



How to work with an Interior Designer

"An investment in knowledge pays the best interest"

~ Benjamin Franklin

If you're choosing a design professional for the first time, there are several things of which you should be made aware. The following information is meant only as a guide to what you can expect in a designer/client relationship.

Timeline:

Unless clients are under a particular timeline for completion of their project, many designer-client relationships can last several months or longer. The completion date for any particular design project is affected by many factors, including the following:

- frequency of client/designer meetings
- timely decision-making on the part of the client
- vendor lead times
- back ordered items
- production facility and workroom schedules
- budget constraints
- vacations, illnesses, inclement weather

There are a host of other things which can alter an anticipated timeline. Typically the shorter the timeline for completion, the sooner decisions and orders must be made to allow for vendor and production lead times. Sometimes, alternate selections must be made to avoid vendors whose lead times may be too long. Alternate choices must often be prepared. At this point, being flexible enough to alter a design concept slightly to accommodate a change in vendors is vital. If you have a particular completion date that is important to meet, be sure to inform your designer at the beginning of your working relationship.

Pricing:

Another important issue to understand in the design world is pricing. You will find as many ways to price a project as there are designers. In this industry, there is no 'standard' fee schedule. Each designer's overhead costs, profit margins, vendor discount rates and other factors determine how and why they charge what they do.

Some of the ways designers develop pricing for a project are:

- 'cost-plus' in addition to design fees
- design fees plus retail
- a percentage off retail plus design fees
- flat fees
- straight hourly plus a percentage of budget

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Some interior designers will not work with clients whose budgets are below a certain minimum. Others don't get involved in product purchases, but only make recommendations. Then again, some will only work hourly. Unfortunately, there is no way to compare 'apples to apples' in this industry. When making your ultimate decision about with whom you will work, try to be flexible and ask to negotiate the fees that meet both your needs and theirs.

Budget:

Designers develop concepts for their clients based on one important factor....information. Without it, they would all have to be telepathic in order to perform their duties. Many clients aren't always forthcoming about their budget. This may one of the most critical pieces of information that is shared with a designer. Remember that a designer is the clients' advocate. If clients don't talk openly about how much they have to spend on a project, they could wind up spending more on research fees by having their designer investigating options that they can't afford, and eventually spending more in the long run without any appreciable benefit.

Designers' choices in fabrics, furnishings, vendors or contractors are all affected by how much the client is willing to spend on the project as a whole. Should the designer make recommendations from Vendor A or B? They can only give real value and make correct recommendations when they are armed with factual and concise information.

When developing a project budget, clients should take into consideration these often overlooked costs:

- sales tax
- delivery charges
- freight and shipping costs
- rush fees
- cancellation and restocking fees
- custom order and sample charges

These items come out of the overall budget, but do not provide any visible benefit. They are, nonetheless, hard costs that must be considered. Clients should take their total budget figure and deduct the appropriate percentage for sales tax (for their state) and add an additional 15% for delivery, freight and shipping charges. Additionally, clients need to factor in design fees to their overall figure or set aside a portion of it (according to each designer's pricing structure for the job). The remaining funds can then be designated for actual furniture and fixtures (referred to in the industry as the F & F budget).

Communication:

Clients and designers should get to know each other rather well during any sizable design project. Designers must ask questions about clients' lifestyles, patterns of behavior of family members, color and style likes and dislikes, budget information; some things that may seem unnecessary to divulge. But any good designer should ask as many questions as they need to in order to match the clients' needs with a design concept that is functional, livable and beautiful. A client should always be willing to give feed-back to their designer, whether it's positive or negative.

Trust, honesty and integrity is imperative to developing a good working relationship during the course of any project. Many client/designer relationships start out well enough, but can end in a stalemate over a particular portion of the job. This can happen for a variety of reasons, but the bottom line is; keep the lines of

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communication open, even if there's a problem. Many issues could be avoided between clients and their designers if the terms and parameters of the relationship are outlined in the beginning. Clearly delineated expectations and responsibilities of each party should be addressed in as much detail as possible, leaving little to be misinterpreted. Communicate as much as you can to your designer about your likes and dislikes ("hate floral, love stripes"), budget constraints ("we're waiting for our company bonus"), lack of being able to visualize ("I need a picture or drawing to understand the concept"). There is no such thing as too much information!

Respect:

Interior Designers are professionals. Good designers bring to the table a compilation of experience, training and innate instincts to accomplish the goals set before them. At times their work is relatively simple. But more often than not, they spend many hours determining the proper scale, color, design, budget and style that reflect each client's taste. Many designers have a half dozen clients or more at one time. They must keep detailed records, and be diligent in their follow up with vendors, contractors and clients.

At times, clients do not understand why designers charge for nearly everything they do (research, personal shopping, drawings, travel, etc). In this industry, *Knowledge is King*. Their living depends on exchanging this knowledge for compensation. Although they may also sell actual goods, most of what they offer to clients is *their ability to think through problems and recommend solutions*; whether it be a simple window treatment design and appropriate fabric selection or tackling large space planning issues – they ply their trade with their minds – and their time. There is almost an unlimited number of resources designers have at their fingertips and it often takes many hours of research to find the appropriate solution for a design problem.

Respecting the time a designer puts into a client project is important. Likewise, a good designer will respect a client's time, as well.

- They shouldn't cancel appointments at the last minute
- They should be in constant contact with their clients about their project
- They should be mindful of a client's work and family commitments
- They should not impose their particular tastes upon their clients

Mutual respect – from both parties – is the key to a great working relationship.

**When you work with an interior design professional,
remember, they are striving to achieve one goal
– *your ultimate satisfaction.***