't offer fresh, new ideas—in which case, the client gets what it paid for. You wouldn't ask a law firm or management consultant to provide you with recommendations prior to hiring them. A design firm, no less than a law firm or management consultant, has to know its client thoroughly if it's to give valid advice. This takes time and commitment from both sides. Design competitions—even paid ones—just don't allow for this level of participation.

Comparisons sometimes are made with design competitions held for the purpose of selecting architects or advertising agencies. Where these analogies fall short is in the initial effort required versus future potential. Architects and advertising agencies typically present design alternatives in order to win assignments that represent substantial future billings and ongoing consulting

services to the client. The "product" comes at the end of a long engagement (in the case of architecture) or is the cumulative effect of a long engagement (as in advertising campaigns). Either way, initial design represents only a small part of the project's total value to both client and architect or agency. Not so with graphic design. The design approach represents the real value offered by the design firm, and the bulk of the work may well be completed at the front end of a project.

## The Design Brief

A design brief is a written explanation given by the client to the designer at the outset of a project. As the client, you are spelling out your objectives and expectations and defining a scope of work when you issue one. You're also committing to a concrete expression that can be revisited as a project moves forward. It's an honest way to keep everyone honest. If the brief raises questions, all the better. Questions early are better than questions late.



### **Why Provide a Design Brief?**

The purpose of the brief is to get everyone started with a common understanding of what's to be accomplished. It gives direction and serves as a benchmark against which to test concepts and execution as you move through a project. Some designers provide clients with their own set of questions. Even so, the ultimate responsibility for defining goals and objectives and identifying audience and context lies with the client.

Another benefit of the design brief is the clarity it provides you as the client about why you're embarking on a project. If you don't know why, you can't possibly hope to achieve anything worthwhile. Nor are you likely to get your company behind your project. A brief can be as valuable internally as it is externally. If you present it to the people within the company most directly affected by whatever is being produced, you not only elicit valuable input, but also pave the way for their buy-in.

When you think about it, the last thing you want is for your project to be a test of the designer's skills. Your responsibility is to help the design firm do the best work it can. That's why you hired the firm. And why you give it a brief.

### **How to Write One**

A brief is not a blueprint. It shouldn't tell the designer how to do the work. It's a statement of purpose, a concise declaration of a client's expectations of what the design should accomplish. And while briefs will differ depending upon the project, there are some general guidelines to direct the process. Among them:

- Provide a clear statement of objectives, with priorities
- Relate the objectives to overall company positioning
- Indicate if and how you'll measure achievement of your goals
- Define, characterize and prioritize your audiences
- Define budgets and time frames
- Explain the internal approval process
- Be clear about procedural requirements (e.g., if more than one bid is needed from fabricators, or if there's a minimum acceptable level of detail for design presentations).

In the final analysis, design briefs are about paving the way for a successful design effort that reflects well on everyone involved.

## Budgeting and Managing the Process

If the briefing effort is thorough, budgeting and managing a project is easier. It takes two to budget and manage a design project: the client and the designer. The most successful collaborations are always the ones where all the information is on the table and expectations are in the open from the outset.

### **Design Costs Money**

As one very seasoned and gifted designer says, "There is always a budget," whether it is revealed to the design team or not. Clients often are hesitant to announce how much they have to spend for fear that if they do, the designer will design to that number when a different solution for less money might otherwise have been reached. This is a reasonable concern and yet, it's as risky to design in a budgetary vacuum as it is to design without a goal. If your utility vehicle budget stops at four cylinders, four gears and a radio, there's no point in looking at Range Rovers.

If you have \$100,000 to spend and you'd really like to dedicate \$15,000 of it to something else, giving the design team that knowledge helps everyone. Then you won't get something that costs \$110,000 that you want but cannot pay for. The trust factor is the 800-pound gorilla in the budgeting phase. Without trust, there isn't a basis for working together.

The ideal approach is to bring in your designer as early as you can. The design team can then help you arrive at realistic cost parameters that relate to your objectives in lieu of an arbitrary budget figure. At this stage it is quite feasible to put together a budget range based upon a broad scope of a project or program. Individual estimates can be provided, for example, for design concepts, design development and production, photography, illustration, copywriting and printing for a print piece (or, in the case of a website, estimates for programming, proprietary software and equipment).

The more informed you are as a client about what things cost, the more effective you can be in guiding a project. You should know, for instance, that if your design firm hires outside talent such as writers, photographers and illustrators and pays them, it is standard policy to markup (generally, 20 percent) the fees charged by these professionals. You can choose to pay these contributors directly to avoid the markup, but this should be addressed at the time they're hired. Printing, historically, has been treated the same way.

