



colton design

6 SECRETS PROJECT MANAGERS  
SHOULD KNOW WHEN HIRING  
A PRODUCT DESIGNER

# WHO AM I TO DISPENSE THIS ADVICE?

## Who am I to dispense this advice?

### FIRST THINGS FIRST

A bit of background about myself. After all you probably want to know something about the person dispensing this advice and why he is qualified to do so.

I grew up in a nice suburb of London and I attended a good school where I nursed the idea of one day becoming a lawyer like my father and those guys in the TV show LA Law. However a few bouts of work experience in summer holidays made me realize that my fantasy was quite different to reality. (No offense to any lawyers reading this.) After a perusal of a university courses handbook, I decided I would study for a BSc degree in Architecture, Planning, Building & Environmental Studies at University College London. It seemed like a good fit. I had a natural creative ability and had done well in mathematics and physics. I also relished the idea of designing and making the world a better place in which to live.

I had a very satisfying four years at university which included a 6 month stint in Paris at the Sorbonne. And life in a foreign country opened my eyes to the fact that I didn't really want to live in England where it rains 11 months of the year. No I wanted sunshine, a brave new world and something exotic. Hmm perhaps Israel.

So July 1997, I packed my bags, kissed my parents and boarded a plane for the Holy Land.



My first six months were spent learning the language in an “ulpan” and acclimatizing. I also looked for work in Architecture or Urban Design. I was offered many unpaid positions but, as that wasn't going to pay any bills, I had to decline. And through a friend I found myself working in the High Tech industry at the height of its bubble.

During my 6 years in High Tech (- I had started in QA and went on to do C++ and Java programming), I was somewhat restless. I didn't feel that I had really answered my calling in life. Throughout I would find time to sketch things and come up with ideas for products

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that weren't in the marketplace yet. It hit me that this is what I really wanted to do and, even though I had never heard the term "Industrial Designer" before, I discovered that such a vocation actually existed. In all fairness, how many of us have actually contemplated the fact that practically every object that we come across has been thought about and designed by someone.

With the encouragement and approval of my wife (then newly married, now 12 years plus), I undertook a postgraduate conversion course in Industrial Design. The design process of Industrial Design is very similar to that of Architecture and so thanks to prior knowledge from my degree, the course was a breeze.

Fresh with my diploma I landed a couple of clients who were entrepreneurs. The experience was good but I realized that I needed more technical knowledge and industry experience. I was very fortunate to get a job as the in-house product designer for Keter Plastic's subsidiary Space-In in Yokneam not far from my home in Binyamina. In fact I was doubly lucky because my first boy was born around the same time.



I now have three boys – you can imagine how much energy there is in my house!

My stint with Keter lasted for nearly 2 years and was extremely beneficial. I learnt to produce designs that successfully conveyed the demands of the marketing, engineering and production departments and I got to remodel their range of cabinets and shelves for major international clients and the public at large.

I worked on each stage of the product development from concept sketches and presentation renderings to making prototypes. This was followed by implementation in the engineering phase with CAD modelling and assistance with the mold development.

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Selecting and applying suitable surface texturing was also my responsibility. And finally, creating the instruction manuals. At Keter, I garnered a strong technical knowledge of the plastic manufacturing process and how to design respectively.

After Keter, I wanted to freelance for financial reasons but mostly because I wanted to work on a variety of different products and not be constrained to one specific niche. Eventually I opened my own design studio (with the highly original name) Colton Design.

### WHERE THINGS STAND TODAY

Almost 8 years later and I have catered to clients in high tech industry, home furnishings and children's products. I have also developed and patented several of my own initiatives.



Don't think that it's been a breeze. Not at all. Mistakes have been made. However, to

quote Michael Dell – *“Recognize that there will be failures, and acknowledge that there will be obstacles. But you will learn from your mistakes and the mistakes of others, for there is very little learning in success.”*

In fact, one of my principle reasons for putting this report together is to prevent a myriad of possible mistakes in communication and other aspects between the client and the product designer that they have hired. The hope is that there will be mutual understanding and more plain sailing.

