

Working with an Artist-Blacksmith

By Mark Aspery

As a professional smith I have at some time got to talk ‘money’ with my clients. I consider myself an OK blacksmith, but I am a poor business owner and hate talking money. Initially there never seems to be the right moment to discuss the costs of a commission with a client(s).

For me commission generally goes something like this;

”Yes, I do make railing, the minimum that you will be charged per foot is \$XXX, are you still interested?”
“Would you like to make an appointment to meet?”

What follows next is an interview process with the client to find out what they want and to explain what I can and cannot deliver. I do not show the client any coffee table books on blacksmithing at anytime during the meeting. I do not have a portfolio in the normal sense of the word. I have a file that contains close up photographs of various items of blacksmithing –such as all things organic, joinery, repousse. With this file I can explain to the client, in a pictorial form, some of the blacksmithing terminology that I may use during the meeting. “Here is an example of a...”

I leave that first meeting with a series of very rough sketches and a few notes and or photographs. I leave them with a copy of my ‘Working with an artist blacksmith’ which sets the ground rules for our future working relationship, which hopefully centers around good communication.

From that point on I am ‘on the clock’ and charging for my time. I return after a period of time (usually a week or so) with three or so thumbnail sketches of designs that I have made as a result of our first meeting. One of these designs, I hope, will come close to their vision of the piece they are trying to commission.

I go back home and further refine the design and make some test pieces as samples. The test pieces help me 1.) develop my tooling 2.) it enables me to give a cost estimate to the client and 3.) it allows both of us the ability to look at a 3 D rendition of a 2 D drawing to see if we still like it.

I present the client with a bill for my time thus far. At that stage both the drawing and the test pieces are theirs to do with as they see fit. If they want to shop around for a better price, they can. I have yet to have this happen but I have heard stories.

A separate bank account to receive the deposit is helpful. Hardly an IRS escrow account, but it works. You can now bill the client for your time and transfer funds from the separate account to your normal business account. You can show the client the statements at your various meetings and request a topping up of the separate account. I work in the black where I can. It’s not my fault that the stock market or the like takes a dive during the commission.

Contractor’s laws in the various states will set directions for licensed contractors with regard to deposit money caps and the client.

One thing more.

A little while ago I accepted a commission at a time when I was busy doing something else. The result was that I did not give the commission my full attention and the delivery date came past due.

I did a little work in an effort to get out of ‘hot-water’ and took pictures of a step-by-step progression of a piece needed within the commission. I constructed a 1 page PDF document of the progression with a cute little saying on the bottom and my contact details on the top (This goes onto everything that I mail out)
I sent the document via E-mail to the client and extended my apologies for my tardiness.

The unexpected happened, the client forwarded the document to her friends
“Look what my artist-blacksmith is making for me!”

The client forgave (well almost) my tardy behavior and I got e-mails from her friends asking about possible commissions.

Conclusion;

I would send update, step-by-step, photos (with contact details on the page) to every client that I work with.

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Generally, a commission can be broken down into four stages:

Design: The design of a commission may be achieved in a number of ways. It may be the work of your architect, a professional designer, original work produced by you, the client, or by the blacksmith. Should you choose to work directly with the blacksmith, expect to pay a design fee. After consultation and a site visit, the blacksmith should provide a drawing of the project and sample pieces to support the artwork. Samples enable the client to visualize the project in three dimensions. They also help the blacksmith estimate the cost of manufacture.

Manufacture: Prior to the start of manufacture the client will usually be asked to place a deposit against the completed work. A 50% deposit is customary on most projects below \$X,XXX. On large and complex projects an initial deposit of \$X,XXX is required with progress payments agreed upon between the blacksmith and the client. In the event of cancellation by the client, materials and hours worked will be deducted from the deposit and any remainder returned.

Finish: The finish should be agreed upon during the design phase. In some cases the blacksmith may deliver the completed work to a finishing specialist, such as a painter or faux finisher. Some special finishes can be expensive to achieve and difficult to maintain. No finish will last forever. Most finishes will require periodic maintenance and occasional renewal. It is good practice to discuss and understand the durability and appropriateness of the finish being selected.

Installation: The installation of the completed commissioned piece is usually a separate cost item. Certain projects may require the services of specialists. Structural, mechanical and electrical work may be required to support the installation. Clients are well advised to secure the appropriate services. Items such as gate actuators are normally beyond the expertise of the blacksmith. New and remodel construction projects must be coordinated by the general contractor. Large installations may require the services of crane and rigging specialists. Licensing and insurance considerations may also dictate who participates in the installation process.