THE CREATIVE PROCESS:
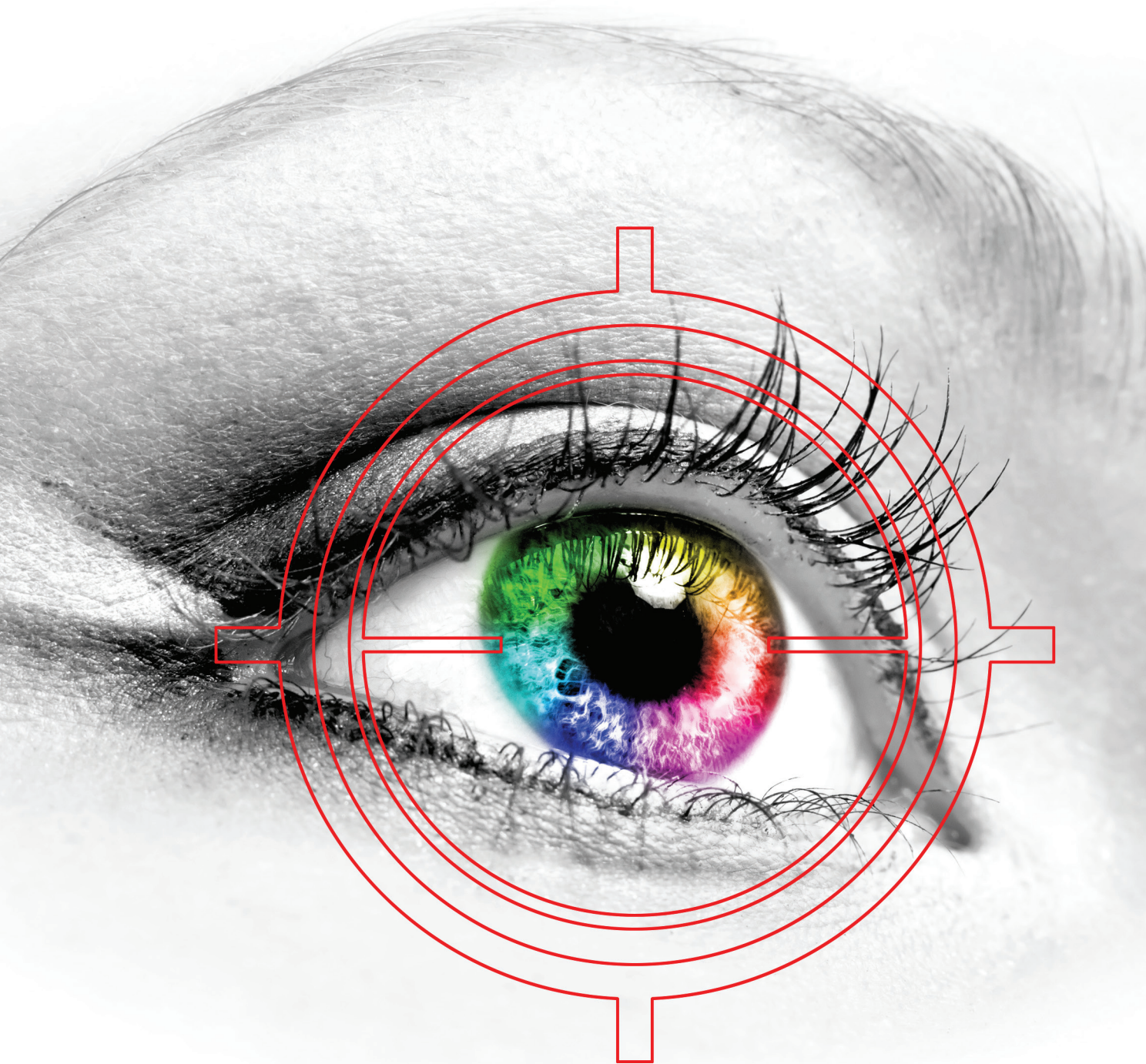
A GUIDE TO WORKING WITH GRAPHIC DESIGNERS

J | CONNELLY®

BETTER MINDSET, BETTER OUTCOME

Good design is crucial to any business project. If you're deep in the throes of a full company rebrand or if you need a banner and brochure for an industry conference, a strong visual identity helps transmit your brand image and attract the right audience.

