"Spec" is short for speculation. An illustrator who takes on a spec assignment is therefore working for free on the chance that if the illustration is used it will be paid for. This practice is not uncommon with low-budget projects where money is tight, but is also frequently practiced by high-end operations as a means to audition new illustrators. There is, however, considerable debate among illustrators and designers regarding the efficacy and ethics of asking for and doing free work. Most other professionals would balk at such a request. So why should an artist be asked to gamble?

Spec work cannot be demanded or legislated. It is an individual decision. The neophyte illustrator may decide to do so because it is the proverbial foot in the door and getting a published piece (regardless of payment) will lead to more published pieces. Other factors to consider include desirability of the job and the amount of freedom allowed. The payoff for free work should at least be a rewarding experience, and yet sometimes it can be as difficult as a paying job.

Doing spec work poses complex ethical dilemmas. Asking for free work implies casting couch behavior—i.e., some kind of quid pro quo. But what about those artists who decide not to speculate? Is work to be doled out on the basis of who will or will not cooperate? Spec is a double-edged sword. It may open doors, but devalues effort.

Since rules governing spec do not exist common sense must prevail. Judge work on spec requests on individual merits. In addition, the following questions should be considered:

- Is the job interesting?
- Is the art director or art buyer someone worth cultivating?
- What is the extent of the job (i.e., how many iterations, corrections, or revisions are you willing to do)?
- Is payment contingent upon publication?

Before entering into work on spec ascertain whether others are being asked to work on the same job (is this an exclusive or open audition?). If others are involved decide whether the competition is worth the time and energy. If this is spec work for a speculative project (i.e., a proposal for an ad campaign, book, or magazine dummy) agree to conditions that will protect your “intellectual” and “creative” property. As long as you are working for free, maintain all rights to your work.

Finally, make sure that you do not make a career of doing work on spec, lest you devalue yourself and your profession.