What you need to know from a client before undertaking a motion graphics project

GET THE INFO YOU NEED TO SAVE TIME AND MONEY IN THE LONG RUN

I think we can all agree that re-rendering projects after delivery, or losing a commission after days of pitching can be frustrating as well as a huge waste of time and resources. It seems a common cause for going down the wrong avenues of thought at the outset, or delivering material with the incorrect format, ratios or text safety, is when designers, editors and motion artists fail to wring enough detailed information from the client when taking a brief or commission on a project at the initial briefing or enquiries stage.

Whether pitching or embarking on a confirmed job, there are certain key bits of useful information that many clients don't write in their briefs, don't want to write in their briefs or simply don't know the answers to. Here is a breakdown of useful questions everyone should consider asking before embarking on a project whether it is paid or not, in order to have the best chance of winning the commission, delivering on time, keeping the client for the future and not wasting your own time.

Budget - This is often a difficult issue with many people, mainly because money is something we don't want to start off talking about with a client, after all we are supposed to be creative people, not accountants. That said, and stating the somewhat obvious, it is essential that the budget constraints are known from the very beginning. What is the point of producing an amazing pitch, elaborate storyboard, detailed treatment and wad of reference material, even to go so far as producing a test animation, when the budget may be considerably smaller than your idea allows?
As suppliers we need to balance the clients expectations and hopes against what their budget can really afford to deliver. How many times have you been sent a link to an amazing commercial or music video, with a brief asking for 'something like this...'?
Excitement starts to build with the thoughts of working on such a cool project that looks so expensive, the mind starts to think about motion control shoots in huge studios, or exotic locations, or getting a team together to do months of cg work, when in reality the budget allows for a weeks' worth of After Effects animation on a bunch of photos.
There are other budgetary elements to consider too, which leads me on to....

Audio - Many clients have a very specific idea of what the music, sound effects, and/or audio bed will sound like, many have not even considered this aspect. It is well worth getting a clear idea of what your client is thinking along these lines, to allow you to consider the various aspects involved in this vital part of the process. Getting this clear early will make your life easier all the way through the project. Music or sound effects can initially help inspiration, trigger thought processes, give you a sense of pace, atmosphere and emotion, so if the client has a track ready to go then this answers many questions immediately, and gives you a great starting point. If the music has not been considered, or at least not been reduced down to some options or a reference, then the next question should be whether a composer needs to be brought on board for the project, or whether stock music is a viable option. These are of course additional costs, so going back to point one regarding budgets, is the audio aspect of the project your responsibility, and will this affect your budget? Not only do composers need paying, or stock audio bought, but it is worth assessing how much time it will take you to deal with the composer, acting as middle man between your supplier and the client, as well as the hours it will take trawling through stock libraries to find something suitable. The audio also defines the next point....

Duration - Is this a 10 or 30 second commercial, a 15 second title sequence or a 3 minute music video? Making sure you know the duration of the piece before you start work is another obvious but key bit of information which will shape your concept and approach. Many times, you will be expected to produce multiple durations of a project or cut downs from the full length finished video. Often cut downs are not as simple as chopping up a finished piece, they can sometimes require longer shots, clean shots without transitions, retimed animation, or new audio mixes and re-titling. All of this can be planned for if the durations are clear from the outset. It is often the case where different length versions are only thought of by the client at the delivery stage, which can cause many problems during the last hours before delivery, and you can be certain that there will not be an increase in the original budget. If the question is asked initially and you have the information in an email, then there is scope to charge more money if the goal posts get moved later down the line. The duration also guides your concept towards one style of animation or another, one type of film, camera or technique. Designing a full length music video to be animated in 3d, or stopframe may be a great idea, but is it viable in the time and budget you have available? Perhaps that looping background with some simple greenscreen is more realistic, even if you really wanted to try something more adventurous, but at least if you know this in advance you won't have any nasty surprises sprung on you later, and you can plan your schedule and resources easier. The next thing to know is....

