

# A Non-profit Organization's Guide to Pro Bono Design Work

## INTRODUCTION

The Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario (RGD Ontario) is pleased to provide this guide for non-profit organizations to assist in the process of working with a graphic designer on pro bono communications projects. If you have questions or would like to receive a copy of *A Graphic Designer's Guide to Pro Bono Work*, contact Hilary Ashworth, by email at [hilary@rgdontario.com](mailto:hilary@rgdontario.com) or by phone at 1 888 274 3668 x 23 (in Toronto: 416 367 8819).

It is not uncommon for professional graphic designers to offer their services free of charge to non-profit and charitable organizations. It is a valid way for them to give back to the community, support causes they believe in, add work to their portfolios and make valuable connections with prospective paying clients.

Many non-profit and charitable organizations do pay for professional graphic design services. In particular, you may wish to pay a graphic designer for services if you require a major commitment or if the project is very targeted with tight timelines and strict guidelines, as in the case of a fund-raising campaign, identity program or annual report.

Pro bono work is not the same as working on spec. This involves asking a designer to take on a design project and do the preliminary creative work (perhaps even a finished product) with nothing more than a hope that the non-profit will like the work enough to pay for it. Members of RGD Ontario are not permitted to practise spec work. See next page for a full explanation.

## WHAT IS PRO BONO WORK?

Pro bono is defined in RGD Ontario's book, *The Business of Graphic Design: A Professional's Handbook*, as: "The donation of a person's time or expertise at no charge generally conducted for charitable, religious, civic, community, governmental, educational and other non-profit organizations."

## COMPENSATION AND SPEC WORK

Spec (or speculation) work is defined in the *The Business of Graphic Design* as: "Providing design services to develop creative concept work for free (or for a set fee) as part of a new business pitch."

As is stated in RGD Ontario By-Law 3: Rules of Professional Conduct: "a member may compete in any design competition for projects of general, community or public interest if they are of a non-profit nature and if the rules of competition have been approved by the Board or conform to general competition rules approved by the Board."

RGD Ontario's Board of Directors will not approve a project competition that is 'open call' where designers are required to submit uncompensated creative work as part of the selection process. See below for details on how to select a graphic designer for your next project.

If your organization has a budget for design and advertising services, it should be stated at the outset. Pertaining to compensation, The Rules of Professional Conduct state: "A member shall not work for a client or employer without compensation, with the exception of the occasional pro bono work for charitable purposes or for work performed for family members."

## WHAT IS GRAPHIC DESIGN?

Graphic design is an interdisciplinary, problem-solving activity that combines visual sensitivity with skill and knowledge in areas of communications, technology and business. Design is a process, not a product. Whether graphic, industrial, interior or architectural, design involves organizing unrelated elements in engaging and meaningful ways. Graphic designers specialize in the structuring and organizing of visual information to aid communication and orientation. Computers and software programs such as Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop, and Quark Xpress are integral to the work designers do, but these tools are not integral to the design process.

## WHAT ARE THE AREAS OF GRAPHIC DESIGN?

- Advertising & marketing communications design (development, implementation and management of marketing initiatives)
- Art & creative direction (overseeing the quality of all the creative work generated and ensuring that the final product meets its communication objectives)
- Branding & corporate identity (logo and graphic standards manual)
- Broadcast design & motion graphics (opening titles and closing credits)
- Corporate communications & information design (newsletters, annual reports, business cards and so on)
- Editorial design (book, magazine or newspaper design)
- Environmental graphic design (planning, designing and specifying signs and wayfinding systems)
- New media design (websites, CD-ROMs)
- Packaging design

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH DESIGNERS?

### FRESH IDEAS

Graphic designers can provide your organization with fresh, creative communications and/or identity make-over.

### QUALITY AND PROFESSIONALISM

A professional graphic designer can guide you through the process of creating valuable communications tools for your organization.

### SUCCESS

Ideally the project will have a positive impact on your organization and you will benefit from it.

### EXPOSURE

Your organization can gain recognition and respectability through a well-crafted professional piece.

## WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF WORKING WITH DESIGNERS?

### VOLUNTEERS

Designers provide pro bono services on a volunteer basis. Keep this in mind as you work with them. You will need to give the designers more time than you would if you were paying for their services. They will most likely expect recognition for their work, most likely with credit on the pieces they have designed and other forms of exposure.

### CREATIVE PROCESS

Be aware of the creative process. Make sure you have a project/creative brief both you and the designer have developed together. The project/creative brief should clearly outline what you want to achieve and should include the following items:

- What do you want to get done?
- Who is your target audience?
- What are budget and timing issues?
- What are mandatory items on all communication pieces?
- What should the key message, character and tone of the work be?

