

THE OUTSOURCING GAMBLE: A BUSINESS MANAGER'S GUIDE TO BUYING CREATIVE SERVICES

By Bev Rossi and Danielle DeRogatis, Graphic Matter, Inc.

Eventually most business owners or managers require the use of freelancers, or contractors, to take on creative projects. These contractors can include writers, artists, photographers, graphic designers, interior designers, web designers and others. Contracting for creative services can be broken down into a two phased process; *plan and design and implementation or production/reproduction*. This article focuses on the plan and design phase.

DEFINE YOUR NEED

Clearly identify the message you want to deliver as well as who your target audience is. The more specific you can be about your goal, the more precise the contractor can be when creating copy or design. It's key to convey the type of collateral material you need created since the approach the contractor takes in creating copy, graphics and photography can vary greatly depending on the desired result; a brochure, logo, ad, press release, article, etc.

USE TANGIBLE, MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES

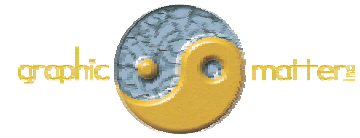
Be prepared with samples of existing pieces that you both like and dislike to steer the contractor in the right direction. Although you want to maintain control over the project and its direction, be open to ideas the contractor may have as well. Being overly sensitive to the contractor's opinions may cause you to overlook a great idea. Try to maintain an open mind on objective issues such as the production process and the associated cost. An experienced designer might suggest additional expenses up front that could save significant time/cost when compounded over a year.

DEFINE CONSTRAINTS UP FRONT

These constraints include budget, time, quality and political limitations. If there are existing materials you need to match, be sure to identify the properties of these pieces that must remain consistent in the contractor's new project and provide samples. Details such as expiration dates and tie-ins with other projects are crucial to the success of the project. Be sure the contractor makes note of any colors, ideas or graphic looks that you are definitely not willing to consider.

CREATE A WRITTEN AGREEMENT

This agreement is typically provided by the contractor and should clearly define the project requirements including objectives, timelines, estimated cost and deliverables. Deliverables should be defined in terms of tangible, measurable results. The written agreement should also identify project assumptions and exceptions. It must include how the contractor will handle any changes, such as last minute needs, rush jobs and add-ons to the initial project



and how this will affect the cost and deadline. Be sure that both you and the contractor are comfortable with these terms before the project begins.

PAYMENT & CREDITS

Expect to commit to service and/or payment in advance. Most contractors will expect to receive a 30-50% deposit upon signing the written agreement.

The contractor may have a customer satisfaction policy where they compare the requirements in the written agreement to the deliverables to assure they meet the stated expectation. Remember the professional is selling their time, not merchandise; therefore refunds represent a 100% loss for them. Requesting credits may satisfy you in the short term but may be counter productive to your long term goals.

REVIEWS & CHANGE ORDERS

Plan the initial review early in the project to confirm a mutual understanding of the objectives and build a relationship based on trust and respect. The initial concept presentation may include a blueprint, first draft, comprehensive mock-up, photographic proofs or proof-of-concept. This is the first time you will see your requirements translated into a physical product. Typically this is when the written agreement really comes into play.

Change orders fit into two categories: billable and non-billable. Typically a change request is not billable, if the change is intended to eliminate a deviation from the original requirements. However, if the change alters or extends the initial specifications, they will most likely be billable.

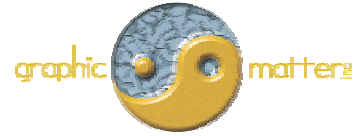
Areas that are less easily measured require common business sense, good communication and negotiation skills. This proofing stage makes the intangible become tangible. Avoid using vague and subjective phrases such as "make it more professional." Eliminate emotional evaluations or responses wherever possible. Instead provide examples that more closely resemble your vision for the project. Remember beauty is in the eye of the beholder. A picture really is worth a thousand words.

COMMUNICATION BREAK-DOWN

If a project will fall of course it is likely to happen in the edit and review process. Manage this process with care to protect your budget and timeline. This can occur due to poor planning or passive communication. To avoid feeling uncomfortable with constructive feedback, try returning to the initial agreement and review the requirements together. Consider this more like a translation process where you each speak a different language. Remember you are striving for the same goal - moving intangible concepts into tangible materials. Promote proactive and positive communications.

FINAL EVALUATION

When the final deliverables are in, perform a joint evaluation. Confirm the initial objectives and specifications and then review any changes that were introduced during the course of the project. Finally, determine if there are any outstanding deliverables due from the contractor.



Sometimes deliverables from one contractor may need to be passed on to another. Be sure to collect all materials and instructions you need to complete the project. For graphic design request all source files in their native software application including illustrations, fonts, page layout programs, high resolution photography, print specifications and other detailed specifications. This creates the opportunity to reuse this output repeatedly and makes for the best business value.

WIN-WIN

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