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# **DESIGN SALES AND MARKETING**

## **-AN INVESTIGATIONAL STUDY**

by

**Katrina Jeanne Kuddes**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**UNIVERSITY HONORS  
WITH DEPARTMENT HONORS**

in

**Interior Design**

**Approved:**

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**Thesis/Project Advisor**

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**Department Honors Advisor**

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Dating back to the ancient Mesopotamian era, design has been a fundamental instigator of creations and inventions, leading us to the world we have today. Everything we have is the result of design: communities, architecture, mechanics, plumbing, furniture, clothing, etc. Design starts, often quietly, in the mind of an individual as an idea; but the idea begins to breathe when committed to paper or tangibly created.

Through the centuries, design creations have brought about the wheel, the dome, the arch, pillars, cathedrals, skyscrapers, and much more. Each new design instigated a renewed desire to continually improve the human life and the environment in which they lived and worked.

In the early 1900s design didn't require much marketing, if any at all. Most business was brought to design companies through word of mouth and through close family and friend referrals. At the beginning of the century, there was typically only one local specialist for any focus of business. Marketing and sales were not necessary to gain business. Most "marketing" was produced through reputation and through simply being the only company capable of delivering and providing such inventions or service. Gradually competition developed and more companies began manufacturing or providing the same products or services. Through the course of the past two decades, within the business world, strategies and techniques have changed within the field of sales and marketing. Such changes have had a great impact on businesses of different emphases. New inventions and advancements in technology have opened up new resources to sell and market a business. One area of business that has benefited greatly from this is design.

Design is everywhere. It is a fundamental necessity that encourages creativity and advances the abilities and lifestyles of mankind. In a world that is constantly growing and constantly changing, there is a need for professional designers to make their company's product and/or service known and available. Professional designers need to inform potential clients that their business will provide the most adequate result for their needs. To achieve this, a designer must develop a fluent and attractive technique to communicate to the world. This communication can be done through the marketing and sales of design services.

Designers need to develop specific techniques of communicating effectively with the particular client base sought. "In the design field, each of us comes from a different background, a different school, a different part of the country. We have aptitudes in many varied areas" (Knackstedt, 5). Some designers specialize in technical work (autoCAD and computer renderings), while other design professionals are very experienced with contractual specifications (building codes). Each designer has an area of specialty or expertise and it is necessary to recognize and advertise a design firm's expertise. In the field of Interior Design there are many different business techniques and strategies to be considered. A critical concept to grasp is how design businesses market and sell products versus services.

Sales and marketing of an interior design firm is not as easy as it may be for a local car dealer. Car dealers have tangible products to show to potential clients, while professional designers can create an image of what the end result will be. Selling interior design involves developing skills to sell the latest and greatest design products as well as the services that an interior design firm offers. The practice of interior design is a

relatively new profession. Prior to World War II, with few exceptions, interior design was primarily involved with the residential environments of the wealthy and influential. Retail furniture stores began to cultivate business by offering color coordinating advice to their customers who purchased furniture, upholstery fabrics, fine rugs, and carpets. As demands for design services increased in the 1940's, interior design began to establish itself as a needed and recognized profession. In 1904, Elisa deWolfe was among the first individuals who brought the concept of professionalism to interior design and interior decoration (Piotrowski, 7). The design profession origin can be traced back to the need and desire to improve an individual's quality of life. Today, interior design is a respected profession and a highly specialized field for many.

The influence of an interior designer touches the lives of virtually everyone in the world. "Interior design affects every life in not only the home, but in all environments and surroundings where people gather for work or recreation" (Piotrowski, 5). The services offered by interior designers are essential when meeting client expectations of design. For example, if an architect designs the shell of a building, it is not complete without the interior designer furnishing and conditioning the space for its proper function and use. Design is "the creation of a harmonious whole" (Martin, 1), tailored to the context and needs of each client. Each element of a design is chosen for its contribution to the whole – combining function, beauty, and effectiveness.

Interior design is regarded as a business more than an art form (Crawford, 25). With this in mind, it is necessary to learn how to market and sell this business to the public. Having good marketing and sales techniques for a business is also a design in itself. Marketing and sales are important keys to the success of an interior design

business. Both marketing and sales are necessary for a business, and neither can be successful without the other. A professional designer could market design services, but without the sales strategies, the number of interested clients would not increase. Likewise, a design firm could sell to potential clients, but without the marketing techniques informing clients of the design services offered, the overall sale would not be as successful. The success of a design business relies greatly on the image that marketing and sales techniques represent to potential customers and clients. This image is created by the content of professional design, how they market themselves, and how they sell their product or service.

