



Design Institute
of Australia

Design Policy:

DIA Policy on Free Pitching

Free pitching is a term used to describe the supply of design services without payment.

Free pitching may be initiated by a customer who requests the provision of free services, or it may be initiated by a designer who provides free services in the hopes of later payment. Free pitching is condemned by professional design organisations around the world.

Free pitching undermines the value of design services and destroys the professional standing of designers.

Free pitching has many forms

On the client side there are many ways, both obvious and disguised, in which designers are encouraged to provide their skills for free. In general a professional designer should avoid providing their skills for free except in genuine cases of charity or in competitions where there is no intent to avoid the purchase of professional services.

On the designer side designers initiating free pitching as a marketing method is a very messy area. It is a continuum that ranges from the blatant to the apparently innocuous. It includes actions such as deliberately trying to displace existing professional relationships by providing free design, the provision of design concepts within a tender or a request for quotation, participating in a design 'competition' to 'win' a public project, and handing over brain-storming sketches at an initial client meeting to select a design consultant.

It would be a rare designer who could say that they had a completely clean slate.

Free pitching is stealing your time

A further complexity is the existence of well-established traditions such as public competitions in the field of architecture for major public works. And the agency pitches that are a media cliché in the advertising industry.

Precedents such as these make it very difficult for a professional body to establish a clear rule. The DIA's Practice Note PN008 Free Pitching and Design Competitions includes guidelines for running design competitions to avoid situations that take advantage of designers. The DIA has been successful on many occasions in having competition conditions changed to provide fairer treatment of designers.

Young designers trying to carve a niche in a market with well established players face strong temptations to free pitch. The best advice is to think clearly about the extent to which you are undermining your ability to sell your services in future dealings with the customer and the degree to which you are destroying your professional credibility. Spending the same time and resources on an existing client relationship or the broad search for clients prepared to engage you on the strength of your folio is likely to yield more certain returns.

Professional designers lead by example

The onus is on experienced designers to lead by example. They have the folios and commercial experience to avoid free pitching. They are more likely to be in a position to explain to a customer why they don't provide services for free and why it is likely to result in a poor commercial outcome for the project.

The following chart has been prepared to help you visualise whether you are dealing with a free pitching issue:

Free Pitching Matrix

This chart outlines the ways in which the services of designers are acquired and the issues of free pitching associated with each.

Method of obtaining design services	Request for Quotation	Tender	Paid Pitch, Limited Competition	Public Competition	Awards	Pro Bono	Free Pitch Request
Used to obtain	All services and goods.	All services and goods.	Creative services.	Creative services.	Publicity and, sometimes, creative services.	All services.	Creative services.
Method used by	All businesses.	Larger businesses, councils, government.	Larger businesses.	Larger businesses, government.	Larger businesses, government and industry support organisations.	Not for profit organisations, charitable organisations, worthy individuals.	Larger businesses, government.
Reason used	Gain understanding of the fair price for a particular service or goods.	Gain understanding of the fair price for a particular service or goods.	Obtain a broad range of solutions to a creative problem.	Publicity for a company, issue or product; enlist public ownership in an issue or project; obtain a broad range of solutions to a creative problem.	Publicity for the organising and sponsoring customers. Publicity and recognition for the participating suppliers. Occasionally to acquire commercial ideas.	Unable to afford the services or products needed.	Gain free solutions for a creative problem.
Features of method	Most common method of purchase between businesses. Purchaser selects those who will quote based on some initial assessment of their suitability. Purchaser is primarily attempting to establish a fair price for the most beneficial parcel of goods or services.	"Common method of purchase used by organisations where there is a need to demonstrate an equitable method of selecting a supplier. Provides buyer with a broader range of quotes without the need to select each potential supplier."	An organisation approaches a number of suppliers who are asked to compete for their future business or a project based on providing a paid sample of their work. Or, an organisation approaches a number of suppliers who are asked to quote on and perform the same brief.	An organisation advertises to the public or to a selected community of interest. The competition details will include eligibility, time frame, a clear definition of the material to be provided, and specific details of the prize.	"Awards have either a community support focus or a commercial publicity focus. Community support awards usually require the submission of existing work. Commercial publicity awards may be based on existing work or may require the designer to fulfil a set brief. Awards processes are often annual events with the reward to the designer being the prestige and publicity rather than a prize."	"A supplier agrees to provide goods and services at no cost, or reduced cost, as a donation towards the community support work being done by the organisation."	An organisation approaches a number of suppliers who are asked to compete for their future business or a project based on providing a free sample of their work.

