

How to hire an animator without getting burned

You're about to spend five figures on something you can't evaluate. Here's what to look for.

You can't tell the good ones from the expensive ones.

Not until the work comes back. And by then the money's gone, the launch date is here, and you're deciding whether to ship something you don't like or pay someone else to fix it.

Here's the part nobody tells you: **you don't need to learn animation to hire well.** You need to know which questions expose a bad fit before anything is signed. Every project I've seen go wrong was visible in the first conversation. The founder just didn't know what they were listening for.

So that's what this is. Seven things that go wrong, the question that surfaces each one, what the work actually costs, and how long it actually takes. Ten minutes, and you'll interview better than most people who've hired video before.

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They skip the script and the storyboard

This is the expensive one. An animator who goes straight to animating will show you something 80% finished, and if you hate the structure, fixing it means starting over. Structure gets locked whether you approve it or not.

Storyboards exist so that changing your mind stays cheap. Skipping them isn't faster. It just moves the cost to the end, where it's yours.

Ask

What happens before any animation starts? Will I sign off on a script and a storyboard first?

You never get the source files

Six months out you'll rebrand, or want a fifteen-second cut for ads, or need one line of copy changed. Without the project files, you can't. You go back and pay again, or you rebuild from nothing.

Some animators withhold files on purpose. It's a retention strategy, and it works because founders don't think to ask until it's too late.

Ask

Do I own the project files and every asset on delivery? Get it in the contract, not the email.

One video, one aspect ratio

You get a 16:9 for the homepage and nothing else. Meanwhile you need vertical for social, square for paid, a silent cut with captions, ten seconds for the top of the funnel.

The animation is already built. Cutting those at the same time costs a fraction of what it costs six weeks later. Almost nobody offers unless you ask.

Ask

Which formats and cutdowns are included? What do they cost now versus later?

It's a template with your logo dropped in

There's a large market of pre-built After Effects templates. Some animators buy one, swap your brand in, and charge custom rates for it.

The tell is in the portfolio: every piece moves the same way regardless of who the client was. And when you ask why a specific choice was made, there's no answer, because nobody made it.

Ask

Walk me through why you made one specific choice in this piece. A real animator will talk for ten minutes.

No real background in animation

Plenty of people selling animation are designers who learned After Effects. They can make things move. They can't make things move *well*, and that gap is the whole product.

Motion has fundamentals: weight, timing, anticipation, follow-through. Somebody who never learned them produces work that feels subtly cheap, and you won't be able to name why. You'll just feel it, and so will everyone who watches.

Ask

Where did you learn animation, and what were you doing before this?



The motion itself is bad

You can't evaluate this technically, and you shouldn't have to. Here's the shortcut: **watch their work with the sound off.**

Good motion holds attention with no audio at all. Bad motion is a slideshow with music on top: things fade in, slide across, land with no weight. Music covers a lot. Silence doesn't. If it's boring silent, it's boring.

Ask

Nothing. Just mute it and watch.

They're racing to be done

Some animators optimize for throughput: deliver, get paid, move on. You can hear it in how they talk about the timeline. Fast, confident, and incurious about your product.

Speed isn't the problem. Speed *instead of understanding* is. If they haven't asked what you do and who it's for, they aren't making a video about your company. They're making a video.

Ask

Nothing here either. Just count how many questions they ask you. The good ones ask a lot.

What this actually costs

For a custom animated explainer or product demo, scripted, storyboarded, original, files delivered, here's the honest market.

Under \$2k

Templates, or someone learning on your budget. Occasionally you find a great junior. Usually you find out why it was cheap.

\$4.5k–\$10k

Custom work from someone who knows what they're doing. Script, storyboard, original animation, source files. This is the real range, and it's where you should expect to land.

\$25k and up

Agency rates. You're paying for producers, account managers, overhead. Sometimes worth it. Rarely worth it at your stage.

What moves the number

Length is the obvious lever and the weakest one. **Animation style** matters more: character work costs more than motion graphics. **Deliverables** matter: one video, or one video and six cutdowns. And **how much is already decided**: a finished script and real brand guidelines are hours you don't pay for.

If a quote comes in far under this range, ask what's missing. It's the storyboard, the source files, or the originality. It's always one of the three.

Two to four weeks, and where they go

If someone promises a custom animated video in three days, they are not doing the work below. Something is being skipped, and it's usually the part that makes it good.

Days 1-3

Discovery and script

What the product does, who it's for, what the video has to accomplish. Then a script you approve before anything else happens.

Days 3-7

Storyboard and style frames

Every scene sketched, a few frames rendered in final style. Your last cheap chance to change direction. Use it.

Days 7-17

Animation

The bulk of the work and the quietest stretch. Expect a rough pass partway through, not a finished piece.

Days 17-21

Sound, revisions, delivery

Music, sound design, voiceover if there is one. Then your revisions: a defined number of rounds, not "unlimited."

Four weeks instead of two usually means more complexity, more deliverables, or slower feedback on your end. That last one is the most common. Projects stall waiting on the client far more often than they stall waiting on the animator.

Take this into the call

Print it, screenshot it, whatever works. If most of these are checked after an hour with someone, you've found a good one.

The hiring scorecard

Nine checks. Anything unchecked is a conversation you haven't had yet.

- ☐ They described a process where a script and storyboard come **before** animation.
- ☐ Source files and full ownership are confirmed in writing.
- ☐ I know exactly which formats and cutdowns I'm getting.
- ☐ Revisions are a specific number of rounds, not "unlimited."
- ☐ Their portfolio pieces look different from one another.
- ☐ Their work still holds up with the sound off.
- ☐ They can explain *why* they made specific choices in past work.
- ☐ They asked me more questions than I asked them.
- ☐ The quote sits in a range that matches the scope.

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Want to see what flag one looks like when someone does it right?

I'll write you a script. Actually write it, not a template, not a teaser. Free, no pitch attached.

You answer six questions about your product, your customer, and the problem you solve. I send back a real script. If you like it, we can talk about making it. If you don't, you've lost about four minutes and you keep the script.

It's the same thing I just told you to demand from whoever you hire. Might as well see one first.

[Get a free script](#)

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Storyboards first. Source files always. More questions than you're expecting.

Emilio Lopez