To deliver a better final product with maximum impact, you need to understand the creative process. This can be a challenge for those without experience working with a design agency or individual graphic designers. Just like any successful partnership, it all starts with good communication.

Creative professionals can vary in expertise and skill level, each providing a different kind of service. Whether you have an in-house design team or an outsourced design agency partnership, the whole project team should be set up for success from the beginning.

In this guide, you'll learn more about the main phases of the creative process between designers and non-designers, how to set realistic expectations and create a platform for open communication, which will help make collaboration a cinch.

"Design can be art. Design can be aesthetics. Design is so simple, that's why it is so complicated."
legendary graphic designer Paul Rand

DEFINING THE DESIGNER

Designer is a term that can be used to describe different roles (e.g. graphic designer or UX designer) each one specializing in their own niche or having a hand in multiple disciplines. There are also different ways in which you can work with them.

In-House Designer
An in-house designer works for the company and will already have a good understanding of the brand and business goals. In fact, they probably created the brand style guide.

Design Agency
Some companies opt to outsource the design function to another agency and partner with them on all design needs. They are often considered part of the team so likely won't need a deep briefing on the company's branding and background each time.

Freelance Designer
Freelance professionals are typically hired for one-off design projects that are for a specific service. They often have a clear beginning and end. For example, if the team needs a new sales deck for an upcoming meeting, you might hire a freelancer that specializes in Power Point design to do the job.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Designers can't understand your vision without proper direction, background and context. The creative process includes three main phases: planning, feedback and evaluation. Even projects on a small scale—while they may not require the same level of planning—can benefit from these guidelines.

Phase 1: Planning

The Project Scope
You're working with a team or individual who may not have a deep understanding of the brand, its business goals or the project itself. The planning phase is the time to provide all the tools they need, which in some cases may include an introduction to the business in addition to the project scope.

Quick Tip: Know your priorities. If the project is made up of multiple elements and different parts, communicate which items are time sensitive and which ones can wait.

A project kick-off meeting is a great way to begin. Think of this exercise as a presentation of your ideas and a roadmap to your desired destination. It will start the collaborative process on the right foot by setting expectations for each person on the team.

The project scope details the following:

Objectives
Set clear goals and explain what you want to accomplish. What are your desired results and how will the design help? Actionable and measurable statements are critical to getting what you need.

Deliverables
Define what you need the product to be and in what format (e.g. PowerPoint slides, PDFs, image files). Provide templates and printer specs from the start so the designer understands what they're working with.

Team Players & Roles
Collaboration is the heart of every successful team project. Creative projects often require a project manager, decision maker and strategist.

The project manager acts as the liaison between the designer and the internal team, working as the sole point of contact. They gather feedback from internal team members and consolidate everyone's comments.

The decision maker makes the last call on conflicting situations and gives approval at each milestone. It's helpful for the designer to know who they must make happy.

The strategist is the visionary for the project, aligning objectives and goals with the overall vision for the company. They might also help the designer brainstorm creative concepts. There could be more than one strategist on the team.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The Creative Brief

Communication will provide the foundation for the results you receive. The creative brief provides a basis for that communication. As the blueprint for the project, it impacts the design by outlining key insights, challenges, preferences and more.

While the creative initiative may evolve, be cognizant and communicative if your feedback steers away from the game plan you and your designer agreed upon.

Technical Details

The creative brief is the appropriate place to specify if there are any requirements the designer should be aware of beyond what's in the style guide. Color preferences, types of imagery and preferred layout should all be made clear from the start to avoid frustration later.

Quick Tip: Share visual examples of likes and dislikes. Communicate if you are open to other options, as sometimes a designer may have a better idea.

Provide Context

The brief should include relevant background information to give context for the task. Knowing the "why" will enable the designer to produce a better final product as it helps them understand their role within the larger scope of the project and business goal. The brief will typically outline these points:

The Business Objective

What impact does this initiative have on the business?

