

ABDA 2018 Survey Results: Everyone on the same page.

Earlier this year the Australian Book Designers Association surveyed its members to get a better idea of their employment conditions. Out of approximately 140 ABDA members, 83 responded to the survey. Sixty-three percent of the respondents are female, most live either in New South Wales or Victoria, and 89% studied art or design at tertiary level. Freelance designers made up 68% of respondents, and most of these work from home.

For those freelance designers, when it comes to being contracted to design for a publishing company, in the vast majority of cases it is the publisher who provides the contract (when there is a contract). Most designers admitted they did not read these contracts carefully. In more than half of these contracts the publisher sets the fee for the design, and in most there is no contracted number of drafts or changes that the publisher can request. Some designers felt that they would feel able to renegotiate a fee if it went beyond the agreed criteria or felt unreasonable, but some admitted to feeling uncomfortable or too intimidated to ask for more.

“With the limited number of publishing houses in Australia, to ask for more money, i feel that it may result in you not getting future work.”

“It always takes much more time than they account for. And I have a family to feed.”

“I might lose the job.”

“I’m hopeless in this area. I can often do 10 rounds of changes.”

To address the issues raised in the survey, ABDA is planning to develop a pro-forma contract in consultation with publishers, industry professionals and copyright experts, to codify a reasonable range of fees for various design tasks, and to clarify designers’ legal rights. Seventy-eight percent of designers said they would use a generic contract if it was available.

“It would add rigour to the process. It would be helpful for the publishers as well as designers and create some regulation across the sector. It would clarify the expectation on both sides.”

“So everyone is on the same page.”

“It would be an immensely useful tool (on both sides I would hope) to have some collective agreement of what is reasonable behaviour in my relationship with a publisher.”

Most cover design contracts include a kill fee, which is an amount a designer will be offered if the publisher is not happy with the designer's submitted drafts. Most designers feel that kill fees set by publishers are unfair considering the amount of work that a designer has done.

"Publishers would give more considered briefs and be less ready to kill a designer off, if it cost them more."

"It's tricky because a designer can satisfy the brief but the publisher might not like what they've been given."

Designers feel they have a general sense of their rights regarding copyright, but this becomes more complicated when it comes to the legal ownership of original artwork and photography, and the rights for their work to be used and reused in overseas editions, digital editions and ebooks.

"I have had designs published overseas but am unsure I have any rights over my designs."

Book designers also had a lot to say about briefs, which were sometimes inadequate for various reasons:

"Where I get a reasonably clear brief, and I may meet the brief but there are too many parties with different agendas commenting - editor, publisher, sales and marketing, author. The direction can then become confused or diluted."

"When the goal posts get changed at every design round."

"It was mostly the 'I'll know what it is when I see it' cop-out brief that causes the most trouble - when the work hasn't been discussed adequately before it comes to the designer, when no one has put proper thought into it and they are just hoping the designer will magically solve it."

"A brief that changes half way through the process because marketing/sales wasn't consulted earlier"

"Indecision when it comes to what the publisher is after for the cover. This is the cause of countless revisions, and can be avoided if briefs are completed after a publisher has had in depth discussions and thought about the direction they want the cover to go in."

ABDA is planning to create a standard design brief and work to educate publishers about the information that can be useful for designers – 78% of ABDA respondents said they would use such a brief if it was available.

“Using a template structure provides you with good prompts and methodology.”

“So the publisher knows exactly what I need to know.”

“A good brief sets you up for a great design process.”

For more information on the survey results please email info@abda.com.au