

MARKETING TIPS

A quarterly article on tips to help in the marketing & promotion of your business



THE DESIGN PROCESS OR I DIDN'T SIGN ON AS A THERAPIST, DID I?

Designing or redesigning the space a client will live in is one of the most personal and elemental activities anyone – architect or designer AND client – undertakes. To make it turn out as we plan demands the close communication of architect and client over a sustained period of time.

Design is a collaborative and an iterative process. It will evolve as architect or designer and client(s) meet and talk, incorporating new ideas, site features, and budget. The architect's or designer's job is to create options and possibilities. The client's job is to give feedback, to choose among those options.

Well, that's simple isn't it? Let's see.

Phase One: Design

As we said above, you need to help your client think through the design options using a number of techniques – sketches, floor plans, simple models – that continue dialogue and incorporate and review ideas. Some people are naturally visual and can “see” the project as you describe it. Others will need more patience on your part as they struggle to translate sketches and models into personal shelter.

Let's recognize up front that such basic changes create stress, for any number of reasons, from dollars to flaws in relationships. For instance:

Sometimes during the design process your client couple's relationship, which looked really easy going and amiable during your first meetings, suddenly turns into a war zone. He or she may agree to something that had earlier precipitated disagreement only to call you later to question the entire issue again. He said, she said.

Some designers or architects will call a hiatus for a cool down, if the project schedule isn't built around, say, a life event – a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, First Communion, graduation, or

wedding. Others “design” rules of engagement in addition to physical design, such as, meeting separately with both and bringing their ideas to a neutral place in a neutral way. Once in awhile the rift is permanent and you end up with one or the other or neither as your client. Collect your money. And remember, you didn't cause the problem. It was waiting to happen. But you need to learn from it.

Sometimes your client can't make a decision. The picture in his mind's eye has been replaced with myriad choices and now he's paralyzed. If you begin to see this happening, how can you get him beyond that place? Use your professional judgment to eliminate some of the choices. And walk him through the best of his options. You're the expert. Make it count.

As design evolves to the formal plan, three-dimensional models are shared with the contractor to get initial cost estimates for the base design and for proposed options. This is still the easy side of the project, making the picture in the mind's eye come to life. Nothing has yet been taken apart.

Oh, watch out for the Enlarging Cast of Characters. Know who has decision authority, listen to the kibbitzers, acknowledge their ideas in the conversation, and turn to your decision maker/s for the final word.

The plan is also used to address permits, potential zoning issues, and special needs. In some areas the process of getting a permit is the longest segment of the work. If you know this to be true in the city or town your client lives in, suggest she builds in enough elapsed time into the schedule to reach the deadline. Not knowing about such things causes your client stress because she won't understand the delays. Not that many of the rest of us do...

Even when everything happens in sequence, correctly and on-time, there is tremendous stress on the family.

Phase Two: Construction – Chaos Should Not be a Surprise

You have an obligation to tell your client about the hell fire and damnation that's about to take place. No one is prepared for the demolition of his or her home. Before a single wall is touched, make sure your client knows that her place is about to be trashed – and that's a normal thing – and you can guarantee all the pieces will be together and the space will be completely clean before she begins to use it again. The shock of the demolition will be replaced by anticipation of the changes.

Once the design is firm, the final plans and specifications go to the contractor. The contractor is chosen for his ability to transform these plans into physical reality. Your job is to work with the contractor and the client, essentially, to facilitate the process of working together and to translate what is happening on the ground to your client. Your careful attention during this process can forestall upset if there is a need for changes as work goes along.

Occasionally you will be The Bridge between your client and the contractor. For reasons not obvious to you, your client may have trouble communicating with his or her contractor – a real problem given the numbers of detail decisions the client has to make during the construction process. You collect your shekels helping with the issues that come up. You answer the inevitable questions along the way. You are the authority.

Once an architect or designer could afford to be narcissistic and unapproachable – it was almost an expectation. Bad news. No deities here. Your job is down in the trenches. Your goal must be client satisfaction, communication, and collaborative decision making.

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