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## Five Tips for Choosing a Design Firm

### How to make a smart choice and avoid disaster

*By Carrie Rossenfeld*

Wading through dozens of prospective designers to find just the right one for your office buildout or redesign isn't appealing. But knowing what to look for and what questions to ask can make the task easier and leave you happier with your results. Here's what you should know about picking the perfect design firm for the job.

#### 1. Consider your landlord's interior architect

Find out whom your landlord has retained as the building's interior architect and if you have any obligations to use this firm. Even if you don't have to use the landlord's firm, you may want to do so. Someone who is familiar with your space starts off with a point in their favor, says Russell Posey, senior vice president of The Alter Group Ltd., a corporate real estate development company in Atlanta. If the landlord's chosen firm doesn't meet your requirements, you should be able to retain an independent architect or designer for your space.

#### 2. Obtain referrals

Obtain referrals from your affiliated hospital, healthcare and medical associations, practices within your specialty and even other practices whose design you admire.

"Research other healthcare facilities which you think are well designed and might work for your practice, then find out their team," advises Shane Watts, vice president of Burt-Watts Industries Inc., an Austin-based construction firm. "A personal reference will probably be the strongest bet in finding the perfect match."

You may also wish to go through a construction management group that will accept bids from design firms and construction teams and cull out a final selection to present to you. Remember to include online research as part of your due diligence, call references and check out firms with the Better Business Bureau before signing any contracts.

#### 3. Look for the right qualifications

Ideally, your chosen designer should specialize in healthcare design. It's even better if they have expertise in designing for your specialty and familiarity with healthcare technologies that are critical to your practice. They



*The office of Westlake Dermatology in Austin, Texas, was designed by Burt-Watts Industries Inc. and David Besset Architects.*

should also be well-versed in ergonomics, infection control and such issues as lighting and air quality.

Moreover, you may want to consider looking for a firm that has expertise in energy efficiency and sustainability, as well as in-depth knowledge of state, federal and local regulations, according to Carol Tobin, a principal with New York-based design firm Tobin + Parnes Design Enterprises.

#### 4. Seek the “spark”

Obviously, you shouldn't choose to work with a firm if you lack rapport with the main players on the team, or even worse, if you have bad chemistry with them. But, you also shouldn't pick a firm that you feel so-so about either. You should feel comfortable with the firm you've chosen, but also feel energized and excited when you interact with the firm's principals and staff.

“Physicians should make a point to meet with the agency's staff, especially those who will likely be working on the account, to determine if there is, or even if there is not, any chemistry,” says Watts. If your gut tells you “no”, listen to it

#### 5. Ask for an itemized proposal that includes all fees

Don't be shy about asking for an itemized proposal that includes all fees for your design work. The proposal should include mechanical, electrical, plumbing and fire protection design services, as well as architectural and structural design.

“Ask for a lump sum price, not a fee based on the percentage of construction costs,” says Posey.

Also ask questions about the designer's programming – how the firm evaluates and learns about the way your office functions on a day-to-day basis during office hours and after. This is the most cost-effective time to make changes and the best time for interested parties to influence the outcome of a project, Watts says.

Watts also recommends the National Institute of Building Sciences ([www.nibs.org](http://www.nibs.org)) as a good resource for help in evaluating design firms.

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