# WHY YOU NEED PRODUCT DESIGN?

## Why you need Product Design?

Design and innovation is *the* hot topic these days for companies that wish to remain current and successful. Why? Simply because consumers are overwhelmed with choices for products. It's not enough to have great technology. In order to stand out and captivate, new products must be rooted in good design.

But as Steve Jobs said "*Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works.*" So a duly diligent product designer must get this balance right.

This report sets out 6 essential secrets that any organization starting a project should know before hiring a product designer.

# THE 6 ESSENTIAL SECRETS

## The 6 essential secrets

### SECRET #1 - DEFINE YOUR PROJECT GOALS

At the beginning of any project there is a discussion about your aims and goals. It is imperative that you have a written statement of what you believe these are. This is also useful if your colleagues have different opinions. Try to be as specific as possible too. You should ask yourself, at the very least, the following questions:

- What is the intended end use of the product or what benefit are we bringing to the market?
- What/where is our intended market?
- What is my timeline?

### SECRET #2 - PREPARE TO BE CHALLENGED

You may have a specific outcome in mind. So you should know that often the design process for achieving that outcome may be very different to what you had imagined. It may even challenge what you thought the end product should be.

There's the old joke about changing a light bulb. In context, it would be:

How many product designers does it take to change a light bulb? Answer – Perhaps a light bulb isn't what's required here?!

For example, you could request a designer to create a new storage cabinet and that is exactly what you will get. However, if you ask for a new system of storing items, we could create something entirely new and unique with the possibility of opening up new markets and hence new revenue streams.

### SECRET #3 - BE OPEN MINDED

Even though you should have the problem you wish to solve defined as clearly as possible, as I have just demonstrated, it is in your interest to be open to discussions with the product designer. In this way, we can craft together a more open-ended and innovative solution. I know this can be challenging, but we really are on the same side here. And designers are aware that there is only so much "innovation" some companies are prepared to extend to. On more than one occasion I have heard a client declare "We want to be really innovative, but I want to continue making products the same way I do now". Hmm.

# THE 6 ESSENTIAL SECRETS

I understand that it is hard for clients to think like product designers and honestly why would they?! But if you have hired a product designer to convey the things you don't know, then try not to see him as a threat.

## SECRET #4 - THINK OF IT AS A PARTNERSHIP

The most successful projects are those where the client has made every reasonable effort to be a part of the design process and where necessary, providing documentation and resources. Essentially it is a joint effort and for the product designer to do his part, he must have the support from the client.

The client should also be prepared for progress reviews, provide feedback and sign-off on approvals in a timely manner. Deadlines work two ways.

## SECRET #5 - UNDERSTAND WHO IT IS YOU ARE DEALING WITH

Design firms are businesses too, but with unique perspectives and unique work processes.

A small design firm is comprised of people who are accustomed to highly creative and demanding assignments, and thrive in a compact organization.

We bring expertise instead of procedure and ways of thinking instead of methodologies. Smaller firms are often more willing to push the envelope creatively as well.

Small design firms can often possess specialized skills (such as engineering), or they may have a lot of experience in a particular product/service category (medical device design, for example). This is helpful when clients want to find firms that have done similar work to what they are looking for, which makes sense. But know that designers see each problem as unique.

Be aware that many small firms market themselves as full-service. However, you should research as to where their true proficiencies really lie. I believe that certain services should be provided by external expertise when necessary. This makes sense when, for example, market research is their main focus, as opposed to many design firms where market research can be a part of the design service offered, but it will never be at the same extensive level.

## THE 6 ESSENTIAL SECRETS

Sometimes a project requires the assembly of a team of specialists so that collectively, they possess the expertise appropriate to the design challenge, and are handpicked in a very calculated way. The idea here is that you assemble the best on a project-specific basis, and when the project's done, so is the team. Of course, the team can always be reassembled for another project if the results were good. And for the client it is one invoice to the main contact.

Specialty areas can include research, new product definition, innovation planning or the application of design thinking to business processes.

There are other advantages to working with a smaller firm: a more intimate and personal connection with the designer; a certain degree of hand-holding and designers who answer their own phones. They can also implement changes much faster too.