You should also be aware that photographers, illustrators and writers are generally paid a “kill fee” if a project is cancelled after work has started. That’s because talent is in constant demand and accepting one project often means turning other work away. In the case of photography, expect to pay when a photo shoot is cancelled. And remember that unless you stipulate otherwise, you are buying one-time usage of the photographs—not the work itself—and that copyright laws are in force the moment the shutter trips. If you want unlimited use, you will have to negotiate and pay for it.

#### **Who Leads/Who Follows?**

It is the client’s responsibility to lead a project and the designer’s to design and manage the design process. Don’t confuse leadership with involvement. As the person representing the client, you might want a great deal of involvement, or very little. If you provide leadership, your participation can be whatever you want it to be.

“The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you.”

*Max DePree, CEO, Herman Miller, Inc., Leadership as an Art*

There are countless volumes on the subject of leadership, so we won’t presume to give leadership lessons here. The same general principles apply. In a design project, leadership requires that you give clear direction at the outset. You must be available when needed by the design team and ready to make decisions in a timely manner. You should understand how the design supports your objectives (so you can sell it). And you’ll need to monitor major delivery points and be prepared to get the necessary approvals. On this last point, some designers are excellent presenters, and, in fact, like to present their work to the final authority. But while they can be persuasive, they are not the ones to get the final sign-off. As the leader of the team, you are the deal-maker, the closer.

If you identify and articulate your objectives, establish your process early, see that the design team has access to what it needs from you, have a detailed budget and schedule to measure progress with, and lead the process from beginning to end, there is no reason that you won’t be able to enjoy the design process as much as the end product.

At least, that’s how many of our members and their clients see it.

### **About AIGA**

AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts) is the oldest and largest membership association for professionals engaged in the discipline, practice and culture of visual communications and graphic design. AIGA was founded in 1914 and now represents 16,000 designers through national activities and local programs developed by more than 40 chapters and 80 student groups.

AIGA is authoritative in promoting and communicating standards for ethical conduct and professional expertise and in collecting and analyzing data about the profession. It is stimulating in its provocative programming on critical issues facing design and in celebration of both effective and innovative design—a source of inspiration for many members. AIGA is open to new ideas, new professional disciplines and the ever-evolving nature of design.

Members of AIGA include professional designers, educators and students engaged in type and book design, editorial design, communications and corporate design, posters, interface and web design, and new media and motion graphics design. AIGA serves as a hub of information and activity within the design community using conferences, competitions, exhibitions, publications, educational activities and its web space. While many activities are open to both the public and members, AIGA also enables many focused conversations among designers about the issues facing the profession and society.

The role of AIGA's local chapters is both integral and complementary to the organization's national role. Chapters provide AIGA members with local forums for meeting, exchanging ideas and information and creating traveling programs of national import to designers and the public. In addition, chapters play a primary role in the growth, expanding service base and creative vitality of AIGA.

AIGA is a national not-for-profit educational organization incorporated under Section 501 (c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code in the State of New York

Aquent is proud to be Presenting Sponsor of the AIGA business and ethics series. Aquent works with AIGA to help independent designers serve business with integrity.

#### A Q U E N T

Aquent connects design professionals with their clients' project work and permanent positions in 57 cities in 12 countries. Companies work with Aquent when they need to hire pre-screened and qualified creative talent on a project, freelance or permanent basis. By working with Aquent agents with industry expertise and an exclusive Online Portfolio System, clients find the creative talent they need.

As the Official Talent Agency of AIGA, Aquent supports designers in their pursuit of professional success through generous financial support of AIGA activities, including the Design Ethics Series. Aquent was also the first company to offer benefits to freelancers and is a strong advocate for appropriate levels of compensation for design professionals and respect for their contribution to effective business solutions.

To locate an Aquent office near you, call 877-2AQUENT/800-622-8367 (in North America) or visit [www.aquent.com](http://www.aquent.com).

**"A Clients Guide to Design: How to Get the Most Out of the Process" is one topic in the AIGA business and ethics series, a range of publications dealing with ethical standards and practices for designers and their clients. New topics will be added to the series regularly. Additional copies can be downloaded from [www.aiga.org](http://www.aiga.org). For more information on solving communications design problems or hiring a professional designer, visit [www.aiga.org](http://www.aiga.org).**

**To join AIGA or to review the purpose and benefits of AIGA, visit [www.aiga.org](http://www.aiga.org).**

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