



Inklings

Bulletin of Interpretive Ideas

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Current/Recent Project List

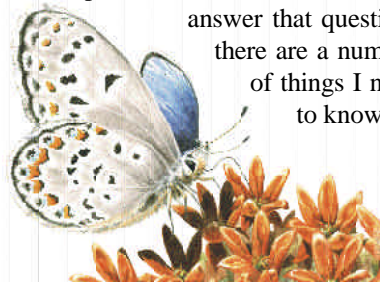
- Exhibit Planner, Chilo Lock and Dam, Clermont County Park District (OH), with Lifespace Design
- Exhibit Planner, Mansfield Mill, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with Lifespace Design
- Exhibit Planner, McCormick's Creek State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with Lifespace Design
- Interpretive Sign Design, Clifty Falls State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources
- Exhibit Planner, Lincoln State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with Lifespace Design
- Interpretive Plan, Prophetstown State Park, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, with Lifespace Design
- Interpretive Sign Design, Chilo Lock and Dam, Clermont County Park District (OH)

A Picture Begins with a Thousand Words: Tips for Successful Collaboration with an Illustrator

by Amelia Hansen

The unveiling of a new exhibit for your site can be like Christmas Day and a blind date all rolled into one . . . surprise! Hopefully a good one. That final output which doesn't quite meet expectations may be due to ineffective communication; an inability for both the client and the artist to "see" the same thing. As an illustrator, I feel I've failed if I can't interpret the idea or illustrate the point, no matter how "pretty" a picture I may make. On the other hand, I think that many people are so unfamiliar with my line of work that they just don't know what I need from them in order to create art that complements and supports the text, is scientifically or historically accurate, meets the deadline, and is still under budget. Over time, I've come up with a few things that may aid communication and expectations on both ends, and which might help that big project turn out to be the fantastic exhibit you were expecting.

The scenario: client calls, "we'd like you to do some artwork for us." Great! The client is usually anxious to find out what it will cost, as anybody is before making a purchase. But before I can answer that question, there are a number of things I need to know.



Karner Blue by Amelia Hansen. Signs by Interpretive Ideas for the Portage (IN) Parks and Recreation Department.

What's the project? What will it be used for? Brochure, poster, outdoor signage, indoor exhibit, etc.? In this case, let's say the client wants to put up informational signage along a bluebird nestbox trail.

How many illustrations and of what? Often, the client doesn't have the specifics yet, but the more info the better. Something like, "We're thinking of four signs: one showing a nest inside the bluebird box; one about predators with a raccoon breaking into a box; one about competitors, maybe a main picture of a tree swallow sticking its head out of the box and then some small pictures of starlings, house sparrows, house wrens; and one on bluebird ecology, which could show plumages, food items, seasonal habitats."

What's the deadline?

Do you have reference material ready? Very important! Do you have any photos, clippings, books, artifacts that I can take a look at, or will I have to spend time on-line or in the library tracking stuff down? Is the job so site-specific that I'll need to visit it?

What size will the out-put be? A ballpark helps: "it must fit our scanner", or "it must be at least 50% of the final six by ten feet."

Full-color or black and white? Is one medium preferred over others? "We were thinking that the picture of the bluebird box interior be full-color but it might be neat to have a pen and ink drawing of the box plans to the side."

Are you using a designer, either on-staff or hired in? If the client has another person doing the design, I'll need to work very closely with them to make sure the work goes smoothly.

What format will you need the final artwork to be in? Can I put it on a CD for you?

What rights do you want to buy? Graphic designers, photographers, and illustrators customarily sell only specific rights to the use of their work. The Graphic Artists Guild Handbook of Pricing and Ethical Guidelines considers



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“one-time reproduction rights” to be the standard of sale for commissioned artwork. That is, the client agrees to use the work only for this project and in the manner in which both parties have agreed. To buy more rights than are really needed is expensive for the client and to sell all the rights at a low price deprives the artist of income from future use.

Why do I need to know so much detail before giving the client an estimate? Not to strip the artist’s profession of all its romance, but in many ways making commissioned artwork is similar to running a car repair shop. Certain jobs take x amount of hours to do, require various levels of skill, and a different array of tools and materials. The answers to these questions give a better understanding of the project’s requirements and help to estimate how long it will take to do. There are a few more things the client can do that will make the illustration job easier:

Designate a contact person.

This person will be the one who compiles your staff’s group critique of the preliminary sketches into one clear concise message, answers questions, and coordinates gathering reference materials or text from staff.

Try to have a your project in fairly solid shape before contacting an illustrator. Know what concepts you want the project to highlight and whether or not you want an overall

look or design to tie all the pieces together. Writing assignments have already been given and people know what their deadlines are.

Be prompt with any of the materials that have been promised. Did you say you would send a bluebird box for use as a model? Are there photos from your site which are essential to the process? Please send them as soon as you can or by whatever date has been agreed on.

Be prompt with draft reviews. I know that the contact person is usually juggling this exhibit project along with all the other usual duties, but please just take a few minutes to communicate what’s going on. The artist may also be juggling multiple projects and this frees up time for another client’s job. A timely turnaround prevents a frantic rush to meet a deadline.

I find that a lot of communication goes on between me and the client, especially in the first stages of the project. I ask lots of questions: Horizontal or vertical layout? Thoughts on color scheme? What season? Is it okay to show all these flowers with different bloom times together? I always send pencil sketches, sometimes multiple drafts. These give the client an opportunity to see how I’ve interpreted their

words and whether or not we’re on the same track. Sometimes I get it the first time, sometimes the client says, “This isn’t what we were thinking of. Could you make it more like this?” And that’s okay, because it can be hard for people to articulate a vision until they have something tangible right in front of them. Pretty soon, we all find ourselves



*Mastodon by Amelia Hansen.
Exhibit by Interpretive Ideas for
the W. Lafayette (IN) Parks and
Recreation Department.*

on the same page, and the project is up and running. When the box of posters arrives from the printers, or the delivery truck drops off the brand new

signs, there’s anticipation and excitement for sure, but no surprises.

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Amelia Hansen’s work appears in signs, exhibits and brochures produced by Interpretive Ideas. This article first appeared in the newsletter of the Visual Communications section of the National Assn. for Interpretation and was reproduced with the author’s permission.