



FIELD GUIDE / 2026 EDITION

Hiring a CGI Studio in the **US**

The same job is bought three different ways in America. Which route you are in decides the price, the brief, the file rights and who answers the phone.



START HERE

Three routes to the same set of images

A rendering package for a US project is almost never bought the same way twice. The developer buys it direct, a property marketing agency buys it on the developer's behalf, or it arrives inside the architect's fee. The images can look identical. Everything around them is different.

Most bad outcomes we see on American projects are not craft failures. They are route failures — somebody paid for images on one route and expected the behaviour of another. So before you ask what a render costs, work out which of these three you are actually in.

ROUTE	WHO HOLDS THE MONEY	WHAT IT CHANGES
Developer direct	You, paying the studio	You pay the studio's rate with nothing on top. You also write the brief, chase the drawings and carry every gap yourself.
Through a marketing agency	The agency, who subcontracts	You buy a managed outcome. You rarely see the studio rate, and you are one step removed from the person holding the mouse.
Inside the architect's fee	The architect, as a line or an allowance	Technically supervised images, sized by a budget set before anyone knew what the marketing needed.

None of the three is wrong. The developer-direct route is not automatically cheapest, and the agency route is not automatically overpriced — a good agency absorbs coordination work that would otherwise land on your desk at your own salary cost. What matters is knowing which one you are in, because the questions you have to ask change completely.



Maverick Frame production render.

STEP 01

The three routes, and how each one fails

Every route has a characteristic failure. They are predictable, which means they are avoidable if you name yours at the start.

	DEVELOPER DIRECT	MARKETING AGENCY	ARCHITECT'S FEE
Margin shape	Studio rate, no layer above it.	Studio rate plus agency mark-up and management time. Both can be legitimate; neither is usually itemised.	Often an allowance carried at or near cost, sometimes marked up as a reimbursable.
Brief quality	Strong on commercial intent, weak on the drawing set. Studios receive the sales story and half the dimensions.	Strong on audience and channel. Technical detail is filtered through a non-technical account layer and arrives thinner than it left.	Strong on geometry and materials, weak on what the image has to sell. Beautiful, accurate, and occasionally useless to a sales office.
Who owns the files	Yours to negotiate directly, if you remember to.	Frequently contracted to the agency. Change agencies and the model may not follow you.	Commonly sits with the architect as part of their work product. Marketing may have no separate right to reuse it.
Who you talk to	The studio. Fastest correction loop available.	An account manager. Every comment is relayed, and relays lose detail.	A project architect with four deadlines that are not your images.
Failure mode	Under-briefed. You get exactly what you asked for and discover you asked for the wrong thing.	Telephone game. Round four still fixes something you said in round one.	Timing and priority. Renders slip because the design package is more urgent, and no one is wrong.

The single most useful thing you can do

Ask, in writing, whether the rendering work is being performed by the company you are contracting with or subcontracted to another. It is a fair question, it is answered honestly far more often than people expect, and it converts two of the three failure modes above into something you can manage.

STEP 02

Questions to ask, by the route you are in

Send the block that matches your route. These are written to be pasted into an email without editing.

If you are buying direct from the studio

- ☐ Who writes the shot list — you, or us?
- ☐ Who on your side answers a comment, and in which hours?
- ☐ What drawings do you need from us, in what state, and by when?
- ☐ What does a new angle from this model cost in twelve months?
- ☐ Do we receive the 3D model, or only the images?
- ☐ What happens to the scene file if we do not commission again?

If an agency is buying on your behalf

- ☐ Is the rendering produced in-house or subcontracted? To whom?
- ☐ Who holds the model and the licence — you, us, or the studio?
- ☐ Can I see the studio's own portfolio, not the agency case study?
- ☐ If we part ways, what transfers with us and at what cost?
- ☐ Is the production cost separated from agency management time?
- ☐ Can our architect speak to the studio directly on technical points?

If it sits inside the architect's fee

- ☐ Is the visualisation allowance a fixed sum, and set when?
- ☐ Is it at cost or marked up — and either is fine, we just want to know
- ☐ Are these images scoped for approvals, for sales, or for both?
- ☐ If marketing wants three more views, does that vary your fee?
- ☐ Who has the right to use them in marketing, and for how long?
- ☐ Where do the renders sit against your own deadlines this month?