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Method of obtaining design services	Request for Quotation	Tender	Paid Pitch, Limited Competition	Public Competition	Awards	Pro Bono	Free Pitch Request
How is it negotiated	Business to business private communication	Public advertisement, or limited private distribution of tender.	Business to business private communication.	Public advertisement.	Public advertisement or limited distribution in a particular group.	Business to business private communication.	Business to business private communication. Sometimes the offer to pitch is general knowledge within a particular supplier group.
Intellectual property	Ownership of any resulting intellectual property should be clearly documented in the proposal.	Ownership of any resulting intellectual property should be clearly documented in the proposal.	Ownership of any resulting intellectual property should be clearly documented in the proposal.	Check the competition rules for conditions associated with ownership of IP.	Check the award rules for conditions associated with ownership of IP.	Regardless of the provision of free services the ownership of IP should be documented before commencing.	Designers should ensure that they retain all intellectual property that results from their work and be vigilant that the organisation isn't benefiting from IP that it has not paid for.
Advice to the purchasing organisation	Do not expect design solutions to be provided with a quote for services.	Do not expect design solutions to be provided with a quote for services.	Purchasing multiple design solutions may mean reduced briefing and interaction with each supplier with the potential that some or all of the solutions provided may be compromised. You must also ensure that you have the skills to assess and select from the commissioned selections.	"Public competitions produce good results when the outcome required is largely publicity or community engagement. Using competitions to develop commercially important designs is dangerous. The variables associated with lack of direct communication between client and designer, the various skill levels of the participants and the relative design assessment skills of the judging panel all contribute to unreliable results."	Award processes used for the collection of commercial ideas have the same flaws as competitions.	Take care to assess that free services will achieve your organisational aims. The commercial benefits of paying a professional supplier to fully assess and address your requirements may produce results that will outweigh the initial investment.	Free design solutions may be detrimental to the commercial success of your project as the normal process of professional interaction between client and designer has been eliminated. Disputes relating to ownership of intellectual property may compromise any commercial outcome from the supplied work.
DIA Position – Advice to designers	Normal commercial practice	Normal commercial practice	Professional designers do not provide their services at a discounted rate for the commercial gain of others.	Professional designers may choose to spend time on public competitions.	Professional designers may choose to participate in awards processes.	"Professional designers may choose to provide their services in support of organisations and activities that have a public benefit."	Professional designers do not provide their services for free for the commercial gain of others.
Things to watch for	Avoid providing free professional services with the quote.	Avoid providing free professional services with the quote.	Avoid providing discounted professional services. Ensure that the ownership of all intellectual property arising from the brief is clearly defined.	Avoid competitions where the intent is to avoid the payment of professional fees.	Support award processes that are primarily intended to build the strength and reputation of the profession. Avoid award processes where the intent is to avoid the payment of professional fees.	"Avoid displacing an existing paid professional relationship where the organisation was able to budget the professional fees."	

DIA Policy on Free Pitching

Along with many other major professional design bodies throughout the world, the DIA resolutely opposes 'free' pitching. More importantly, the DIA opposes all types of pitching – for reasons that are explained here in more detail.

