

# A View from Both Sides of the Turnstile: Five Tips for a Successful Designer/Operator Partnership

How do you ensure that, once a project is open, it will operate efficiently? JRA COO, Dan Schultz, offers five tips for a successful designer/operator partnership, from assembling a team, to determining a vision, to financial considerations, and finally, to what happens after Opening Day.



Dan Schultz

Each side has questions. The operator is thinking: Can these people design to my budget? How much theming do we really need? How much will this increase our attendance, revenue, per caps, etc.? Will they provide me enough service access and storage? Will they listen to my creative ideas? The designer, meanwhile, wants to know: How far is this client willing to go? What is their budget? How much theming can they afford? What are their expectations for throughput, per caps, etc.?

At the end of the day, everybody just wants to feel that his or her needs have been taken into consideration. The operator wants the designer to understand what he goes through on a daily basis. And the designer wants the operator to understand that she is willing to listen – that she does have a conscience.

The good news is that mutual understanding is possible. Based on my experience on both sides of the fence, I offer five tips to develop a productive collaboration.

## 1. Putting the Team Together

### *Operators:*

Here's a piece of basic strategy for selecting a designer: When selecting your own staff members and colleagues, one of your criteria is probably whether you feel that you actually want to work with them on a day-to-day basis. The same strategy should apply to the designer: regardless of the designer's reputation, do you feel that you can work with him or her? Do you get a sense of understanding and empathy to your needs? Are members of the design team able to ask the tough, objective questions that enable them to fully understand the scope of work required? *(continued next page)*

I am very proud to be a part of the entertainment and attraction industry. I have had the great privilege to have been a part of the operating side of the business in theme parks for 15 years, and I am currently in my 27th year on the side of the planning, design and implementation of attractions with JRA. I believe that this background gives me a unique perspective on the level of teamwork and spirit of cooperation it takes for an attraction's operating group to collaborate with a design and production consultant in the creation of a truly compelling and successful guest experience.

For perspective, let's start with two real stories from my past.

### *As an operator:*

The summer crush had just begun at our theme park, and I was already having one of those days. As the manager of entertainment and attractions, I had juggled the staff schedule, helped find a lost child, handled a guest complaint, sat in a long budget meeting and realized that I would have to work a double shift. I had barely caught my breath before another small emergency hit. The lighting in a dark ride had malfunctioned. When we got in to take a look, we found that the lighting problem was directly

overhead of the ride's conveyance system – a track within a water trough. The only way to get at the necessary lighting equipment was to shut down the ride and: A) drain the water and place an A-frame ladder in the trough; B) build a scaffold over the trough or C) put a ladder in the trough without draining the water and hold on tight.

Typical, I thought. Whoever designed this ride never considered the maintenance aspect of keeping this ride looking and operating as it should.

### *As a consultant representing my design and production company:*

I'm sitting in a conference room watching our design team present ideas for a new park attraction. Our designers have presented some wonderfully creative and functional options, but our client's operations people look doubtful. They're raising all sorts of red flags, and I feel frustrated. Why can't these operators think out of the box? Why don't they trust us?

After 40+ years in the theme park/attractions industry, I realize how crucial it is for operations and design to have confidence in one another, and I know how hard that can be.



*Designers:*

Okay, the operator really selects you. But you can help make a persuasive impression beyond your design talent. Before meeting the operator and making your pitch, take the time to research the operator’s facility and / or company. Understand the history of the attraction. How much theming has been used in the past? What is the theme? What audience is the attraction directed to draw? Showing a basic understanding of the operator’s attraction during your initial marketing presentation and interview will usually provide a more conducive environment for negotiation.

## 2. Collaborating on a Vision

*Operators:*

When the designer asks in your initial project kick-off meeting to describe the project, don’t hold back. Too much information should never be enough for a designer. Talk about your operating needs, the budget, the schedule, guest tendencies and your vision. This is your opportunity to describe the project as you see it. If the designer does not show a genuine willingness to hear what you have to say, then you probably have the beginning of a communication problem. This does not bode well for the future of the project.

*Designers:*

Listen first, talk second. Most operators have experienced situations and problems that you would never think of, problems like baby stroller traffic jams at the entrance to a facility and guests wet from a water ride dripping on your indoor theatre’s seats. Allow the operator to fully explain his or her needs, objectives and initial thoughts. Let the operator recognize that you want to fully comprehend the design requirements. Then use your design experience to offer mutually advantageous solutions.

## 3. Work in Progress

*Operators:*

When you receive a progress set of drawings provided by the designer for a review, take the time to look at them carefully. The designer wants your input, both good and bad, as soon as possible. Providing good and thorough feedback in a timely manner will help avoid the potential for project delays and change orders later in the process.

*Designers:*

Hit your deadlines. Provide your drawings when promised. If the operator is upset due to delays, the willingness to think objectively or ‘outside the box’ is immediately compromised. Your dream client is one that will consider your ideas with an open mind; bad performance on your part will destroy these opportunities.

## 4. Money Matters

*Operators:*

Give the designer as much project budget information as possible. Reputable designers can work within budget parameters without stifling their creativity. If you elect not to provide budget guidelines, then you can’t be upset when you get designs you cannot afford to build or maintain.

*Designers:*

Design responsibly. If you are given a project budget, then design toward that goal. In today’s economy, convincing an operator to find more money so that they can build your more elaborate, expensive concept is usually impossible. Focus your creativity on providing innovative ideas that fit the project budget. If you can do this successfully, you probably have developed a long-term relationship with the operator.

## 5. Postmortem

*Operators:*

Immediately after grand opening, review the project development process and outcome. Did you get the project you desired? Were the goals of the project realized? Was the creative process efficient? Share your thoughts with the designer. This can lay the groundwork for your future relationship, or it can help you better understand your design (and designer) needs on your next project.

*Designers:*

Immediately after grand opening, review the project development process and outcome. Does the final project work, both visually and operationally? Is there anything in the process that you would do differently? Did you maintain a positive working relationship with the operator? Ask the operator for an evaluation of the process and the final product. For designers, a completed project should be more than a paycheck and another line on a resume. It should also provide a valuable learning experience and, hopefully, a favorable reference from the operator for your next potential project.



In the end, what we’re really talking about is communication and respect for one another’s jobs, two things that can make any working relationship successful. In the real world, design and operation must go hand-in-hand. The most successful projects are the ones where everyone recognizes this and carries that philosophy through from the first meeting to the grand opening and beyond.

Want to learn more about how JRA help you dream vividly, but responsibly?

Contact us today and let’s start turning your vision into a successful reality!