Target Audience

Who is driving the business objective and what are their characteristics?

The Challenge

What is the prospective customer doing, thinking and believing that you're trying to change or influence?

The Goal

What do you want your audience to think or do?

The Benefit

What is your audience getting out of this?

The Marketplace

What is happening within the industry that is driving the need for this creative initiative?

Competitors

Who are your competitors and what are they doing in this space?

Parameters

Are there any corporate, legal or FDA restrictions?

The Tone

What is your desired tone for the brand? Is it sophisticated, casual, etc.?

Design Specifications

Creative briefs also detail the specifics of the project. It gives the team a reason to start thinking about and making decisions on factors that have a huge impact on the project early in the process.

Here is an example of a list of questions you could find on a creative brief for a brand logo:

1. What is the purpose for creating or redesigning this logo?
2. Who do you want the logo to appeal to?
3. What is the exact company name that should appear in the logo?
4. What are your brand colors, and do you have any preferences?
5. Is the brand modern/contemporary or traditional/classic?
6. Provide examples of other brands' logos and explain why you like or dislike them.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

FEEDBACK IS BETTER WITH CONTEXT

Precise feedback with context creates a better understanding for the designer and gives them the opportunity to offer additional suggestions for consideration. If you want to stay on a graphic designer's good side, avoid phrases like these:

"Make it pop!"

"I have one QUICK change."

"Can you jazz this up?"

"Just make it look pretty."

"I'll know what I want when I see it."

Phase 2: Feedback

Good Feedback Means Better Results

Feedback can propel the project forward or put speedbumps in the road. How you respond can help dodge endless revisions and miscommunication. The worst thing you can do is give vague or no feedback at all.

How to Give Helpful Feedback

Feedback should be constructive and structured. Before sharing any comments, refer to the creative brief to ensure the original guidelines were met and consider these tips:

1. **Be Specific** Stay away from subjective criticisms that are open to interpretation. Examples are useful when you're having a hard time putting what you mean into words.

2. **Be Open to Suggestions**
   It's okay to request specific changes like making the font larger or using a different color but explain what you're trying to accomplish so the designer can offer a better solution if one exists.

3. **Take Note of Audience**
   It's the project manager's job to consolidate feedback only from team members who have been briefed and understand the goals of the initiative. Otherwise, the project may lose focus from too many opinions.

4. **Give Constructive Feedback**
   Point out opportunities for improvement, but also emphasize where the designer hit the mark. Not only does positive feedback help with morale, it gives the designer tangible examples of what is working well.

5. **Have a Conversation**
   A list of edits can sometimes be more productive with a conversation. A feedback discussion allows both parties to ask questions, work through disagreements and come out the other side with a clear direction for next steps.

6. **Avoid Industry Jargon**
   Be selective with the language you use. Between design lingo and industry jargon, it may feel like you're speaking different languages. Communication should be clear on both sides.

Phase 3: The Evaluation

Regroup and Review

There's always room to improve the process. Regroup as a team to evaluate the outcome of the project and the previous steps, especially if you have an ongoing partnership.

Compare how the final product measured up to the original vision and assess whether it met its goals, or if it's on track towards a positive result.

During the evaluation, you might decide as a team that the project needs a phase two to act upon additional ideas that were identified during the creative process.

Continue to Improve Communication

Take this time to have a productive conversation about the creative process and identify if there were any gaps in communication in the planning phase and the feedback phase so they can be addressed for future projects.

INVEST IN THE CREATIVE RELATIONSHIP

It can be a challenge for individuals and teams in different roles to come together and execute a seamless project. A line has been put in the sand between designers and non-designers, but a shift in mindset and communication style is the recipe for success. Taking steps towards a better relationship with your designer can improve the quality, timeline and satisfaction of your design results; the ultimate creative investment for your business.

If you need help with your branding assets or if you're looking for a design partner recommendation, contact **Chris Cherry**, Chief Engagement Officer at **ccherry@jconnelly.com** or call us at **973-850-7329** to see how we can help.