

7 Ways to Derail Your Design Project Before It Starts



BLUE MARBLE CREATIVE



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A lot can go wrong on a design project. Most businesses enlist the help of a professional when embarking on such projects as building a website, creating brand identity, or developing a multimedia campaign, but whether working in-house or with an outside team, the process of going from idea to tangible outcome can seem mysterious and daunting. Simply being aware of these seven common missteps can help insure you against ending up with a design train wreck:

DERAILER 1 Make assumptions, but don't make a plan.

Imagine a green vegetable — perhaps kale, or jalapeños. They're both green vegetables, yet very different. This is often the crux of why creative projects go awry: wildly differing visions of the same general idea.

When managed correctly, the ideas, experiences and perspectives everyone brings to a project become a valuable asset. Take the time for everyone to discuss their ideas for the project. Otherwise, you could end up with a lot of kale in your jalapeño jar.

It's easier to have a meaningful discussion about what works, what doesn't, and why when you can illustrate it with real-life examples. Look for actual websites or print materials you like, or don't like. Once there's consensus and clarity about the vision for the project, write it down! This is a critical step. Writing it down makes it concrete and gives everyone something to reference throughout the course of the project.

DERAILER 2 Wait until the end to involve key stakeholders.

When a project's decision-makers are brought in mid-stream—or worse, just before you go to print or launch the website—inevitably they'll have changes. Consider it one of those laws by that guy Murphy.

Save yourself potential rework and time delays by involving key stakeholders right away. Project leaders often hesitate to bring in the final decision-makers early because usually that's the CEO or the Executive Director, and it's assumed that these people are too busy to be bothered with the details. (It's amazing how frequently this happens.) Instead include them in the visioning process and get their stamp of approval on various milestones throughout the project. Their involvement from the get-go is essential to the project's success and timely roll-out.



DERAILER 3 Avoid asking “why?”

When people get stuck on design decisions, 99% of the time it’s because they can’t articulate or don’t understand the “why” behind the design. Why are we doing this project? Why would our prospective customer care? Why is blue a good (or bad) choice of color?

Sometimes people don’t ask “why” because it seems too obvious a question, and they’d feel dumb asking it. They assume that everyone else has already had this conversation. Other times, people don’t discuss “why” because doing so may challenge preconceived notions.

After one client had begun working on their annual printed catalog, we questioned whether a digital version of the catalog would work better for them. They had always done print catalogs; that was the norm for companies in their industry. After discussing the pros and cons of print and digital, it was decided that a digital version would better extend the reach and life of the publication.

DERAILER 4 Forget focus groups and competitive analysis—those are so 2000.

It’s true; lots of analytical mumbo jumbo can be a waste of time. But the fact remains that business communications are about your audience, not you, and the many other messages competing for their attention will affect how they react to yours. It takes some mental gymnastics to get outside of your own head and translate things for your audience.

Even if you can’t afford a professional market research firm, you can still get meaningful insight to inform the decisions you make about your design project. Select a handful of people who represent your ideal customer for informal focus group reviews. When asking for feedback it’s important to know how to solicit raw impressions and reactions, not opinions or design advice. Gaining this kind of outside perspective shifts your focus in a healthy way and gives the work appropriate context.

To better understand who your ideal customer is, make them a real person. Give them a name, a job, a place to live, hobbies, and quirky personality traits (Ted is addicted to sci fi novels; Anna can tell time to the minute without looking at a clock). It’s much easier to know how you should talk to your audience when you can think of them as an individual.

DERAILER 5 Don’t hold anyone accountable.

Let’s say you’ve agreed that your new website must be done in three months. Who is the project lead? Who is providing text and imagery? Who is going to work with the print vendor or web host? With no decisions made up front, these details can bring your project



to a screeching halt. The project plan should clearly outline who's responsible for what and everyone should be in agreement at the out-set.

DERAILER 6 Assume the technical stuff will work itself out later.

A project's functional requirements can have a major impact on the time and costs for completion. What content management system you're going to use for your website or whether you have the proper indicia for your mailer are important details to confirm. This kind of stuff can be overwhelming or boring, so there's a real temptation to gloss over it.

Technical specifications must be clarified before the project starts so your designer can accurately define the scope of work and identify which solution will work best. You don't need to be a master of the jargon; your designer should take the lead and be asking you lots of questions. Your complete and thoughtful answers will be appreciated and provide your designer the information they need to ensure the most successful approach.

DERAILER 7 Your budget is "I don't know." Your timeline is "soon."

It's tough to price out graphic design services. You're trying to assign a value to something that doesn't exist yet. As the client, you can't take it for a test drive, you can't easily return it if you don't like it, and you can't try a free sample of it. There are no guarantees about how many customers it will bring you, how much time it will save you, or how it will galvanize your team.

While it's understandable to be uncertain about the costs, in most cases clients do, in fact, have a dollar threshold in mind. Since there are many different approaches to take with design projects, once your designer understands your budget they can determine which solution will be best for you. So talk early and frankly about what financial resources you can allocate towards your project.

Travel schedules, meetings, how much content needs to be written, and so forth can dramatically affect the project's timeline. Again, an early and candid discussion with your designer will help you determine when the project can realistically be completed.

When you understand the various areas where a design project can get off track, you'll be able move through the project smoothly toward a successful completion.

At Blue Marble Creative, we help socially- and environmentally-conscious organizations develop marketing and outreach materials, such as websites, publications and identity collateral, that communicate their important work, engage their audiences and inspire action. We offer a complimentary Communications Strategy Session for qualified organizations and businesses to gain clarity and next action steps on their design and marketing projects. If you would like to be considered, please drop us a line at info@bluemarblecreative.net or call us at 509.493.2487.