Professional interior designers gain clientele through successful marketing. Only strategic marketing can make a business successful. "Marketing...is the process of creating customers for your products and services, in enough numbers and rapidly enough so you can make your business successful and profitable" (Bangs, 20). Although many interior design firms are successful enough to gain prospects or commissions from referrals and previous clients, professional marketing is also very important for design firms to actively market their design products and services through other means. In order for a company to be successful, a design professional must always be thinking beyond the current project; they must look for ways to attract a constant flow of work and new projects (Murphy, 24). Whether the projects are extensively detailed or minute, every project counts. As long as the firm stays busy and the business is always flowing, then the company stays on the path to success. This rule of thumb goes for both residential and commercial designers. A professional design firm always needs to be planning

ahead, looking beyond current projects to keep projects coming - to keep their firm active, growing, and profitable.

Competition is constantly developing and increasing in the business world. New design firms are starting daily with new styles, skills, specialties, products, and services. It is easy for an interior design firm to get lost in a crowd of new firms. In the 1990's many people were forced to go out and create their own design firms due to a poor economy. Interest and need for design services also declined, and many professional design companies were forced to cut back on their employees. In the late 1990's, the economy became very active again and new forms of business developed that competed with existing design firms (Knackstedt, 9). Such new forms of business included major home centers, manufacturers opening their catalogs to end users, architectural offices offering design services to clients, and the greatest competitor of all – the Internet.

The introduction of the Internet has added an entire new need for design firms to market their business. Due to this advanced technology, firms in a particular part of the country – or world – can make contact with potential clients anywhere. A new challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that firms must look beyond traditional methods and techniques to secure commissions and business from potential clients.

Marketing is not the easiest career to undertake. A marketer's job relies on the success of his performance. Marketing requires a great deal of planning and organizing, but if done correctly, the results can be very rewarding. Marketing "requires time, talent, energy, and a knowledge of where the markets are" (Murphy, 28). Unless a design firm is globally recognized, it can not expect the market to come to them (Piotrowski, 342). Design firms must constantly seek out new business. "The first step to marketing is

picking a target market to focus on” (Piotrowski, 343). This helps a design firm identify one or more groups of potential customers who are most likely to need and utilize the services of the firm. Although a target market can be very broad, design firms have more success when they are as specific as possible in defining their market.

Professional design firms have found marketing more successful when a particular niche that the company specializes in is established. Establishing a design niche, such as residential or commercial design, attracts a specific industry that the design firm finds particularly interesting and rewarding.

Once a design firm has decided on a target market and a specialized niche, there are important principles that a design firm must consider when developing their marketing plan. These principles are “the four P’s of marketing: product, place, promotion, and price” (Piotrowski, 345).

In most cases, an interior designer’s product is the professional design services that they offer to their clients. In marketing, sometimes a design firm does specialize in a tangible good, such as upholstery, casegoods, and seating. For situations like this, the designer must be sure to establish what goods they will sell so that they can market to potential clients.

The second “P” of marketing is Place. “A design firm must find ways to get its product to the places where its potential clients and customers exist” (Piotrowski, 345). As a designer creating renderings in a small community, the market for renderings will not be very demanding. A change of location will be necessary, so the design firm could market their services in large cities. Renderings are not always wanted or desired in



small communities. Location and place are factors to consider when marketing services to gain business.

Through promotion, the third "P" of marketing, potential clients find out about the availability of a design firm's product. Promotional activities and events inform potential clients of the existence of a design firm and its specialties. Promotion puts a design firm's name out to the world, informing potential clients how their design services compare to other local competitors. Various methods of promotional activities can be carried out through brochures, referrals, advertising, and other promotional techniques.

