

# Furniture commissioning - made easy

Commissioning a unique piece of furniture is a wonderful experience, one that allows you to own something entirely individual, designed and crafted just for you, and in the process help to maintain the rich tradition of furniture design and craftsmanship in Britain, for which it is rightly proud.

And so, in order to obtain the greatest pleasure from the whole process there are a number of fundamental points to consider.



## Brief

The clearer you are about what you want (or what you don't want) the easier the design phase will be. Make sure that you have prepared a list of what you require; function, ideal size and position in the room. A sketch, however poor, is useful as are images that express a style, colour or feel. It is the designer's job to extract as much information as possible from you during a lengthy discussion and you should allow at least an hour and preferably more. It is part of the designer's role to interrogate your brief, as quite often what is perceived as essential is not in fact what is really needed. A designer that does not question your specification is doing you a disservice, as you may very well end up with what you asked for but not what you actually want. The clearer your description and the better the imagery, the quicker an outline proposal can be created. Do not expect a perfectly formed design immediately; the second discussion should be to refine the direction based on basic sketches and material samples.

## Design

You shouldn't short-circuit the design process if you truly want something that meets your needs and desires, so be certain to invest properly in this process. Designs can be presented in many different ways: - 1D plan drawings, 2D sketches or watercolours and 3D computer renderings and models are the main ones. Some people can visualise a piece from two-dimensional drawing but many can't and although it will cost more to produce computer renderings or models, the advantages outweigh the risks. Of course it depends how long the design process takes to determine how much it will cost but resolving issues now will save greater problems on delivery.



## Approval

If you have elected not to utilise a 3D drawing or model please take time to consider the 1D drawings carefully and if something is unclear (which we hope wouldn't be the case) please just ask; it's far better to do this than to sign-off a drawing for production. From a craftsman's viewpoint, the worst thing that can happen is that you buy something you don't like. You will be unhappy, probably tell all your friends and potentially argue about payment. If you are concerned about something, get the designer to explain and sketch. If you are still unsure it might be necessary to invest in a mock-up or a 3D drawing.



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## Budget

Bespoke furniture is expensive, particularly if you want something that is truly unique so it is essential that you have a sensible discussion about the project's costs at the earliest stage. Adapting a design up or down will always be unsatisfactory; it is far better to understand all the parameters before starting.

A bespoke piece of furniture is a prototype, it will be the first one of its type and potentially it may have some flaws, unless you are prepared to build in a prototyping budget. This makes a lot of sense if the piece has complex articulation.

It is extremely unlikely that you will be able to purchase any piece of craftsmen built custom furniture for less than £1000. The costs of running workshops are high and very few craftsmen who are running professional businesses will be operating at less than £35 per hour and probably more, giving a basic labour cost of £1400 + vat per week.

Quite often it is assumed that material cost is a major factor and whilst there can be significant differences between some timbers; it is quite a small percentage of the actual bill. Using inferior materials only culminates in having something less pleasing to the eye, particularly when you are going to look at it everyday.

## Deposits and payments

Your project is unique to you and has no commercial value to anyone else, hence you should expect to fund at least part of the manufacture as it goes along. For smaller projects a 50% deposit is common and larger projects would have a deposit with stage payments along the way. Final payment should be made on delivery or very soon afterwards.

## Changes

Having approved your design and agreed a price, you will have a very happy craftsman and possibly a new friend, keen to show you what they can do. Changes are the things that can, if handled badly, ruin the relationship and affect your enjoyment of the furniture.

Making a change once manufacture has started is extremely costly in time and potentially materials. If you expect the craftsman to absorb these costs you will be doing them a great disservice. Profits on bespoke furniture are usually between 10 and 20%, so it doesn't take much to turn a job from profit to loss.

## Workshop visits

Most craftsmen will encourage visits to see the piece taking shape and you will gain a greater understanding of just how much goes into making a one-off piece. You might even be able to help. Certainly the experience of seeing the birth and development of your piece will enhance your enjoyment.

## The final piece

You are a patron of the arts, you have sustained a craftsman in employment and created a unique piece of furniture that will bring you pleasure forever.



By Appointment to  
Her Majesty the Queen  
Cabinet Makers  
N.E.J. Stevenson Ltd  
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