The last question in each block is the one people skip. It is also the one that predicts whether the images arrive on the day the sales centre opens.

STEP 03

Practicalities of a country this wide

Three things genuinely behave differently on American projects, and none of them is about rendering quality.

1 Your own time zones are the harder problem

An East Coast developer, a West Coast architect and an offshore studio is three zones, not two. The West Coast reviewer opens the file at what is already late evening for the studio, so a comment at 4pm Pacific costs a full day. Fix it with structure rather than goodwill:

- One named review hour per day, quoted in a single zone with the offset written out
- All internal comments consolidated before that hour, by one person, in one document
- State the time zone in every deadline you write. “Friday” is up to a day of ambiguity across your own team

2 Contracting and insurance — questions for your own adviser

We do not tell you what any state, board or insurer requires, and neither should a studio. Take this list to your own counsel, broker or accountant and get answers in writing before you sign:

- Are we contracting with the studio, or with an agency that subcontracts — and who is liable if the images are wrong?
- Does our professional liability or errors-and-omissions cover extend to a visual produced by an outside party?
- What disclaimer language should sit on images used in sales, leasing or pre-sale material?
- What documentation does our finance team need from an out-of-state or offshore supplier, and how is withholding handled?
- Do any state or local rules apply to the way a proposed building is depicted in advertising here?

A studio that answers these confidently is guessing. A studio that says “ask your adviser, and we will supply whatever paperwork they ask for” is the one to keep.

3 Multi-state programmes pay for context twice

If you build the same product in four states, the building is one modelling job and the surroundings are four. Streets, planting, vehicles, signage, light and the shape of the sky all change, and that context work is repeated every time — it is usually the part that surprises people in the second quote.

Say at the outset that this is a programme, not a project. Agree that the core building becomes a maintained asset and that each new site buys context only. Written before the first job, that is a cheaper second, third and fourth city. Raised after the first invoice, it is a renegotiation.

WORKING WITH A STUDIO

Cost, and how to brief it

Two things people ask us before anything else. Both answers are short.

COMMISSIONED WORK	FREELANCER	STUDIO
Single exterior still	\$100 – 300	\$250 – 600
Single interior still	\$120 – 350	\$300 – 700
Package, 5–8 views	\$600 – 1,500	\$1,500 – 4,000
Animation, per minute	\$1,000 – 3,000	\$3,000 – 8,000

Market ranges we are willing to publish. Turnaround and revision-round figures are deliberately not in this table: ours vary too much by project type to state as a benchmark, and an invented number here would be worse than none.

How to brief it — shorter is better

This is the opposite of what most people assume. Four things:

- What you need — **how many images, and of what**
- The plans and elevations, as they are
- A few reference images for mood and light
- One clear line on what the images are *for*

Inflating a small job into a fifty-page specification backfires: taken literally it comes out ugly, and it misleads the people doing the work. Tell them the intent and let the team that does this daily handle the detail.

The mistake that costs the most

The biggest failure we see is not choosing the wrong vendor. It is **timing**. People start looking only after the first supplier has already failed and the deadline is on fire, then choose in a panic.

Line up and vet rendering partners **before** you need one. One, ideally a few, briefed and ready to take work. It costs an afternoon now and saves a project later.

10+

YEARS RENDERING
VISUAL STORYTELLING

350+

BRANDS & AGENCIES
EMPOWERED GLOBALLY

95%

CLIENT
SATISFACTION RATE

40%+

OF OUR COMMISSIONS NOW
INCLUDE MOTION OR 360



MAVERICK
FRAME
STUDIO

When the image has to hold up, **talk to us**

We are a CGI studio: architectural and product rendering, 3D modelling, animation, 360 tours and VR. Ten years, 350+ brands and agencies, and the kind of work that still looks right when somebody counts the windows.

Send us the plans and a line on what the images are for. You get a scope and a price, and no obligation to use either.

START HERE

maverickframe.com/contacts

SEE THE WORK

maverickframe.com/gallery

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Maverick Frame production render. · Cost ranges are market ranges as of 2026 and are not a quotation.

