



SELECTING AN INDUSTRIAL DESIGN FIRM

You've just left a planning meeting with your team. You've been tasked with an assignment to find a design firm for the newly approved project.

What should be a straightforward step in the process often isn't – selecting an industrial design firm from the sea of possibilities can become a time-consuming, confusing and mentally draining experience.

Here's some steps to take to make that process less overwhelming, and help ensure you're choosing the best firm for your business needs.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Before picking up the phone and contacting firms blindly, or conducting web searches to narrow your list, you should start by identifying your needs and gathering some basic information.

- 1 Identify what your end objective is** - This will have a major impact on the cost, the timeline and the success of the project, and should be your first step. Why is it you need a design firm? Is the project's objective to increase market share, increase profitability or alter a corporate image with updated branding? Do you have technology that needs a new look? Have you updated the technology and you need a new enclosure to put it in? Are you receiving customer complaints and need to address ergonomic issues?
- 2 Determine what level of service you need** - Do you have in-house engineering product development capabilities and need the addition of specific design resources to complement and fill the gaps? Or are you looking for a team with turnkey capabilities to work with you from concept through implementation into production?
- 3 Think about how important a set timeline is to you** - You will need to look at design firms that meet your needs. Some firms have many resources in-house, which allow them to control more of the effort during development. Others have a niche expertise and outsource specifics, such as prototypes. This allows them to specifically match the task with a network of resources. Do you have a preference?

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT [A PROPOSAL] IS UNDERSTOOD TO BE A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT TO BE SUCCESSFUL AND WILL REQUIRE GOOD COMMUNICATION BETWEEN YOU AND THE DESIGN FIRM.



COMPARING YOUR OPTIONS

Reviewing design firms can be done in many ways. Conducting searches from one of the many resource web sites allows you to search for firms by location, specialty, and size. A firm's web site should give you a flavor about the company, as well as list their services. Telephone interviews can also be a productive way for you to further narrow the field.

Once you've done this preliminary research, select the 3-4 firms to interview in person. If possible, you should go to their facility for this so you can better experience the atmosphere, see product samples, and meet key staff members. Design is a creative business, and you need to experience that in their environment.

This is usually when many want to solicit proposals, after having established interest in two or three firms. You should resist this temptation, as this is where the selection process can become very confusing. Receiving multiple proposals without baseline information will lead you to an apples to oranges comparison.

PRESENTING THE BEST PROPOSALS

The information you provide for the proposal will determine what you get back for comparison. With each finalist, you need to discuss in detail the expectations, objectives, timelines and budgets. The priorities must be stated. Is it the cost of design services, level of quality, or timelines? You should pick any two out of the above and communicate them to the prospective firms. Although all three are always a consideration, they cannot all have equal footing in the project.

It's important to understand what the proposal means for you in terms of firm selection. The proposal should be a confirmation tool of previous discussions, outlining in more detail the approach, costs and timelines.

The main point here is that the proposal should not be a surprise, but a summary document. It should address your key issues and propose a plan for meeting the project objectives. It should serve as a guideline for development, but is rarely an absolute.

In very little time, usually one to two meetings, a prospective design firm is trying to identify with you, understand your priorities, and gather the information necessary to submit a proposal. Is appearance the priority? Ergonomics? Cost Reduction? Defining the effort to put into each of these is subjective, and the outcome will be dependent on that effort.

THE OBJECTIVES OF A PROJECT WILL ALWAYS DIFFER DEPENDING ON THE CLIENT AND THE WORK THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE.

KEEP PRIORITIES WELL DEFINED

The objectives of a project will always differ depending on the client and the work that needs to be done. Sometimes the main concern is budget, however there are times when the budget is not the primary issue, and a time/materials arrangement is acceptable.

BUDGET

For projects where the development costs are part of the selection criteria, there's a strong need to define budgets. It is possible that you may not have a set budget at this time, but you probably know what you don't want to spend.

Budgets serve as guidelines that can assist the design firm in knowing how much emphasis to place on certain development tasks. To meet your expectations and resolve the project's objectives, this effort needs to be on target.

This is development, and rarely is it possible to accurately pinpoint the actual design costs for each step in the process. Putting an overall budget in place will provide the design firm the opportunity to calibrate how much effort to put into the different development steps, and still meet your project expectations.

It also removes a point of confusion when receiving multiple proposals. Without the blind bidding war, you can review the value proposition submitted from each prospective firm, and feel confident in your decision.

**YOU NEED TO DISCUSS IN DETAIL
THE EXPECTATIONS, OBJECTIVES,
TIMELINES AND BUDGETS.**

TIME

If time to market is the key driver for the project, you need to understand how the prospective design firms can get you there. It is essential that the strategy to meet the objectives is understood and agreed upon.

Will time be saved by going to an all-inclusive firm with several in-house resources? Does their approach to development include brainstorming and other techniques that assist the creative development? Do they have any rapid prototype capabilities that can be used for risk reduction, concurrent with design development?

FINAL STEPS

So you've delivered the expectations, the budget, target timelines and the overall project objectives to the prospective design firms, and have requested a proposal from each. Once you receive the proposals, your task is to now review the value offered for the services.

Does the proposal address the project's objectives? Does the proposed approach work with your internal process? It is important that this is understood to be a collaborative effort to be successful and will require good communication between you and the design firm.

This selection process shouldn't take you months— It should really happen very quickly, as the time will be much better spent in development and getting your product to market than in going through a tedious, confusing selection process.

By doing a small amount of upfront homework about industrial design firms, you will be rewarded by a pleasant, timely process with a successful outcome.

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