

V I A Graphic Content: Successfully Contracting A Design Partner

Graphic design work is always subjective but the process of working with a design company should be pure business. Unfortunately, many relationships between companies that hire outside design firms turn sour, wasting huge amount of time and effort, dollars and opportunities.

Here are some tips for ensuring you start and continue on the correct foot with your design partners. They are the 7 big Cs: comprehensive, contract, client-centric, cost competitive, current, concerned corporate citizen, and customer conscientious.

Comprehensive

Otherwise known as full service, great design should be applicable into many forms of communication such as websites, print brochures, t-shirts, billboards, video, etc. You don't want to have a company design a great logo or corporate identity and find it only works well in multiple colors in one media format. A full service company takes into consideration the entire communications potential and ensures that the design is translatable into multiple media types. When it comes time to apply it, they are ready and there is no conversion cost to adjust it to fit into the new media. A company that's been down various paths before can also provide you great ideas and save you costly mistakes.

Contract

Designers may not be the strongest business people. Sorry, but it's the truth. Therefore, its important that you have a solid contract with your design company and great design companies are business savvy enough to know that it works in both the agency's and the client's best interest. A good contract includes a work-for-hire clause making the client the owner of all work and derivatives of it. You should also look for terms such as the number of revisions included and any additional expenses expected from the projects. Ideally, you want to know who is going to manage the project and what the escalation process is if there is a problem. All contracts should have terms to allow both parties to cancel with defined cause and the implications of that happening.

In most cases, a good account manager is worth more than the best creative. Helping ensure fluid communication between client and agency is the key to avoiding dissatisfied or disgruntled people on both sides. The agency should have a process for managing client projects and be able to clearly explain how it works (plus references to validate that it does). They should have accountability and measurement processes in place to ensure that projects are kept on track and clients are continuously happy. Think about this like a restaurant with great food but lousy service. Both are important and to ensure things are successful, the manager will stop by to check in with the customer to see for himself/herself how the overall meal is going. Seek out a design company that understands the significance of great account management and has a process in place to ensure it.

Cost Competitive

Very pricey or very cheap design proposals are red flags. Shop around enough to be educated about the area’s going rate and don’t ever let price be the only deciding factor. Also make sure you that you know the total cost of the project. Design quotes should include implementation fees such as onsite supervision of printing, development of website functionality, and a set number of revisions. They typically do not include the cost of reimbursable materials such as printing, shipping or web hosting. Between proposals, make sure you compare apples to apples.

Current

Bleeding edge tools aren’t usually necessary (and sometimes can even be risky) but your design company should have a process and commitment for staying up to date and evaluating new technology. New technologies can potentially save you money in production and design but may also raise compatibility concerns that can be avoided if known up front.

Concerned Corporate Citizen

In today’s social responsible world, it is critical that your design partner can support you on any initiatives you may have to use such as FSC certified processes, renewable resources or other environmentally friendly materials. The partner should advise you on options in this area and ideally recommend ways you can minimize waste in creating your new materials and help you optimize environmental stewardship. Whether you are creating direct mail, brochures or branded giveaways, make sure your design partner appreciates your company’s corporate citizenship goals and can support them well.

Customer Conscientious

And last on the top hit list of things to make sure your agency understands why your customers buy your stuff — while you need to sign off on the final design and therefore you need to like it, the design company should clearly understand and work to the goal of appealing to your target customers. Ask them how they will test or validate the design to make sure it works for the intended consumers.

Conclusion

With limited marketing resources, it’s critical to make sure you establish and sustain a productive relationship with your design partner. It will save you time, money, aggravation and ensure you get great design results that can be used to market and sell successfully.

About the Author:

Victoria Adjami is the founder and principal of Communication via Design, a full service graphic design company based in Boston, MA. Since 1993, Communication via Design has been generating positive momentum for its clients through distinctive branding and cohesive marketing communications. Their strategic design services include branding, print collateral, event marketing and interactive solutions.

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