Finally, the fourth "P" of marketing is Price. Price is perhaps one of the most critical considerations to take when marketing a design business (Piotrowski, 346). In a world where the economy is constantly fluctuating, price is a concern for both businesses and clients. Clients can be cost conscious and want to save every penny possible. Price is often the main deciding factor when selecting a design firm amidst competing design firms. Clients will choose the design firm that will provide the best service for the lowest price. Deciding on price can be tricky too. If a price is set too high, clients will overlook the company and lean toward competing companies. Also, if a price is too low, a client will question the reasoning and consider it to reflect the level of quality that is provided.

Once a professional design firm knows their products, services, customers, prospects, and understands their competition, then the design company can develop effective strategies to achieve sales and marketing goals. "It is essential to formulate a well-organized strategy to promote the firm and its image in the community" (Crawford, 25). Strategy is really the key to success in marketing a design firm. If a professional designer is planning ahead, far enough in advance, and outlining a strategy, then their

business is more likely to be successful against other competing design firms. As a successful marketer, a professional needs to look beyond current projects, make goals, and set strategies for reaching those goals.

Many designers do not like to think about marketing, or how to best catch the attention of potential clients. This lack of desire to market design is often the result of being occupied with other work and projects currently underway. Other designers think that marketing means selling and they refuse to have themselves thought of as salespeople. "Marketing encompasses the activities involved in anticipating, managing, and satisfying demand" (Evans, 44). Marketing and sales go hand in hand, however, they are two separate philosophies within the business world.

"The benefits of a marketing, rather than a sales, orientation are many. Marketing stresses consumer analysis and satisfaction, directs the resources of a firm to making the goods and services consumers want, and adapts to changes in consumer traits and needs. Marketing looks for real differences in consumer tastes and devises offerings to satisfy them" (Bangs, 24). Marketing is geared to the long run, and marketing goals reflect overall company goals. It also views customer needs broadly, rather than narrowly. "Marketing comprises all the activities that build the relationship between the designer and client, including product development, research and promotion. Selling is a process of educating and communicating directly with potential buyers. It begins when you attract their attention and continues through developing their interest and giving them the information that helps them evaluate the decision. It ends with the commitment" (Evans, 52).

Selling a design service is much different than marketing a design service.

“Selling is the stage of marketing that brings you face to face with clients” (Martin, 168).

Selling is the personal communication that is made with clients as solutions to client's problems are introduced. The goal of a professional designer is to make the marketing process flow naturally into the selling stage with any client. By the time a design firm reaches the sales stage, their clients should have all of the information and confidence in a design firm's product and service that they need to make a decision. “Just as McDonald's learned to sell hamburgers and hospitals learned to sell medicine, interior designers need to learn to market and sell design services” (Knackstedt, 3). Selling design services is not an easy task. Generally people have a built-in distaste for the sales process, and they do their best to avoid the stereotypical sales behavior. Rather than having a negative view of sales, professionals need to think of sales as educating and communicating with clients, helping clients make intelligent and informed decisions that will benefit the client and/or their company.

The process of selling a design service is different from that of selling a design product. Typically, an interior designer's product is their services; however, in some cases, their product can be a tangible good. In the case of an interior designer, marketing a service is more difficult than marketing a product. Consider a waiter at a restaurant trying to interest someone in a new food. The waiter is trying to sell a customer a new dish that has just been introduced. The customer does not know what it tastes like, or what the new dish looks like; they only have the waiter's words to base their decision on. The customers have their preferred traditional favorite, and they know what it tastes like.

The challenge is getting the customers to appreciate something that they can't see the end result of at the time of a service agreement.

Selling a service takes much more effort and communication than any other sales item. The critical difference between selling a service and selling a product is that the designer is creating and supplying the service, as well as selling it. "The design service can't exist without the professional" (Piotrowski, 396). Each design project is unique, one of a kind. Each project is a product of the context, the client's needs, and the designer's talent. Selling a design service is also more personal than selling a product. The client is in a sense, buying both the designer's skill and a working relationship with the designer. The stronger the relationship, the more likely a sale will occur. Both the sale and the success of the service depend on the relationship of trust that develops between the designer and the client.

Due to this critical difference of selling services versus selling products, many of the traditional sales techniques do not apply to professional design firms. If a design firm provides design services and no products, then they will have a different sales strategy than a firm that specializes in both design services and products. The key to sales for a design firm is: excellent two-way communication (Martin 167). Listening is just as important as the sales presentation. Listening to a client and hearing their needs is much more important than making a sale. The sale and the relationship with the client are of equal importance. An equal, if not greater, amount of time should be spent on developing the relationship with the client in comparison to the time spent preparing for the presentation.