DIA Policy on Pitching

- It is the DIA's firm policy to all its members that they should strongly reject all offers or inducements to participate in any competitive design process held largely or solely for the purpose of future commercial gain.
- It is the DIA's firm policy to all its members that they should clearly reject all offers or inducements to provide any or all of their services at below their normal rates.
- It is the DIA's policy that the provision of design services through any competitive process, at whatever the rate, is damaging for the professional reputation and long term business viability of the individual(s) concerned, and for the design profession as a whole.
- It is the DIA's policy to publicise its stance on pitching by various means, including DIA Member Practice Notes, the DIA website, appropriate public and professional forums and selected media opportunities as and when they may arise.

Background

It is said that there are only two certainties in life, neither of them pleasant: death and taxes. Depressing as this may be, designers also have a third issue to contend with: pitching. There is possibly no other single aspect of design that is more contentious.

Like it or not, pitching is rife within the design industry, and as competition increases, there are some individuals who feel that the only way to survive is to undercut the competition.

Stumbling into disaster

A pitch is commonly defined as: 'to try to sell or promote something such as a product, personal viewpoint or potential business venture, often in an aggressive way.' Interestingly, (for those who disapprove of pitching), pitch is also defined as: 'to fall or stumble, especially headfirst.'

In the context of the design world, a pitch is most often a situation where a designer or design business is 'invited' by a potential client to deliver a design concept or strategy at little or no cost, in competition with one or more other designers.

The client then 'assesses' the efforts of each designer, with the 'winner' usually being awarded the client's business – at least until the next pitch.

How does the DIA define free pitching?

Rather than define 'free' pitching, the DIA believes the real problem is pitching in whatever form it takes.

Free pitching may be the most commonly used term, but it tends to distract attention from all other forms of pitching, all of which are damaging for designers and the design profession.

The DIA therefore defines pitching as:

Pitching is any practice that involves the speculative or competitive provision of design services (including concepts) for a commercial client that results in the designer receiving or charging less than their normal professional rates for work that is intended or likely to be commercially realised or in an attempt to win new business.

Common types of pitching

- The speculative or competitive provision of design services or concepts at no cost.
- The speculative or competitive provision of design services or concepts at a nominal cost, 'discounted' cost or a cost substantially below the designer's normal rates.
- The speculative or competitive provision of design services or concepts at a 'deferred' cost or 'partial' cost, or any cost dependant upon the eventual 'success' or 'choice' of the design services or concepts provided.
- Any other means of not fully charging the designer's normal rates for all services or concepts provided, including 'over resourcing' or any services or concepts provided through third parties.
- Design 'competitions' where it is clear that the 'competition' is being conducted by a commercial organisation for commercial gain, and for a project or product that is clearly or likely to be for eventual commercial realisation.

Pros and cons

There are various arguments for and against pitching, with most of them being summarised as follows:

For:

- Pitching is a legitimate competitive expression of a free market capitalist system.
- Pitching is a 'meritocracy', where designers and design businesses are regularly assessed according to their creative abilities.
- Pitching allows designers to demonstrate their credentials in a manner that minimises the risk of clients employing an inappropriate or incompetent designer for the task required.

- Pitching allows a designer to demonstrate their 'flexibility' and 'sensitivity' to a client's needs and requirements.
- Pitching allows new, inexperienced designers an opportunity to gain valuable experience in the real world, a 'real' addition to their portfolio, and the opportunity to measure themselves against their peers.
- Pitching is a necessary, unavoidable cost of obtaining new business, and in the winner's case, is recompensed by the addition of that new business.
- Pitching is a widespread and long accepted feature in all creative industries.
- 'You've got to be in it to win it.' / 'If you don't do it somebody else will.' / 'Your competitors are all doing it, why aren't you?'

Against:

- Pitching usually delivers work designed to please, rather than what actually works.
- Pitching dramatically undercuts the financial viability of a design business, both in the short and longterm.
- Pitching aggressively devalues the critical intellectual component inherent in all design.
- By devaluing individual designers or their businesses, pitching denigrates the design industry as a whole and makes it significantly harder for all designers to obtain a financially viable living.
- Pitching is almost entirely designed to deliver short term financial benefit to the client, at the direct expense of the designer.
- Pitching almost always involves superficial, poorly conceived design briefs that are virtually useless as 'real' design practice for inexperienced designers.
- Pitches are often 'assessed' by the client according to highly subjective guidelines that may bear no relation to realistic design principles whatever.

