

# Talking to Designers

by Nicholas Boonin

Nicholas Boonin is president of Nicholas Boonin, Inc. For over 25 years, he has been designing and building exhibits and interpretive displays for museums and conservation centers.

This is what designers had to say about how to get the most bang for your buck from designers.

- **"Know your client, live with them, eat with them."** (Murry Gelberg)

Working with a designer can be unique in the world of business. It is often intimidating. Culturally, we are often ill equipped to share our opinions about our visual environment. What you probably wish is that your designer could read your mind. Here are some pointers that may make the design process easier.

## Missions and Goals

- **"Know yourself and your institution"** (Murry Gelberg)

Be prepared! As a client, the more focused and specific you are about a project's mission and goals the more successful your project will be. The mission (the general task to be accomplished) needs to be clear. What is your goal (specific result achieved at the end of a mission)? How will your success be measured?

If you are still having trouble focusing your mission ask...

- **"If it (the exhibit) were a story with a beginning middle and end what would you say?"** (Steve Feldman)

Be clear and candid, stay open to new ideas. If you have seen work done elsewhere that you admire, share this information with your designer. What you like and dislike is equally valuable.

- **Remember ... "It can be cheap, fast or good ... pick two!"** (Neil Kutner)

Understand your project's parameters. What are your budgetary and time. Do you have board members or major contributors whose agendas must be reflected or incorporated? Are there methods like interactivity, multimedia or computer technology that must be incorporated into the display for fund raising or political reasons?

- **"Life is in the editing ... choose your battles"** (Murry Gelberg)
- **"Ask (your client) what they want to say and what they want people to go away with"** (Steve Feldman)

Never be shy about your expertise. The designer will never know as much about the subject of your exhibit as you or your experts. You provide the scholarship about a subject and the designer helps to present your story, giving it a sense of vitality, a point of view and a style. It is also the designer's job to deal with the technical aspects of code and construction details.

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- ***"The designer can be an advocate for the visitor... they bring an outsider's eye to the project... the museum staff often knows so much they may assume levels of familiarity or literacy that the public may not have. The staff may be too close to the material ... use the designer as a test subject."*** (Steve Feldman)

A good designer will ask detailed and probing questions to help clarify goals and expectations. The designer should always give you the opportunity to tell them what you want. If your designer starts telling you what you want before hearing what your needs are BEWARE! The designer should always ask questions and continue to be responsive through out the life cycle of the job.

- ***"Raise your children...so that you'd like to invite them over for diner"*** (Neil Kutner)

Exhibits are a little like children. They are the result of a creative process and must be nurtured. Make them interesting, not safe and boring. The more comfortable you are with your choice of designer the more risks you will be willing to make.

## Getting Started

- In the public sector there is usually an exemption to the competitive bid process for "Personal Services Contracts" which enables you to find just the right designer to meet your needs. Putting contracts out for competitive bid starts with the misconception that designers are interchangeable. Do your homework, understand the costs and rates and find the best professional for the job. This will put you in touch with the most appropriate person / firm.
- Some institutions ask designers to compete on spec for a job. This process is attractive but flawed. By asking for designs on spec, you are effectively asking for the work a designer can afford to throw away. This is not the work you are looking for.
- Be careful about designing too early. Anything done before you determine your goals and resources is eyewash. Often a board member or sponsor will fall in love with an idea expressed in a drawing that was produced before a clear idea of the project was established. If this "cherished idea" no longer fits into the more matured vision you might have disappointed valuable allies. A strong design rests on the foundation of strong program development.

***"I hate getting exactly what I asked for"*** (Neil Kutner)... Neil likes to be dazzled ... he looks forward to being surprised... he wants what he asks for and a little bit more.

- When you work with a designer be prepared for some give and take. Often the first ideas at a concept stage are not used. Be prepared to hate the first ideas.
- The Design Process usually has three main phases: concept, design development and working drawings.

The concept stage of the job should never be rushed. This is the time in the process when the client has the most to offer and the designer depends on the client the most. As the project develops through the design development and working drawing phases, client involvement remains important. These parts of the project are more technical but there is lots of detail where your input will be valuable.

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- If you don't like something, or think something isn't working, say so. Offer directions and ideas if you can.
- Having compatible styles of problem solving and approach is important to the success of a project. There are different styles of approaching and solving problems... rational, romantic,
- There are also different types of designers. They may have skills or orientations that make them strong in a particular skills or view points. Common categories are; story teller, form-giver, stylist, educator, salesman, inventor, problem solver, illustrator or engineer.

## More Tips

- Items that are often overlooked are lighting and signs. These items are important in creating the general feel of the space and a visitor's ability to navigate through it. Make sure these items are in your exhibit budget.
- Final approval of copy always takes longer than you expect (every one who can read wants to edit) try to find a balance between involving key people and keeping the process streamlined.

***"The less copy the better... cut your copy in half and then ... cut it in half again."***

(Steve Feldman)

- Pay your bills! It's good for business and long term relationships.

## What Not to Say

I have heard the following phrases all of my professional life. They are usually said very seriously. They neither inform nor empower.

- ***"We have champagne taste and beer budgets"***. ("I've never had a client who said ... I have more money than I know what to do with" — Steve Feldman)
- ***"Be creative!" or "Show me something I've never seen before"*** (We had other plans)

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