With this in mind, selling design services is not accomplished in one encounter. Typically a professional designer has several conversations or meetings with a prospective client before any presentations or proposals are made. The relationship a designer develops with their client, throughout the marketing and selling process, is one point that makes them unique in the client's eye. Selling is where referrals come from. Selling keeps clients returning for additional business. Acquiring new clients costs a company five times the amount it does to keep returning clients satisfied (Knackstedt, 7). Obviously, a design firm will benefit incredibly if they keep their customer service relationships strong with their existing clients. Not only will the designer's client continue to do business with the designer, but the returning clients will influence others to use the same design services they rely upon and trust.

Similarly, as a design professional, it is important to develop qualities that will sell the design services to potential clients. "In some way you have to provide something the client isn't getting at present. If you are very well established, it might just be the ability to deliver good work on time. More frequently, and invariably for the beginner, the "something else" is a fresh and valid visual approach, with absolutely flawless execution" (Piotrowski, 398). Professional designers also need to stay focused on company goals, the marketing plan, and sales strategies. "If you want your small business to succeed, FOCUS" (Bangs, 12). Focus on your best customers, products, and services and keep focused.

Once a design firm specifies their target market, selects a design niche, establishes sales goals, and focuses on providing the best for their customers and their company; then it is important to understand that interior design breaks down into multiple levels of sales.

Aside from the design firms that sell primarily design services, there are also design firms that specialize in both design services and design products. Marketing and sales are necessary for success in both genres of design firms. For design firms that specialize in products, there are various levels of sales that exist: manufacturer, wholesale, and retail.

Manufacturer salespeople work for organizations producing the product.

“Working for a [design] manufacturer is the most prestigious sales job available” (Futrell, 8), because the salesperson is working for the company that directly manufactures the product. Working for a design manufacturer allows the designer to have first-hand knowledge of the quality and performance of the product. Having additional knowledge assists the salesperson in acquiring sales from clients. If a designer knows their product, they become more credible in the eyes of the client.

Another category of sales in which a design firm may be involved is wholesale. Wholesalers are also called distributors. They buy products from manufacturers and other wholesalers, which are sold to other organizations. “A wholesale salesperson sells products to parties for: resale, use in producing other goods or services, and operating an organization” (Futrell, 8). In the case of design wholesalers, this would apply to companies that buy products from manufacturers that later sell the products to other organizations for profit.

The third category of sales that a design firm could be involved in is retail sales. “A retail salesperson sells goods or services to consumers for their personal, non-business use”(Futrell, 7). Meaning, a retail salesperson typically sells merchandise to end users who will not use the merchandise for making business profit. Overall, more companies are focused on retail sales than in any other type of transaction. Retail sales is the most

common form of business to be involved in. The trend of retail sales is recognizable in design businesses as well. Different types of retail design are endless, especially in today's world. Retail design can be sold at local home improvement stores, home decorating stores, furniture stores, etc. As a result of local retail design sources, a greater need has developed for professional design businesses to generate a greater reputation of their design firm. Due to the vast development of local design centers, many people have developed a "do it myself" attitude. These individuals do not recognize the need for designers to help them. Instructions have been laid out step-by-step to assist personal home builders and remodelers. "Do it yourself design" has brought about a greater struggle for professional design firms to create a name for themselves, because the competition has increased in the form of retail sales. No longer is design only available through specialized design services, it is available to everyone.

Methods and techniques for marketing have changed due to new developments in sales, and new advancements in communication. The greatest change that has come about is the Internet. The Internet has brought a new dimension to design business marketing and sales. "Designers like to believe that they can rely on referrals as their major marketing tool. But any informed firm knows that this is no longer enough. Established firms can lose jobs to inexperienced newcomers to the field who have sophisticated techniques to market their design skills" (Piotrowski, 341).

With competition at the level it is today in the design business, a professional design firm either makes the sale, or they disappear into the paths of design history. Unfortunately, the rates of companies that are annually unsuccessful are gradually growing. As times change, companies need to change their selling techniques if they

want to be successful. Selling used to revolve around the products that an organization had to offer; companies differentiated themselves through their products. Selling techniques involved convincing customers that their design product was better than the others, because it was first on the market, or the product represented the latest and greatest technology. Organizations would take a product to market by advertising all the wonderful new features.

