

So How Do You Really Feel About Design Competitions?

Imad B. Ghantous PE
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A Thought Leadership Commentary

You get an overseas call from a potential client asking if you would participate in a design competition and he says “Do not worry, everybody who has been invited will be of the same caliber as your esteemed company. The evaluation criteria will be fair, and we will have a competent set of highly respectable jurors, the decision will be quick, and it will all be above the table.”

It is a big project, and you have eager staff that have been chomping at the bit to get the opportunity to show what they could do. So, you decide to move forward. A high degree of excitement engulfs the studio that is working on it. You go as far as diverting people that are billable to work on this competition.

The project description is very preliminary and most likely, large chunks of it have been a cut and pasted from other projects because you notice strange references, or a change in terminology. But you forge on. You have a miniscule amount of time to produce the equivalent of a schematic design complete with elevations, engineering systems, floor plans etc. Major emphasis in the RFP is on the model, renderings, and computer animation. The team works day and night to get the work done. Getting the model done is always on the critical path and whether done inhouse or outsourced it is always a miracle, the model maker pulls a rabbit out of the hat the night before!

Preparation of the competition booklets takes time. Getting a coordinated content that most often comes from different authors within the design team and the Proposals team including, imagery, model photos, and renderings is a gargantuan effort. But by the grace of God, it all comes together with no time to spare. In the meantime, negotiations with the airline are already in full swing. You reject any solution that involves sending the oversized model by cargo and you insist on carrying it with you as accompanied luggage. You finally make it to the airport. You make your way to the check in desk. A lot of activity ensues, particularly if you have a lit model with a nasty looking transformer with wires sticking out of it. So, you have to unpack the model for inspection which is always a painful exercise. It passes the inspection. You put it all back together and add a few more “Fragile” stickers to the other 50 you already have on the box. You wave goodbye to the Model as it is being taken away and you head to your gate. Anxiety sets in! What if they forgot to load it? What if they damaged it? You stay up throughout the flight, contemplating what the repercussions might be. If you had a connecting flight, you are usually a nervous wreck and you insist at the gate to get confirmation that the box has been loaded onto the connecting flight.

You get to your destination, sometimes in the early hours of the morning, and you rush to retrieve your luggage. Your booklets come down the belt happy to see you. You wait for the big model in anticipation. You go to the oversized luggage section, and you feel compelled to move the black rubber curtain and peer into complete darkness. But you are delighted when you see your model and renderings box being brought to you by a smiling attendant. You survey any potential damage. A boot mark in the middle of the box, or a gash in the corner, are usually a bad omen. Sometimes the box looks great but when you pick it up it sounds like a box of corn flakes. You take it to your hotel, and you spend another sleepless night fixing the damage,

You deliver the model, the renderings, and the booklets the next day. You head home and start working on the presentation. You go back for the presentation to the client. At the venue you see familiar faces of your competitors. But there are others you do not know. You go up to them and introduce yourself and exchange business cards. You quickly google them and to your amazement they are not of the caliber you were promised. You ask the client’s representative, and he sheepishly says that they came in at the last moment and he had no control over it. You are disappointed but you forge forward. You do your presentation, in a large room with other competitor’s materials on display, to the client’s representatives; few you know and few others you do not know. After overcoming the distraction of cell phones ringing and people taking calls while you are trying to present an important concept, you thank the client and engage in a terse conversation with your team while in car heading back to your hotel. You leave the next day back home.

Then the jury is convened and when you are told who they are, you get a sinking feeling in your stomach! It takes weeks to prepare their report and then the client’s representative calls to tell you that your materials were presented to the ultimate decision maker by one of the client’s attendees, usually totally unqualified to do so. And to add insult to injury, you are asked to do modifications to your scheme and resend updated renderings.

In the next viewing, the ultimate decision maker’s eye is caught on a whimsical design that he likes, and he decides that this is the winning proposition. He has no time to review the competitions’ full entries or even the Jury’s report. And so it goes. You see the winning proposition advertised as the next major landmark. You realize that this was the entry by the firm that snuck in at the last minute. Worse still when you inspect the design closely you quickly realize that it is not even buildable! You ask for an explanation,

but you rarely get any. As for the competition stipend, which does not cover the cost of what you have incurred, do not hold your breath!

Few years pass and you are back to see another client and you drive by a building that looks so familiar. Then you remember, you had given up your copyright to the competition entry as per the RFP requirements.

The really strange thing about this is that you do it again for other clients.

This is so wrong on so many levels.

The brief is probably written by somebody who is trying to interpret what the decision maker wants. His interpretation is usually completely off. So, the design based on this brief may or may not be what the decision maker wants. When you do not have contact with the decision maker and understand what are the real drivers behind this project, when you do not understand what the client's business problems really are, when you do not understand how this project would alleviate the client's issues, how can you hope to win the competition? Understanding your client and his business model is critical. This can only happen if you have the ability to meet with your client and have the opportunity to work with him in tailoring a solution that is bespoke for his needs.

Competitions are costly. The stipend never covers what you really spend on them. You fund them with precious dollars that come from delivering contracted and paying jobs. For every dollar you spend you need to win a job worth 12.5 dollars, deliver it over several months (or years) to replenish the dollar you spent.

So let us sum up, you have no idea what the client wants. You will be diverting staff that could otherwise be billable to work on the competition and burn them out. You have no control over the selection of the competitors (or the ones that sneak in). You have no control or even knowledge of who the jury is. You have no idea of the evaluation criteria or if the decision will be based on that. You have no guarantee that you will get paid. You will be spending precious dollars.

If those precious dollars are burning a hole in your pocket, you might have better luck heading to Vegas.

The average time it takes for the full competition cycle for big jobs is about 4-6 months. The probability that the design will drastically change once actual contact is made with the client and with proper interaction with the client's staff and design rationalization and costing, is extremely high. Those 4-6 months is time the project cannot afford in the first instance and what ultimately ends up happening is that you are asked to absorb them in the master schedule.

So why do clients insist on having those competitions that delay the project, cost money and are not a true representation of who can really deliver the project competently? Because they like beauty contests and honestly believe that they can use the same rationality they use to buy a suit to pick a design for multimillion-dollar projects. In the retail business it is known as window shopping. But more importantly they do it because they can. Such projects are very seductive, and designers will flock to take part in the design competition with the hope that they will win the commission. Admittedly the decision to enter the competition sometimes is not only about winning the commission but also about beating your chest in front of the competition!

Although I have painted a grim picture of design competitions, I do so with the hopes that the red flags I have planted along the way would be a reminder to be cautious when deciding whether to participate in a competition or not.

So, to designers that refuse to participate in design competitions as a matter of principal, you have my utmost respect. To those that do participate only occasionally (and I understand why sometimes you have no choice) enter the competition with both eyes open. And lastly for those that do competitions as a matter of course, beauty contests are not in the best interest of your clients or your profession.

So how do I really feel about design competitions? You be the judge!