These are the kinds of things that can make working with a small design firm more satisfying.

### SECRET #6 - ANTICIPATE THE RELATIONSHIP

Are you looking for a “partner” or a “supplier”? This is a critical question to ask yourself before you begin searching out particular design firms.

The two kinds of relationships can be defined as follows:

A partner is a firm that collaborates jointly on developing a new product. It's a relationship that places as much focus on the process as the product. The final deliverables may be fuzzier in this kind of relationship, but through rigorous reviews, both parties work together toward agreed-upon goals.

A supplier, on the other hand, can be thought of as a firm you hire when you have a specific product to be designed with predefined criteria. You've done your homework and you understand your market. You need good thinking, but you also need somebody to make your aspirations a reality. Suppliers don't challenge your business proposition. They fulfill it.

## MORE TIPS FOR YOUR SUCCESS

### More tips for your success

#### WHAT TO DO WHEN THINGS GO WRONG MID-DEVELOPMENT

There are occasions when the client has already entered the product development cycle and needs to engage the services of a design firm to fix a problem. This actually happened to me recently.

#### Case Study

I was contacted by the director of product marketing at Red Bend Software, a world leader in mobile security software. They were in trouble. In preparation for a major automotive exhibition, to showcase their latest technology for updating in-car software, their supplier had let them down in a big way. They had contracted an exhibition design firm to produce demonstration consoles for this event and for their regional offices around the world to take to high-level meetings with car manufacturers. Just weeks before the product delivery deadline, they discovered that their supplier was way behind schedule and way over budget. One demo console was delivered, but was poorly constructed, bulky and came in a packing crate that was held up at Customs every time it was shipped.

To cut a not-so long story shorter, I produced new demonstration consoles that were smaller, lighter, more efficient and downright sexier. I also provided four-wheel suitcases specially constructed with interior laser-cut foam for transporting the consoles. Now Red Bend's representatives could fly with the consoles stowed as overhead luggage.

The console was a success at the auto exhibition and car manufacturers were very impressed with the demonstrations. The final cherry-on-the-top was that AT&T commissioned the production of an additional console and travel package for their Drive Studio.



## MORE TIPS FOR YOUR SUCCESS

“I was in a jam. We were preparing for a major automotive exhibition and had contracted a design firm to produce a demo console for our systems with another five demo consoles to be sent to our regional offices across the globe. Mere weeks before the product delivery deadline, I discovered our supplier was way behind schedule and way over budget. The one demo console they did deliver was poorly constructed, bulky and difficult to transport.

Frustrated and in need of immediate help I contacted Elliot Colton who was recommended by a colleague.

During our work together, I was consistently updated, consulted with and advised. I also felt that my requests were listened to and incorporated where relevant. And I know that they pushed their suppliers hard in order to meet the deadlines.

Most importantly, the final demo consoles were a huge hit. They had a clean and stylish design that we were looking for whilst also meeting our marketing and logistic requirements.

After-sales care was also provided and the team at Colton Design have proved to be true professionals.

I would happily work with them again on future projects.”

**Roger Ordman. Director of Product Marketing at Red Bend Software**

### LONG-TERM CO-OPERATION

At other times a design firm is brought in to provide strategic design services on a long-term basis and to help shape their future aspirations. For example, strong product design is essential to a new startup as engineers tend to trivialize the importance and impact of product design.

# WRAPPING UP

## Wrapping up

Let's not forget that finding and cultivating a successful working relationship with a design firm is an emotional process—you're looking for good chemistry.



And on a final note - product design is something that is about 10-20% of the overall effort but probably accounts for 80-90% of the final result, and if not done right, can cheapen everything else.

So remember design is the differentiator.

I hope this has been enlightening.

Currently I am working with a limited number of handpicked clients because I offer a bespoke service and I am not a “design factory”. However, if you are considering the points I have raised then I would be happy to offer a free consultation. Please send me an email to [elcolt@Colton-Design.com](mailto:elcolt@Colton-Design.com) with the subject header: “Pls Advise”. After I receive your email, within 48 hours, I will get back to you with possible dates for a Skype meeting.

# CONTACT INFORMATION

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