



Project Initiation: a Good Kick-Off

Getting started on the right foot - whether the project takes seven months or seven years - is the key. The beginning of a creative, long-lasting relationship starts with a well-conceived and executed kick-off.

Take nothing for granted.

Each project, even for an existing client, is a new opportunity and new relationship. People, organisations, and circumstances change over time. Just as you don't want to be taken for granted, the client wants the honour of being considered special to you. The client always has other options.

Mind your marketing.

The kick-off meeting is actually the last phase of the marketing process as well as the first moment of the actual project. Now that you have the commission, ask outright what brought you the job and why your competitors lost this opportunity. Use these insights - perhaps a reality check - to guide your decisions or behaviour as you officially launch the client relationship.

Do your homework.

Learn who will be at the start-up meeting. Is this the first time the user will be represented in the room, instead of facilities and contracting people? Within that cast, who will really call the shots? Who will sign off? And how well prepared is that person for this assignment? How much do people in the room know about the project, what has been contractually agreed, why you were chosen, and what are the specific services that are being offered by the various design team members?

Prepare thoroughly by getting a running start.

The moment the ink is dry, begin to gather information. Obtain archival drawings and specs (if any) and learn what is outdated and missing. List the people you will need to interview, when and where. Obtain or make an organisational chart with the names, addresses, and numbers of everyone involved through all phases. Knowing people's roles and responsibilities will clarify the structure of your client's organisation and your relationship to it.

Organise internally.

Gather everyone who will be involved in the project to discuss the client's culture, level of experience, personalities, and expectations; goals for the client, your firm, and the team, priorities, and details right down to how to dress when you are together. This will set forth responsibility, authority, and accountability right from the outset.

Set up the meeting to succeed.

The official kick-off meeting should last no longer than one to one & a half-hours; it's intense but efficient. Provide a draft copy of the agenda to the client and ask for any input. Confirm the names and roles of everyone attending from the client side. On the agenda, provide the names of your people with their job titles. Bring the project's graphic schedule and any props you used in the final presentation, you'll need them. Run the meeting politely, consensually, and tightly. Adhere to the time schedule.

Be sure you get what you came for.

Start the meeting with a brief reintroduction of the winning/ design team and a statement of the project's mission, as you understand it. Don't leave until you clarify and decide the following: parameters, schedule, budget, and decision chain. Make sure that expectations are stated and agreed to - on both sides.

Debrief internally right after.

Discuss anything that was especially effective, surprising, or disappointing with your project leaders/team. Assess how easily you will be able to guide, if not totally control, the process. Now that you have seen the players in action, examine who else will have access to the client's ear - project manager, directors? How much might they enhance or confound your client relationship? Then inform all the architectural team members.

Issue/action minutes within 24 hours.

You are still on probation.

Remember the wisdom of Mark Twain:

"By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."

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