

Dealing with design buyers

When pitching to inexperienced buyers, designers need to be prepared and not commit too many resources to the initial process, says **Grahame Jones**

Why haven't I heard anything? They said they'd come back on Wednesday with their decision. I'm sure we'll hear tomorrow. Thursday comes and goes. But nothing. Decide to call on Friday and leave message. Client in a meeting. Hear nothing back. Nothing in the post on Monday either. Strange? Call again. Leave another message. Decide to email (hate emailing, gives an opportunity not to talk face-to-face). Still no response. Something is wrong. Called secretary and left yet another message. Finally get email. Didn't get job. Did get apologies for not responding any sooner... apparently very busy. No feedback, just 'it was a tough decision'. Never called to say thank you for your efforts. Arghhhhhh!

Does this sound familiar? This common experience sums up my current bugbear – unprofessional buyers.

This year I seem to be continually chasing prospects for their decisions, long after they promised to respond. I find most of them hide behind bland emails. Excuses for not winning work have been equally frustrating. Somebody told us we had 'too much' experience although we were originally selected for having 'relevant' experience. 'Too expensive' was cited by another buyer. Not uncommon I hear you say. But we never even gave a quote!

During the past five years, I think there have been more poor buyers than good ones. Over the same period, there have certainly been more designers and design companies in the market, leading

to a massive over-supply. This has strengthened the position of buyers. And maybe this has had a knock-on effect on how they treat the tendering process.

Once upon a time, buyers might have sought responses from, say, two or three agencies. Now, they have agencies falling all over themselves. There is greater perceived choice. Some buyers apparently don't see the need to treat agencies and the process with due respect. I heard one company (unnamed of course) encouraged 18 design companies to tender for their annual report.

There is no excuse for bad manners. Respect is a much talked-about concept. I wonder how much respect some buyers have for designers and what they can do. Meanwhile, how much respect do they have for the time and effort agencies spend on tendering for work? I guess this is about educating clients on how to buy creative services professionally, not just when commissioning new works/designers, but how to get the most from their agencies on an on-going basis. Buyers educating their own internal buyers and decision makers are also a part of the equation. How many times do you suspect the people you are presenting to either haven't bothered to read the brief, don't know what criteria is being used to evaluate and/or don't know why they have been asked to attend in the first place. And clients seem to be getting younger (or am I just getting older). They go from secretary one day to marketing manager the next without any training and hey presto, they are buying creative services.

Losing is part of life. I don't mind... well ok, I do, but it's the way in which projects are lost. We all know how much money is spent on these things. Recent research by British Design Innovation claims £38,000 is the average annual cost of

free pitching. If you add time for doing a straight tender, I suspect that figure would triple.

So what does this all mean? It's hard to say. There will always be an over-supply of designers and there will always be inexperienced buyers. I guess the trick is to spot one before committing resources. Easier said than done, however. Agencies need to be more diligent: carefully considering how many agencies are tendering, finding out if the incumbent is participating. Asking questions can help shape how you respond to opportunities. Beyond this, go with your instincts: if you think they'll be a waste of time from what you have seen and how they've behaved, don't be afraid to say no. Develop a nose for time wasters.

Buyers, too, need to consider their approach. They would get greater quality of response and respect if they also were more diligent. Don't invite random agencies to participate, because some will inevitably be unsuitable. Do your homework. Keep numbers down to no more than three agencies. Give access to decision makers. Be more open on what criteria is being used. Develop a considered brief. And last but not least... learn how to give bad news.

Education is key. Agencies, opinion-formers, industry bodies, everyone has to continue to educate clients on how to buy creative services effectively. A big subject I know. But I for one am prepared to do my bit. The question is, are you?

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