By using these criteria, the panel can rank the firms interviewed and choose one for the job. Consultants may provide a variety of professional services in addition to design, including surveys, construction inspection, and construction management. Generally speaking, the same consultant selection process may be used to secure each discipline. Again, consultation with the state DOT professional is appropriate before proceeding with a contract for these services.

Each firm should be notified of the selection, or non-selection, at the end of the interview phase. Comprehensive documentation is critical to ensure that the selection process meets state and federal guidelines.

Teamwork

Teamwork is critical to a successful project, and the cornerstone to successful teamwork is communication. Parties involved may include the municipality, the Main Street program, a design consultant, the DOT, the construction company, business owners, and others.

Written correspondence, either through e-mail or hard copy, is absolutely essential to ensure a clear understanding of the issues by all parties. In the event of a conflict, only written communication can be used to provide a clear point of reference. The old adage, “verbal orders don’t work,” is completely accurate and should be taken to heart when communicating with your design firm.

When dealing with a design firm, you should:

- Be specific about your priorities and needs.
- Know exactly what the deliverables will be and when they will be submitted (timeline).
- Provide thorough plan reviews at critical points in the project.
- Provide open lines of communication (goes both ways).

Although you should specify your expectations during the interview process, your tool to ensure that these expectations are met is the contract. It is highly recommended that you ask your state DOT contact for a sample of a professional services contract to use as a template for your own agreement. Many states will provide engineering contracts for a community to use. In either case, it is important that the city attorney review all legal documents before they are executed by city officials.

Conclusion

Selecting a consultant is an important process that should not be taken lightly. Your community will be left with the results for years to come, and you want a firm that observes and listens to your local shoppers, property owners, and merchants, then offers a design appropriate for your district.

Donna Dow, the program manager of Durant Main Street, has been with the organization since it began in 1997. She received the Oklahoma Main Street Manager of the Year award in 2001 and became a Certified Main Street Manager in February 2002.

During her tenure, the downtown has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and the Main Street district was selected as one of the top three in Oklahoma in a statewide poll in 2006.

Donna coordinated her first streetscape project for downtown Durant from July 2001 to December 2004. Phase I was three blocks along Main Street (a state highway). Phase II, which was completed in December 2006, encompassed service entrances and putting electrical lines underground. Phases I and II cost $1.5 million. Phase III should be completed in the summer of 2008.

Here is the second in our series of columns by Margie Johnson, president of Shop Talk, a retail consulting firm that specializes in showing organizations how to become leaders in their marketplaces and industries through customer-centered training. Over the past 15 years, Margie has worked in many Main Street towns throughout the nation. She is passionate about helping small business owners become more successful.

What would your merchants’ reaction be if someone said, “Excuse me, your image is showing?” Would they be proud or embarrassed about their store image? Think about it. They may have been in their stores for a few years — upon opening, most merchants undoubtedly had a grand plan for a dynamic store. The years have passed and many store owners have made minor display modifications, but nothing major.

Even if a store has just opened, the owner needs to ask these questions. Does the store’s current décor properly create an ambience and excitement to keep customers coming back again and again?
Step One
Step outside, stand back 15 to 20 feet, and get a full view of your storefront. Does it make the proper “opening statement” for your store? Are your window visuals exciting? Do they reflect current trends? Is there “clarity at a glance” of what your store sells? What is the condition of your storefront? Is the paint fresh? What is the condition of your sign? Apply the old adage, “you never get a second chance to make a first impression” to the entire store. Remember, your selling floor starts outside your front door.

Step Two
Step inside your store and look slowly around. What messages do your displays and décor send? Do they reflect the look you want to convey?

Step Three
Now, look at the individual components of the store’s concept. Do the fixtures look current or dated? Is the wallpaper torn and faded? Do you need fresh paint or an injection of color excitement? Are light bulbs burned out? Is the lighting dim and misdirected? Does the carpeting need to be swept, cleaned, or replaced? Does the store flow feel comfortable and set a pattern for smart shopping? Is the signage informative? Look at each and every aspect with a critical eye. When customers or potential customers enter your store environment, are you setting the mood to turn them from “browsers into buyers”?

Step Four
Your store’s housekeeping habits can have a dramatic effect on its total visual presentation. Too often, we forget that a crisp, clean store is a key component of effective visual merchandising. Is there clutter on and behind the counter, racks that are dusty and smeared with fingerprints, smudged mirrors, brimming trash baskets, spotted carpets, water stains on the ceiling, plants that are “dying on the vine”? … the list is endless. All of these detractors can destroy the staging of even the most wonderful merchandise. It is imperative that you use your most critical eye in this step.

Step Five
The store’s overall impression will linger long after the sale. Look objectively at the merchandise itself. Has your merchandise mix changed or evolved since you opened the store? Are the store’s look and the actual merchandise being sold consistent? For example, does your store have an active wear look, but you’re selling career clothes? Be mindful of making the product the “star” in any visual display. Be careful not to make displays so elaborate that you diminish the impact of the product.

Step Six
Your overall image review must be comprehensive and include all of the “touch points” that affect your clients’ perception of the business. For example, extraordinary and effective visual presentation extends to packaging, signage, etc. Does your packaging reflect your image and represent a great send-off? Is your signage doing a great silent selling job for you? Are your signs current? Nothing screams “lack of attention to detail” more than outdated signs. Do your sales associates reflect the image you seek to create in both the style of dress and manner of service? Look at each detail of your store with fresh eyes. Remember that 80 percent of shoppers report that they buy on impulse, not logic. Does your store statement have a real “WOW” factor? (“WOW” to me means “Weaken Our Wallet.”)

In summary, the questions are endless and should be revisited often. Get your merchants to ask the hard questions and be honest with themselves. Is there a spark, a sense of excitement, an innovative ambience in your Main Street businesses that pique customers’ interest time after time? A great store design is indeed a strong, silent sales tool. After walking through these six steps, store owners should make the time to rethink their stores’ design and image. Remember, their competitors are doing these reviews and renovations on a regular basis and customers are doing these reviews every time they enter the store.

I can’t stress enough the importance of creating an inviting storefront and an interior environment that reinforces the image of the business and gets customers “in the mood.” Let’s go from rethinking to action.

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