- Pitching emphasises the ‘creative’ aspect of design and suggests a poor understanding of the technical, commercial and marketing related values that designers bring to projects.
- By its very nature, pitching often attracts inexperienced, less qualified designers to the process, resulting in a higher likelihood of substandard work and a poor image of the design profession.
- There is no such thing in any business as a free lunch – the unavoidable costs to the designer of pitching must inevitably be paid by clients somehow, sometime – either ‘factored in’ to other design work or ‘retrieved’ in some other area of the design job.
- Pitching sets up an exploitative business and working relationship between the designer and client from the very start, which is bound to cause further difficulties and result in poor design outcomes.

Where did pitching originate?

Pitching in the design world probably originated as a spin-off from the advertising industry. For better or worse, both are popularly regarded as being in the ‘creative’ domain, and therefore the methods used in the advertising industry for appointing new business were extended into design.

However this neatly overlooked the fact that traditional advertising agencies could better afford the many costs of pitching, as they made a substantial portion of their income from additional media commissions. Design studios have no likelihood of gaining media commissions and cannot afford the costs of pitching – even aside from the philosophical issues involved.

Is any type of pitching acceptable?

The DIA holds the view that any form of competitive pitching – paid or unpaid – is inherently flawed, and therefore by implication, unprofessional.

If designers wish to be thought of as professionals, with the economic benefits that entails, then professionalism must cover every aspect of their business and design skills, not just some of them. You can’t be half pregnant: either you are a professional or you’re not.

Some people believe that entering ‘competitions’ rather than pitches is legitimate, and in some cases it may be. But this is an area that can be notoriously open to abuse by unscrupulous organisers seeking to disguise the pitching process.

Whatever you choose to call it, any competitive design process contains a fundamental flaw that will necessarily compromise the final ‘winning’ design. As a simple matter of logic, the designs you’ll see in a pitch are designed primarily to win the pitch – not to produce the best commercial design solution for a project.

Any designer who pitches against other designers therefore, must inevitably direct a substantial part of their design energies to ‘winning’ the pitch itself.

Are you in the business of winning pitches or designing?

What about providing pitching guidelines?

Professionals in other professions never pitch at all, regardless of how much they’re paid or how the pitch is structured.

Some design bodies, perhaps trying to retain some control over a practice that they regard as inevitable, have suggested ‘rules’ or ‘guidelines’ for those designers who feel unable to resist the pressure to pitch.

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They argue that if a designer uses these guidelines, and manages to obtain their full hourly rate for all work entailed, then the process has achieved a relatively favourable outcome. The DIA does not favour this approach.

Assuming all designers in the pitch do get fully paid (an extremely unusual occurrence) it does not overcome the arguments advanced earlier about the disadvantages of any competitive design process.

Perhaps even more importantly, it is still undermining the fundamental principle that true professionals from any profession do not pitch – ever!

As a result, the DIA regards participation in any form of pitching – paid or unpaid – as unprofessional, and therefore opposes it.

What is ‘pro bono’?

The DIA does not oppose the delivery of genuine pro bono work by its members, however it is necessary to precisely define the nature of pro bono.

Pro bono is an abbreviation of the Latin pro bono publico, which means ‘for the public good’. In common usage, pro bono is usually interpreted nowadays to mean providing work or services for free.

Some professional designers may occasionally choose to provide design work or services for free on a pro bono basis. However pro bono work differs from pitching in that pro bono work should not be provided as part of a competitive process designed to win new business or extra publicity, nor on products or projects ultimately intended for commercial gain.

Designers providing any pro bono work do so entirely at their own discretion, usually for moral, ethical or philosophical reasons, and usually for non-commercial, not-for-profit organisations or deserving individuals. If competitive or commercial factors are present, then it’s not pro bono.

