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Q: What process would you recommend for selecting and hiring a Design or Consulting firm? H.W., Dallas, TX

A: You already have a headstart in your endeavor because you have begun to ask questions and you realize that selection is a process. Now all you need is to compose a proper set of questions and plan the process.

To increase the probability that you will retain the "best" firm, you should insure that all competent practitioners are aware that you are taking proposals. This can be accomplished by writing a complete and detailed description of your intended project, giving specific guidelines as to your expectations, time table, and any restrictive limitations. This description will allow the interested and qualified firms to be specific about their services and will help you to make your initial selection on paper if there are a large number of proposals. It may be necessary to employ a consultant to write your detailed description and help with the initial "paper" selections if you do not have an in-house expert. Although the best bet is a firm who does this sort of work, usually the university has someone qualified enough to get you started, but do not rely on them exclusively.

To get the greatest dissemination of your descriptive solicitation, contact all professional trade organizations related to the work (e.g. A.S.L.A., A.L.C.A., A.S.G.C.A., G.C.S.A.A., etc.).

Set a deadline for proposals and after reviewing them began an interview process with all firms that interest you. Since these can be time consuming, and you should plan on secondary and tertiary interviews, work backwards to determine the number of initial interviews you can handle based on your budget of time and money. Although how involved an interview should be, depends on the scope of your project, allow about two hours each for the first presentation. This should permit one hour for presentation and one hour for questions.

Since you are employing this Consultant/Designer for their technical abilities, dwell on the method and not just the finished product. Do not be afraid to ask questions about costs, sequence of events, frequency of inspection trips to be made by the principal Consultant, liabilities supporting documents, and guarantees. If several firms interest you ask for a complete list of past clients.

After the initial interview, eliminate those firms that do not seem to offer the services you need. Next make written inquiries about the firms you still feel are in contention and arrange to visit some of their work. I would talk not just with the owners but I would also talk to employees who tend to be more candid.

Once you have done these things, the final interviews should dwell on the specifics and I would ask for a final detailed proposal from the firm that I thought I wanted to employ. Additionally if a team approach is to be used, before final selection gather the tentative team together and insure that all areas of responsibility are understood and that the team feels it can function harmoniously. **WTT**



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