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There are relatively few projects where money is no object. In the overwhelming majority of projects, the budget is a continuing matter of debate between those on the team who insist that “we gotta have it” and those who say “we can’t afford it.”

Negotiating the proper balance between programmatic needs and the project budget is something that all members of the project team accept as a fact of life and part of their professional responsibility in getting the best final product.

The tension which exists between the needs of the program and the limits of the budget can, however, have dramatic implications if it is allowed to rise to crisis proportions; for example, when tender documents are nearly complete and significant cuts must be made.

In these last minute situations, there are no winners and the decisions which are made to cut space and equipment will always compromise the project to the detriment of the end users.

As Theatre Consultants, we can play a significant role in harmonizing the program vs budget debate by encouraging the team to address the alignment between program and budget right from the outset.

In our office, we encourage clients to keep their focus on the fundamental concepts before authorizing the team to go full speed ahead with design. Our advice is always, “Get the fundamentals right and the details will look after themselves.”

Initially, the debate is usually framed by the questions “are we building the program; or are we building the budget?” These are valid initial questions which should not be seen as setting up adversarial positions. Rather, they should be seen as the frame of reference for our collective goal of delivering the best product for the available dollars.

The task of achieving a middle course between program and budget ultimately relies on our ability to manage the various expectations which have been set up.

Early in the process, the owner may have publicly described the project in rather grand terms accompanied by seductive renderings and a confident declaration that this visionary project will be built for “X” dollars. All too often, these announcements occur well in advance of any real thought being given to the scope and details of the project.

Having made this commitment, the owner’s expectation is that it will simply happen as prescribed. This expectation and the expectations which the owner has raised in the mind of the public and the users about the scale of project in relation to capital cost may not be at all congruent.

Is such a disparity a problem for the project team? Not if we make its resolution our first priority. Is it a challenge for the team to resolve it? Absolutely. In this context, what is our responsibility as Theatre Consultants? Keep the team’s attention on the program.

In the end, there are only two ways to look at resolving the program vs budget debate: increase revenues or reduce costs.

It is not, for example, beyond the realm of possibility that the owner can find ways to increase the revenue side of the budget and it is appropriate for the team to suggest this as an option.

But if the owner has made a public statement about the project's cost and this cost is now to be changed, the team will need to provide the owner with a plausible case for budgetary increase to avoid the appearance of the project being "over budget."

The second way is to "reduce program" – to cut spaces and equipment. If this second option is the only way to go, the difference between a good project and a not so good project is how and when the cuts are done.

As noted earlier, making cuts late in the process is never a good idea. On the other hand, continual refinement of the program through detailed examination of the quality and quantity of program components starting very early in the process is always a good idea.

Program refinement can include reducing all program areas by a small percentage for a large overall saving and it can include a careful look at how the facility is scheduled so that room utilization is optimized.

The trade-off here—and it is a positive one—is to spend planning time (at this stage, a miniscule percentage of the project cost) to achieve capital savings (which may be a considerable percentage of the project cost) without compromising the quality and functionality of the project.

If the timetable is tight, there will be pressure on the planning phase and this critical time can be compromised in the attempt to meet real or perceived deadlines. The project manager or owner's representative can play an important role in this phase by managing the work of the architectural team to focus on the most positive outcomes.

The goal of every project is to go to tender with a contract package that meets the expectations within the budget. The means of achieving this goal is through a programming phase which leaves no stone unturned.

***Brian Arnott is the founder of Novita and a member of the American Society of Theatre Consultants.***