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## Opinions

# 10 criteria for finding the right design firm

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With more options to choose from than ever in hospitality design, these criteria can help hoteliers find the right fit for their projects.



By Becca Chester

“If you think good design is expensive, you should look at the cost of bad design.” —Ralf Speth, CEO, Jaguar Land Rover

The focused practice of hospitality interiors is a relatively new niche in the realm of design. Before the 1970s, the interior design of hotels was relegated to “commercial” interior design firms, which also designed airports, offices, schools, public buildings and pretty much any other non-residential space. There was not really specialization.

As travel became more accessible, hotel guests became seasoned and global, and hotels were required to focus on this more sophisticated market. Several specialized design firms evolved and architectural firms with prior success in the hospitality market created interiors studios within their organizations. Occasionally, talented individuals branched off from the larger firms to create their own studios.

Demand for specifically designed hotel product became apparent, and media-sponsored supplier expositions sprung up with this focus. The Hospitality Design Expo just marked its 25th year with record attendance. Its published Buyer’s Guide is geared toward more than 52,000 industry professionals.

### **The right fit**

With the advent of Boutique Design New York and Boutique Design West, along with other one-on-one designer-to-supplier events, the hospitality design industry is now huge, both in product offerings as well as number of design consultants.

Hundreds of hotel interior design firms are now in the marketplace. How can a developer or hotel brand manage to find the right design firm that suits each specific project? Here are some guidelines.

- **Establish project goals:** What is the overall budget? What level is the product-focused service, luxury, lifestyle or group? What is the image for the project? Who is the market? It is important to understand the creative needs for the project before looking for the appropriate consultant.
- **Pictorial file:** If there's a project that fits with the owner's or brand's goals, create a file for reference. The design firm you are searching for may have been its creator; if not, the images can certainly serve as a target for the newly appointed design firm.
- **Review the lists:** Last year, Interior Design Magazine celebrated the 30th anniversary of their "Hospitality Giants" listing of the top hospitality designers. Other industry publications also create a list of the top design firms, including Hotel Management. These are typically in order of size of firm, based on fee dollars earned for the year. Glean through and garner the ones based on size of the firm (as well as the location) that maybe appropriate for the look, scale and location of the project.
- **Sift through:** Begin the process of short-listing the candidates. Reach out to the principals of the finalists to determine availability and request portfolios, particularly with projects of similar scale and scope.
- **Follow up on references:** People are far more candid over the phone than they are with the relative anonymity of an email or text message. Call on general contractors, project managers and purchasers that have worked recently with the firm and ask how the designers performed.
- **Competition:** A valuable way to evaluate both the consultants (and their understanding of the project) is to have a design competition amongst two to four of the finalists. Currently, there is a huge influx of hotel work so most firms will not participate in a competition unless there is a small fee allocated to pay for their efforts; include this in the overall budget.
- **Interview:** There is a natural ebb and flow to the workload for any given firm. A company that was idle may suddenly be inundated with work. The firm also may have their focus on other tasks, such as opening a new satellite office or a new, "more important" client. Question the designers about what principal will work on the project and whether they can stay involved through the duration.



### Additional considerations

- **Evaluate the status quo:** Perhaps there is already an interior consultant that has provided the designs for the client for many years, and for which there is an established "comfort level." Are these designers still delivering fresh ideas?
- **Consider collaboration:** There may be the opportunity for a joint venture between a very talented individual consultant with a larger studio. This can be fruitful, as the individual consultant is not burdened with the day-to-day tasks of managing a large staff, and can devote more attention to the project. In many cases, they also may be more inclined to approach the design in a fresh way.
- **Dynamic tension:** The architect may be interested in also providing the interior design service for the project. However, maintaining division between the disciplines and managing them properly create a positive tension, which often results in a product that delivers the best of both worlds.

Once you have your designer selected, managing the process is the next step.

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