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## Getting Design Firm Value Beware of the Lowest Bidder

*By Lynn McGregor*

It was a complete facility relocation project. In search of a bargain project, the client awarded it to the low bidder. (It was approximately one third the normal market value fee for a project this size and most firms competing knew it would be impossible to execute the responsibilities defined by the winning bid.)

With a shattered schedule, bad communication, a blown budget and flawed design (some wood doors positioned under pot lights caused two fires), the result was an embarrassment to the client firm. It had to hire a new design firm to correct matters but since the initial budget was blown, renovations had to be done over the term of the lease. In the end, the client firm was never happy with its facility, and the project cost more than four times the initial budget.

In this economic climate, no one can afford to waste money. But a design fee is a very small fraction of an overall project cost (usually less than 10%).

With a low consulting fee comes the least amount of time from that consultant. And if you get the smallest amount of time, you can be fairly assured that your project will end up costing more in the long run, than it would if you had someone protecting your interests, throughout the process. After all, it takes time to do proper research, and negotiate the best possible prices. And it takes less time to just pull a solution off the shelf.

***When you're looking for a design firm, here are a few things to consider...***

### Check the Track Record

Think about it in terms of professional reputation. Talk to past clients and make sure they feel they've received value from the service. It's important to note that the age of the firm, and the size of the firm are not factors in establishing the quality of the firm's services. For example, a younger firm may be so keen to impress that they may deliver tremendous value to its short list of clients.

When you're talking to past clients, ask them about budget control. Did the designer accurately estimate the cost of the project and did they



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meet it? Did they come in under the estimate? How did they manage the process? Was an agreeable schedule developed at an early stage, and respected throughout the process? Was the process graceful or full of emergencies?

Things should go according to plan. Seasoned professionals know to accommodate for delays all the way down the line so that if anything happens, that project can be pulled back onto schedule. And the same goes for budget. There should always be money for unforeseen circumstances.

### **Check the Communication**

If you are confident that you are considering only good firms with proven track records, you should next review the quality of communication. Check the designer's compatibility with the style and nature of your organization. Does the designer understand your firm's objectives and personality?

Next, do they communicate well with the project team members? Are they "on the same wave length"? Are they respectful of other team members? Do you feel you can trust them? Will you enjoy spending long hours with them?

You can evaluate communication by observing the group interaction, but also by watching to see how your company's goals and values were interpreted into the design firm's proposal.

### **Check the Fee**

Checking the fee is the last thing to do because any good design firm should be willing to develop a way of working with the team that will respect the level of investment the client is making. This manner of proactively partnering with a design firm that you trust and want to work with is a far better way to ensure that you avoid disappointments.

It's a competitive environment for a designer right now and there is likely to be a wide variance in the quotes any tendered project will receive. The key to assessing these proposals is to ask the right questions, and the information above is just a place to start. To find out more on hiring a designer and to access a list of designers in Ontario, visit [www.arido.on.ca](http://www.arido.on.ca).

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