What about design competitions?

Design competitions are a good example of the difficult grey area surrounding the issue of pitching. The DIA definition of pitching has attempted to allow room for designers to enter genuine competitions if they really wish to do so.

However great caution should be observed to ensure that the competition is indeed genuine, and that you have not crossed the line into a cleverly disguised pitch.

The grey area surrounding competitions is that the benefit in winning them is usually all about gaining publicity, which, it could be argued, is ultimately about generating a future commercial advantage.

However much ego gratification is involved in the short term, any designer winning a competition would reasonably like to expect that the status of winning a competition might translate somewhere down the track into potential new business enquiries.

This therefore fulfils at least one of the DIA’s definitions of a potential pitch.

How commercial is it?

To determine whether you are entering a genuine competition or a cleverly disguised pitch, a professional designer should apply the various questions of commerciality outlined in the DIA definition of a pitch.

Is the winning design likely to be used in the future as a commercially realised product? Does the competition holder own any commercial rights to the winning design? Is the competition holder a commercially established concern with a record for using or manufacturing competition designs further down the track?

What is the nature of your reward?

What is the exact nature of your 'prize' for winning the competition? Do you receive, or expect to receive, any payment in any form for the design work you have embarked upon? Are you competing against other designers with a history of pitching for other design work?

Ultimately, it is up to you as a professional designer to decide whether a competition is uncomfortably close to being a pitch or not, and act accordingly.

Industries pitch – professions do not

One of the major problems facing designers is that they are still often perceived as an industry rather than a profession.

Professionals from nearly every other business field – with appropriate qualifications, expertise and a suitable professional body behind them – have a public and business credibility that shields them from the necessity of demeaning activities like pitching.

Have you ever heard of a dentist offering to fix your fillings on the basis that if you like his work afterwards, you might pay for it? How about a doctor? Or an accountant? A mechanic? A plumber? Even the trades don't do it.

United we stand, divided we fall

Professional credibility is crucial to achieving long term financial viability for all qualified designers – but will be quickly undermined if professional designers break ranks and indulge in activities like pitching.

The proliferation of unskilled, unqualified, unprofessional 'designers' in an unregulated sector means that these individuals will almost certainly continue with pitching as one of the few competitive 'advantages' they have.

However for professional, qualified designers to fall into the trap of descending to their level and pitching when times are tough, is simply disastrous. If a designer simply gives away their expertise, or publicly seeks to undermine their colleagues, what possible reason can there be for their work to be valued in the future?

Whether you provide creative ideas, concepts, strategies, visuals, renders, thumbnail sketches, rough mockups, whether you do it 'out of hours' or 'when there's nothing else on', whether you get your junior to do the work or not, it doesn't matter – you're still pitching.

Promote, don't pitch

All designers obviously need to constantly seek new work, and to sell their expertise to potential new clients. That's why you have a portfolio, and client testimonials, and a website, and a capability statement, and well honed presentation skills.

That's why you are a professional.

As such, you want to work with professional clients; like minded individuals who recognise expertise when they see it, and value it accordingly. Leave the other types of client to the other types of designer.

Why would you want to work with clients who will probably drive you crazy at every step of the process and likely end up not paying their share of the pittance they've screwed you down to anyway?

No pitching - a vital point of difference

Surviving in a crowded design world is tough, and may yet get tougher. The key to surviving in such an environment can only be differentiation – creating a difference between 'them' and 'us' in knowledge, expertise, qualifications, creativity and professionalism.

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Refusing to pitch is another, key method of differentiation available to professional designers. Combined with the necessary personal qualifications and expertise, and reinforced by continuing publicity and support from professional bodies like the DIA, refusing to pitch becomes a badge of honour – a declaration of professional status.

Discount, anyone?

Amateurs pitch – professionals do not, not under any circumstances. It sounds harsh, but when all is said and done, if you're not good enough to get business without pitching, the only thing you're really good at is discounting.