In the 21st century, adopting this model of introducing the first product to the market as the emphasized selling philosophy throughout the entire business can be the equivalent of business suicide. Developing a thorough understanding of the customer's business, his/her challenges and his/her goals, gives an organization the opportunity to build relationships and deliver solutions that are tailored to deliver the most value for each customer (21<sup>st</sup> Century Selling is Survival of the Fittest).

Today, survival does not depend on a design firm's products and gadgets alone, but on the value these things, and your organization, can offer customers. "How a professional design business differentiates itself from its competitors involves coming to terms with the markets [interior design] plays in, understanding the needs of [interior design's] different customers, understanding that [design's] customers' needs differ, and catering for these needs accordingly (21<sup>st</sup> Century Selling is Survival of the Fittest).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a successful sales plan requires business to develop a strong relationship with their customers. Mutual trust and understanding are a necessity in designer-client relationships. If the customer does not feel you care or have a real concern for them, then they will be less inclined to bring their business to the firm. A key attribute customers and potential clients look for nowadays is solutions to their problems.



In the design business, solving problems is a common occurrence. Clients are always coming to designers with inquiries or problems concerning their current work place or home. Fortunately, designers are equipped with problem-solving skills. It is the designer's job to come up with answers to problems as they arise.

“Selling in the 21st century has evolved into selling value, not just product; and a clear understanding of when this sale must be product-focused, value-focused, or product- and value-focused” (21<sup>st</sup> Century Selling is Survival of the Fittest ). This latest battle for survival of the fittest is between those organizations and businesses that are prepared to go the extra mile for their customers and those which adamantly focus on nothing more than their products. In the highly competitive, complex and demanding business environment of today, competition between professional design companies is high. Of course, the businesses who are willing to go the extra mile and put forth the extra effort will get the business of clients who desire to have the most adequate and functional design result.

Along with modern selling strategies evolving as time progresses, modern technology advancements and communication opportunities have changed for the better for design firms and other businesses around the world. New methods of communication include email, cell phones, and most importantly, the Internet. No longer is marketing strictly done with paper and ink. Marketing techniques are now available in electronic format. Design firms can create websites for their companies, which can be viewed by potential customers from around the world. At the click of a mouse, a design business can be seen by the world. The possibilities are practically endless.

Similarly, communication channels have changed forever. The traditional "snail mail" has become less popular as companies correspond via e-mail. Not only does it cut back on travel time of postal delivery, but response time is also much quicker. Clients are able to get results and answers more quickly, thus more business opportunities arise. Documents can be attached with a simple click, and then sent over cyberspace to a client's desktop. Such modern day conveniences are time reducers, which provide more time to create strategies, or to be out of the office seeking additional business. Overall, the key is that modern day technology allows more time to be productive in the design office.

Another additional feature of modern day technological advancements is the cell phone. Now design employees are reachable anywhere at any time of day. If designers are not in the office, then they can be reached on their cell phone. Questions can be answered more quickly, and problems can be resolved faster.

Overall, the advancements in technology have brought about more time for office productivity, quicker response time, a greater ability to market one's company, and a channel to communicate with the world. Not only can a design firm stay up-to-date with how competing companies are displaying their image to the world, but a professional designer can also find strategies that will benefit their company in the long run. Of greatest impact and concern is the Internet. The Internet is an endless source of information for the world to experience. It is an endless palette that designers can use to their advantage. It is a competitive, sophisticated tool.

The design profession has evolved over time, and to this day is still evolving in an effort to keep up with advancements and changes in the world. While strategies and

techniques of design sales and marketing may evolve, the basic concepts of interior design will still remain. New ideas will still be invented daily. A part of interior design will always be a service, offered to clients, to help achieve their goals and solve their problems. Whether it be in the work place, home, or a new building, interior design will be needed. As the world changes and advances, the marketing and sales techniques of the design profession will be revolutionized. What the design profession is selling will not change, but HOW they sell design products and services will change. In order to keep up with modern day developments such as the internet and do-it-yourself design conveniences, design firms have a greater need to market themselves, their services, to potential clients. Competition raises the bar, and in order to succeed, a design firm must, clear the bar and more.

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