



# What to look for when you're hiring a marketing/design firm

by Erik Wolf - President, Zero-G Creative

The quality of your marketing materials is essential. When you meet with a potential client, these are the items that they are going to use to judge your quality as a vendor. Poorly made business cards or a template web site will not get the right message across and will not impress anyone. Unless you have a background in graphic design and marketing communications, do NOT try to put these materials together yourself with DIY tools. Similarly, don't try teaching yourself Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop and Dreamweaver and don't hire a cousin/neighbor's kid/college student, etc. to work on your critical marketing materials.

Hire a reputable firm to work on your core materials and be sure that you look hard for the right fit. That can be easier said than done though, so here are some tips to help you find the right design partner:

**1** Do your homework before you engage or even interview. A good design firm will ask you about what makes your brand "tick" beneath the surface. Prepare notes about your brand values and personality. Provide a positioning statement or mission statement if you have one. Provide your tagline. Write down as many details as possible about what you're looking to achieve visually. Do you think your brand demands a more contemporary or traditional style? Is it important to you to have a logo with a distinctive icon in it? Are there other logos or web sites out there that inspire you? Who are your competitors?

Good design rarely happens in a vacuum and preparing for the design process is key. A lot of experienced marketers will tell you that this preparation has a much greater impact on your success in a design project than your choice of a design firm.

If you don't have the time to flesh this out before meeting with a design firm, look for a firm that offers branding expertise as well as design. You could also look for an independent consultant but be prepared to pay for some of their time. A "free consultation" or "free assessment" will not get your project the attention it needs.

**2** Obviously, as a small business owner, you are going to be sensitive to budget. Don't go with anyone that promises you the best price or a significant discount. You will get what you pay for. A better policy is to go with a firm that will guarantee a maximum budget, provided of course that the scope of work does not increase. Without some sort of guarantee in this regard, be prepared to spend about 30% more than what you were quoted. Not that design firms always overcharge, but additional revisions, meetings, etc. can add up quickly.

**3** Discuss the process and design methodology ahead of time and make sure that the workflow of the project is compatible with your schedule. For example, most small business owners have trouble scheduling regular meetings during the business day and don't like taking business hours away from customers. If that's the case, look for a firm that has an established online workflow where projects and approvals can be managed largely over the web. If a project becomes a pain to manage from your perspective, it's likely to get off track quickly.

**4** When evaluating a portfolio, look for diversity in clients and in visual styles. Don't saddle yourself with a "one-trick pony." If all the work in their portfolio looks similar or all uses a common visual style, it's a fair bet that the work they do for you will come out like everything else in their portfolio. Some firms have a lot of range though, so hold out for a firm that can adapt their style to your vision.

**5** When working on your web site, make sure that you and your firm are agreed as to what the web site's primary purpose is going to be prior to ANY design or coding. Is it a lead generation tool? Is it a tool that prospects will use to qualify you as a vendor? Is it a store? Your web site will fill a specific role in your marketing plan and make sure that everyone understands what that is before moving forward.

**6** It's usually best to stay away from industry "specialists." When a company makes it's entire living serving a single industry or vertical, that is often a red flag for small business owners. If a firm claims to know everything about marketing CPA firms or restaurants, it usually means they have a premade formula they like to stick to regardless of the specific needs of your business. It also means that as soon as they get done working with you, they'll usually sell the same service to one of your competitors. Differentiation in a marketplace comes from having a fresh perspective, not the same ideas and the same advisors and designers as your competition.

**7** Remember that a relationship with a design or marketing firm is a partnership. They will NEVER know as much about your business as you do. Likewise, most small business owners lack the experience and/or objectivity to effectively direct high-level marketing/branding/design initiatives. Find a good meeting place between your experiences and things should go very well.

## About Zero-G Creative

You don't need to be a \$50 million company to look like one. Zero-G Creative delivers sound marketing advice and award-winning design to small businesses and startups at affordable prices.

Zero-G's full suite of services includes branding, marketing strategy, graphic design, web design, e-commerce, collateral development and more – all delivered to an exclusively small and mid-sized business clientele. With Zero-G at their side, entrepreneurs know they can reach for the stars.

## About Erik Wolf

A small business marketing expert, Erik Wolf founded Zero-G Creative to work with entrepreneurs who felt “weighed down” by ineffective marketing and small budgets.

Having gained experience in a variety of industries including consumer products, IT and journalism, Erik became a full-time entrepreneur in 2006. Erik holds an MBA in Marketing from Georgia State University and a BA from Emory University. He lives in Johns Creek, Georgia with his wife and two children.