

Spec work: bad for client, bad for designer

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Spec work, anyone?

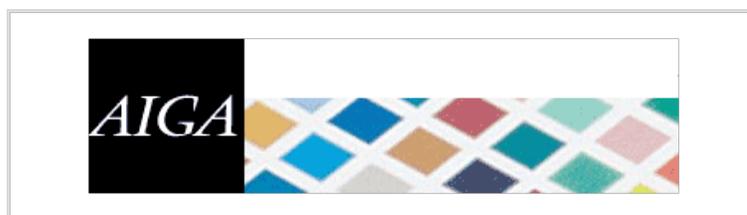
Imagine this scenario:

“I went for a dental check-up yesterday. After the dentist inspected my teeth, she suggested some work to prevent further tooth decay. I told her to go ahead, and if the dental work was satisfactory, I’d be more than happy to pay. She responded that she wouldn’t be able to do that, because she normally provides a service when a fee is agreed upon up-front. I said I’d let her know after I checked in with other local dentists.”

Unlikely, isn’t it? When you visit a dentist an appropriate rate of pay is expected for professional services. Yet every day, graphic design professionals are asked to provide free services in the mere hope of being paid. It’s called free pitching, or speculative work — spec for short — and is considered unethical among leading graphic design associations.

Why free pitching for graphic design doesn’t work

Design contests and spec work can be frustrating for designers who feel the value of their profession is not understood. In a speculative scenario, the graphic designer is chosen for the product produced, and not for the service offered. Graphic design, by its very nature, is not a commodity. Coal, gold, coffee — these are commodities, where the value fluctuates depending upon markets. The value of design is dependent on the skill and experience of the designer doing the work.



AIGA, “the professional association for design,” published its stance on spec work:

“AIGA believes that doing speculative work seriously compromises the quality of work that clients are entitled to and also violates a tacit, long-standing ethical standard in the communication design profession worldwide. AIGA strongly discourages the practice of requesting that design work be produced and submitted on a speculative basis in order to be considered for acceptance on a project.”



If you receive a request for speculative work, write or call the issuer. There's a chance they may not even realise the practice is unethical. The NO!SPEC website offers sample letters to get started.

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*Update: November 2010
Here's how I respond to a spec work requests.*

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When starting out as a designer, it may be tempting to undercharge, but by doing so you'll find yourself working with clients who don't appreciate your value. More often than not, this will lead to hour after hour of revisions before a suitable design is reached — if at all.

Further spec work chat:

- *Jeffrey Zeldman: Don't design on spec*
- *The disconcertion of spec*
- *Creative Latitude: Why speculative work is unethical*
- *If design was an iceberg*