

Design

Before Hiring a Design Partner, Consider This

by Sean Madden

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Design is a service, not a magic spell. There are designers who do it well, and those who do it poorly; some produce profitable outcomes, and some waste money. More and more companies view design as an important strategic element of their business and are seeking partners to help them understand how it can help. If you're setting out to do so, you'll need to confront uncertainty about how to get the most value from the investment and carefully consider what you're setting out to achieve. An effective client-partner relationship arrives at solutions that aren't just creative, but useful. The following considerations will help the design you buy yield results that are actionable and effective.

Understand your need. Designers are problem solvers, and this worldview has enabled them to move from the world of making objects into the world of defining strategy and influencing consumer behavior. A designer can provide you with beautiful forms, but can also help you frame the problem, understand your consumer, and identify ways forward. The most successful relationships start with intention and truthfulness, with the client assessing exactly what they need from design and then seeking out a partner who fits where they are in the process. Clients who don't do this waste tremendous capital

engaging design firms that specialize in tactical solutions to solve strategic problems, and vice-versa — Arnell famously failed to capture Tropicana’s brand heritage when it took the orange-impaled-by-straw off the carton, and parent company Pepsi was forced to revert to the old packaging.

Engage constantly. Even the most effective design team will eventually get on a plane and go home. You, on the other hand, are in for the long haul. It’s your job to pour what you know into the project and travel with the team: think of it as an equal partnership. The outcomes will only work in the long term if both sides combine their expertise into a rich body of shared experience and understanding. Ziba’s service innovation and retail design work with Umpqua Bank, for example, continues to be relevant and productive years after it was completed, with the bank adding dozens of branches and tens of billions in holdings. This reflects the Umpqua team’s investment during the design process, as well as CEO Ray Davis’s continued efforts to champion its results.

Address your biases. Design can be messy, and it doesn’t pull punches. The design team you partner with will believe you hired them as outside experts, and use this position to push you and challenge assumptions. They may debate or call into question foundational aspects of your business, or propose and discard radical hypotheses in a single conversation. You and your team must prepare to recognize your biases and be willing to break them. Other writers on HBR have delved into the topic of understanding bias extensively in the past, and it’s a critical driver of successful design outcomes. Only this degree of self-awareness, combined with meaningful openness can deliver solutions that are both effective and able to function in your organization.

Understand your capacity to act. A good design partner will push you beyond your comfort zone, in a way that produces amazing, energizing new ideas. Once you’ve reached consensus on which idea to activate, it is critical to push the pause button and honestly assess whether your organization is able to execute the chosen solution.

Hopefully, you've already done some of this work up front. You should understand the solution's cultural impact, its technological and operational feasibility, and its viability in your business. Vijay Govindarajan and Chris Trimble have written at length on the challenges of execution in their book, *The Other Side of Innovation*. If your organization cannot execute the solution because it's unable to make necessary changes, then it's the solution that needs to be adjusted, at least in the short term. This may frustrate your design partner, but don't let it be an excuse to back down or walk away. Respect their engagement and effort, and ask them to help you mold the solution into something you can activate.

Successful design outcomes require intentional beginnings, consistent work throughout, and rigorous maintenance following delivery. Don't expect that simply hiring a design partner will magically unlock new revenue streams and markets. Understand your competencies, set clear goals, and hire a partner whose skills align with your desired success. Design done right will still feel like work, but with intention applied — especially at the beginning of the process — the results should be worth it.

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