# Things You Need To Know When Selecting A Design Firm

## By Doug Ringer

If you're finding it difficult to launch products on schedule, look at the capabilities of your contract engineering team.

These 5 steps will help you evaluate potential design partners and provide excellent insight into their ability to meet project requirements.

1. Demonstrated expertise and success in the same discipline
2. Verifiable references and testimonials
3. Advertised expertise
4. An internal quality control function
5. Do they stand behind their design or so they shrug-off their failures and continue to bill time & materials

**Demonstrated expertise and success in the same discipline**. I've seen too many organizations throw money away by selecting a firm based on only their shallow knowledge of the project. The problem is that the technology used today is extremely complex. This complexity makes it more difficult for a designer to successfully move from one technology to another because the specialization required to be successful in one technology may not be wholly transferrable to another.

To counter this, it is critical that you view past products of the firm and verify they used the same technologies as your proposed design. Hire an independent consultant to evaluate the competence of the firm, if you must. It will cost relatively little to do the evaluation, but the benefit will far outweigh the cost.

**Verifiable references and testimonials.** This is a simple request. If they refuse to provide references and testimonials under a non-disclosure agreement, walk away.

Contract design firms, as with all other professional service providers, gain most new business through referrals. If they will not provide names of satisfied clients, they either do not have any or they know the technology you require is different from their previous work.

**Advertised expertise.** I "GOOGLED" a design firm we were considering using and found no mention of the expertise required for our project on their website. I then did the same for their competitors and found multiple pages describing their successes in this particular field.

It is a good marketing practice to tout successes and satisfied clients on your website (and other marketing materials). If they do not market a technique or technology your project requires, they do not have the ability to succeed with your project.

**QA process.** How does your supplier ensure your factory receives quality components? They have a quality assurance (QA) department responsible for quality control. An ISO-certified factory has work procedures they must follow to maintain compliance.

If the design team/firm you are considering is competent, they will have work procedures and peer reviews of designs and test results? During your interviews, ask to see their work processes and meeting minutes from previous design reviews. If say it is "privileged" information— give them a felt-tip pen and tell them to black-out the customer data. If the CIA can redact classified data, then your potential design partner can do the same.

**Guarantee of quality and schedule.** Your prospective design firm made it through the first four steps so they are probably technically qualified and honest enough to share their documents and clients. Now the real test, will they guarantee the schedule and cost targets? Development projects require a large investment, but missing a launch date is much more expensive. You can make up for some cost overruns with additional sales, but profits lost due to delays are gone forever.

Do not view design firms as clones of each other. Each have their own expertise and business practices. Find the firms that claim a proven record of success in your field of need. Then eliminate any of them who cannot prove this expertise. The expense of this work and due diligence process will be returned to your firm many times.