

Meet Your Match

One of America's top interior design consultants reflects on the challenge of matching clients with their dream designers

KAREN FISHER, A FORMER MAGAZINE EDITOR AND A member of the Interior Design Hall of Fame, has been matching designers and architects with prospective clients since 1984, when she founded Designer Previews. She now represents over 300 of America's finest interior designers and architects. A typical consultation at Fisher's elegant New York office involves a fascinating slide show that touches on every design style and gives Fisher the opportunity to hear the client's responses before she chooses the portfolios to show clients. She's now starting a new type of service over the internet—by appointment consultations which give clients the opportunity to view designers' work in real time in the course of a phone session.

How exactly do you work?

I show different options. Most clients know what style they want when they see it—so our job is to show it to them and to help them narrow the choices. I encourage clients to interview at least three designers so they can compare the costs, personalities and approaches of several designers before making their final decision.

In general, who uses the service?

Our clients are mostly professional, about 80% are couples who have just bought a new place. Most of our clients have more money than time. They don't want to spend the time going from office to office looking for a designer. They want the convenience of seeing all the work they need to see at one time and in one place.

Describe your talent pool.

I've tried to make Designer Previews a Good Housekeeping Seal, so I don't represent everyone. These are my choices. In New York, I show 300 of the best residential, office, retail, hotel and restaurant designers and architects. That's going to double and triple as we begin to work nationally. I want to make it possible for clients everywhere to find the right interior designer at Designer Previews.

How do you expect the Internet to change your business?

Although our base will still be New York, the Internet gives us easy access to clients and designers around the world. We've created a program that enables us to simulate an office consultation: while we're talking to clients on the phone we're able to show

them the work in real-time of designers from Saudi Arabia to St. Louis. We wanted to make it easy for our clients to hire Los Angeles designers in Aspen, Colorado, or Nashville designers in Cincinnati. Now I'm able to show Chicago designers to clients in Michigan or Wisconsin. People in St. Louis and Cleveland have homes in Santa Fe, New Mexico and Asheville, North Carolina, so I have designers in Santa Fe and Asheville.

What makes now the right time for a digital interface?

I couldn't have done it three years ago, because neither designers nor clients were comfortable enough with the Internet. It will never replace one-on-one meetings, but I see it as an integral part of the future. With people in airports half their lives, our service can be anywhere they are. All they need is a cell phone and a laptop. The hardest thing we have to do right now is schedule a session with a wife and her husband at the same time.

You maintain two Web sites?

The public site, dpreviews.com gives an overview of the service. The private site is for Internet sessions with me.

You've expanded your territory despite the economic slowdown?

We are starting to get calls from all over the country, and this is going to increase. Whenever someone said something about irrational exuberance, the market for decorators stopped, but it picked up again a half hour later. If our kind of clients move, they have to decorate – that's all there is to it. I take an overview of the design scene. I'm doing this for the future. ∞

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