Delivery Format - This is another essential need to know, and can again change how your budget is used. Most projects are being delivered in High Definition these days, but it is important to know this for sure, bearing in mind that the file size, storage and rendering times between Standard and High Definition are so radically different. Many music videos are still made SD, so why waste time and resources rendering HD, or even worse, imagine you made your project in SD only to be told it needs to be delivered HD? or you make a commercial in HD only to learn later that the client wanted 2k delivery? The basic rule of thumb for safety is to always make it higher resolution than you need and downsize it at the end of the project, but there are many considerations with this apart from computing power and file storage. How about mixing resolutions of different source material? Using a typeface that looks too thin when the film is downsized? Using lines that can create a buzzing or moray effect when reduced? How about working on a multi screen project, or having to display from more than one projector simultaneously? Knowing the full range of formats you will need to deliver including the master, dvd, blu-ray or web versions is vital for planning and successful delivery.
As well as resolution, ensure you clarify the video standard and frame rate you are required to deliver. If you work in the UK all the time and are used to delivering PAL, it's still worth checking with the client in case they forgot to mention to you that they were delivering directly to a broadcaster in America and needed the NTSC standard at 29.97fps or 24fps for film instead of 25fps. This basic question can often be overlooked or presumed, only to cause all sorts of complication and extra work to sort out later. This is of course the case whether you are shooting or not, but imagine if you shot a whole load of studio material in the wrong frame rate? A costly mistake either in the pocket or in the quality of the final result. This leads on to....

Broadcaster/Displayer Requirements - Sometimes your client may give you a full list of requirements, but it is still worth checking the broadcasters individual requirements for yourself, especially with issues such as title safe areas, and strap line or lower third sizes. Broadcasters tend to vary in their various rules and guidelines, as well as constantly changing aspects of their delivery requirements, whether it's safety cages, end credit rolls, text sizes or any other number of specifications.
Web video, projections, event screens and cinema all have their own specific requirements, so it is well worth doing your homework and speaking with the necessary people involved with the display or broadcast of your work to ensure it looks and sounds it's best. After all the work making it, it

would be a terrible shame if it looked the wrong shape or speed, sounded wrong or displayed in a strange colour or gamma level, it wouldn't reflect well on you or your client, so although it may be a pain initially, the extra research will not only give you confidence in your approach, it will give your client the confidence in you to deliver whatever they need without bothering you with questions, or relaying confusing and misconstrued information from whoever displays or broadcasts the film or animation. The final important question you must of course ask is....

Deadlines - Knowing your delivery deadline is obviously important, and will force you to think about what needs to be in place in order for you to meet the specified deadline. There is no point leaving the rendering too late in the day so that the final online, soundlay and grade are delayed and the editor is snoring in bed instead of laying off your masterpiece to tape. The deadline (along with the budget) are the first guides for you to decide how complex your idea can be, what can be achieved in the time allowed and how big a team you need to assemble.

If you are working on a project alone, you need to ensure that your equipment is sufficiently up to the job, and that you have a backup plan if something goes wrong. What if you had signed a contract promising delivery but were suddenly taken ill and unable to finish the project? What happens if a drive fails? These and many other questions are always an issue for a designer or editor working alone, but things can be made easier by building in a series of deadlines during the process of the project. Most clients will want to see the projects progress anyway, so it makes sense to ask the client for a copy of their schedule if they have one. This spreadsheet will usually give you a clue as to when they will need to see parts of the project, when they are available to see them and if they have to meet deadlines of their own. For example, your client is a production company, their client is an agency, and their client is an airline. You are the final piece of the jigsaw, so if your delivery is late, then it sends a ripple all the way through the chain. By building in pre agreed approval deadlines, you can keep everyone calm and up to date, as well as make any minor adjustments as you go along. This will help your client put something into an offline to show their client, which in turn can keep their client happy, knowing that the project is running smoothly. It also means that if you get written approvals as you go along, any changes that are made that have already been approved, can be charged for. Everyone knows where they stand and the project benefits from it in the long run, even if you end up rushing to meet 4 different deadlines instead of just one at the end. And lastly....

Names - It is always a good idea to get a clear picture of the hierarchy at your clients end. Find out who is the decision maker, who deals with the budget and who has the technical expertise. Not only will you know who to contact for a quick answer but it is invaluable in relationship building. Increasingly these days, designers and motion artists are working remotely and you may never meet face to face, so a really good telephone and email manner can be a very useful tool in your arsenal. Don't put the email address in the 'to' section until you are absolutely ready to send the email, if you click send my mistake you may end up spending the next hour explaining or apologising. You will gain their respect if you ask the right questions of the right people, and get their names right!