### EXPECTATIONS + PERSONAL TASTE

Manage your expectations. Be clear and specific about any objections. If there are parts of the creative proposal you don't agree with, let the designer know. Don't wait until the last minute to raise your objections, as it wastes time, energy and the efforts of the creative team. It's also important to distinguish between your personal dislikes and the tastes of your audience. Remember that the designers make the project work for a specific target audience – of which you may or may not be a member.

### ADDITIONAL COSTS

The role of your graphic designer or design firm is to develop ideas and concepts to communicate your key messages. Designers providing services pro bono cannot be expected to cover out of pocket expenses for services such as printing, paper, translation and/or web programming. Make sure to discuss these additional costs with your designer and identify any budget that you may have for these services. It may be possible, if you are hoping to have these services provided pro bono, that a graphic designer may be able to suggest other possible partners but this should be discussed at the outset of the project.

### ORGANIZATION STYLE

Non-profit organizations have fundamentally different organizational styles and decision-making methods than for-profit businesses. Non-profits tend to emphasize consultation, involvement and consensus. Make sure your designer is aware of all of the steps that will be involved in the decision-making process within your organization. In this consensus-based environment, it can be difficult to reach decisions that allow for bold design concepts. Always make sure there is a key decision-maker who signs off on important project steps.

## HOW TO IDENTIFY A GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Choosing an experienced and qualified graphic designer who is capable of meeting your communication needs is essential to any successful project.

The following are some suggestions:

[www.rgdontario.com](http://www.rgdontario.com) – The Association's website includes a searchable list of its professional members with links to company websites and contact information. Visit the designer's individual websites to identify a website that you like and/or with work done in the area similar to that of your project. RGD Ontario's website also offers a posting service where you may post a Request for Proposals from designers for a specific project. This will be posted in the members-only area and designers will contact you if they are interested in providing services for your project. (There is no cost for this service.)

[www.appliedartsmag.com](http://www.appliedartsmag.com) – *Applied Arts* is Canada's largest graphic design magazine. The website features work from its many annual competitions which include special categories for public service work. Peruse the work to identify work that you like and contact the firms directly.

Referral – You may have friends and/or colleagues who have worked with a designer in the past that they can recommend.

## HOW TO SELECT A GRAPHIC DESIGNER

### PORTFOLIO

In addition to viewing the designers' websites, make sure to ask to see the designer or design firm's portfolio at an initial meeting. If you don't like the work or it doesn't demonstrate that they have experience in the area of your particular need, don't hesitate to keep looking.

### REFERENCES

Be sure to ask for references. If you need a more experienced designer, make sure they have done work for other non-profits before. You can then contact the non-profit organization and ask how the project has worked out for them.

### EXPERIENCE AND STUDIO SIZE

Consider whether you are choosing a senior or more junior designer. Younger designers may be eager to volunteer their time but might lack the experience needed for a particular project. On the other hand, design firms might be busier and may not show as much enthusiasm and devotion. Larger firms do have more resources though and are able to take on bigger pro bono projects. Make sure you know what to expect from the different levels of experience.

## OTHER RGD ONTARIO RESOURCES

**RGD Review** – The Association publishes a monthly pdf newsletter which can be downloaded at [www.rgdontario.com](http://www.rgdontario.com). In particular, RGD Review # 3 includes an article, “Designing for a Better World”, a showcase of pro bono design work.

**The Creative Book** – This directory of RGD Ontario members lists over 1,000 professional graphic designers in Ontario by region with a list of specializations. It also lists creative suppliers such as paper companies, printers and photographers.

**The Business of Graphic Design: A Professional's Handbook** – The Association's handbook on operating and maintaining a professional graphic design business includes standard forms and agreements which can be modified for use with designers and design studios. These include a standard copyright agreement and an independent contractor agreement. The forms may be downloaded from [www.rgdontario.com](http://www.rgdontario.com).

## OTHER RESOURCES

### ORGANIZATIONS

#### AIGA

The American Institute of Graphic Arts provides many resources on the process of working with a graphic designer including *A Client's Guide to Design: How to get the most out of the process*, which can be downloaded from the site as a pdf.

#### Sappi Ideas that Matter

This program, organized by Sappi Fine Paper, supports design for the public good. The company awards monetary grants to designers throughout the world to help them create and implement projects that serve the causes that are closest to their hearts.

#### Taproot Foundation

This organization's website provides an excellent benchmark for how to conduct a pro bono project.

### BOOKS & ARTICLES

Emerson, John. “Guns, Butter and Ballots. Citizens take charge by designing for better government.” *Communication Arts*. January/February 2005.

Holland, DK. “Cause and Effect: Why now, more than ever, the nonprofit world needs design and vice versa.” *Communication Arts*. March/April 2002.

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Phillips, Peter L. *Creating the Perfect Design Brief: How to Manage Design for Strategic Advantage*. New York: Allworth Press, 2004.

Bedrossian, Rebecca. “Design for the Public Good.” *Communication Arts*. May/June 2004.

Taaffe, Anthony. *Piloting Pro Bono*. Marketing. May 28, 2007.