

HOW

design • creativity • business



A PANTONE® Library In your pocket

myPANTONE™
for iPhone and iPod touch

Click & **SAVE 62%**
on a year of HOW

Sub

[Creativity](#) | [Business](#) | [Career](#) | [Forums](#) | [Blogs](#) | [Competitions](#) | [Events](#)

[Self-Promotion](#) | [Clients](#) | [Design & Business](#) | [Pricing](#) | [Freelancing](#) | [Management](#) | [Legal](#)

Free Email Newsletter

Sign up to receive free news, tips and special offers from HOW Magazine

Enter your email

[Home](#) » [Business](#) » [Clients](#) » [Building A Better Creative Brief](#)

Building A Better Creative Brief

September 17, 2009

by [Catriona Crombie](#) and [Roger Hart/Blue Marlin Brand Design](#)

Creativity is what makes designers tick. The development of creative work from concept through to finished product is wherein lies the fun, the challenge, in fact, the whole point of being a designer. That's a given. Some designers believe they work better unfettered by the strictures of a client brief. In fact, the opposite is true: The best way to free designers to be at their most creative is to make sure they understand the parameters in which they are working. Counterintuitively, the best way to liberate creative people is to give them a robust brief.

And it doesn't matter how large or small the project, whether it's a tweak or a wholesale brand reinvention. The most influential aspect is the client's brief because the preparation that goes into drawing up a good brief is fundamental to commissioning great creative work.

Getting the best out of a client/agency relationship isn't rocket science; it's largely a matter of preparation and organization: helping clients to issue clear briefs and making sure that they keep you informed.

The better the brief, the better the result; a well thought through, a clearly expressed brief with a clearly defined goal will enable you to produce focused creative work. A woolly brief—or worse, one that keeps changing during the process of creating and researching design work—will aggravate and ultimately demotivate your staff. If your client doesn't know exactly what they're looking for, how will they be able to judge what you produce? And how will you be able to judge how you've done?

Allowing your agency to go through the process of developing a design solution without concrete direction is wearing and costly for both sides of the relationship. You need to understand your client's business, commercial objectives, brands, consumers and motivations. A good brief can tell you all that. And more: it will inspire you to produce your very best work.

A combination of verbal and written briefing is ideal. Clients and agencies frequently blame time pressures as the main reason for inadequate briefs, but working without a formal written brief to save time is a false economy that leads to too much reworking and readjusting of work. Ultimately, it takes longer and its costs clients more, which no one wants in this economy.

A good brief is not the longest or most detailed; it's the one with clarity and focus. Good briefs leave the recipients with a clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve. Bad briefs contain contradictory information and objectives. The more misleading the brief, the longer it will take to work out what really needs to be done.

Storied

corbis

► [Click to see the stories](#)



**SUBSCRIBE &
SAVE 62%**

Form below to get a
HOW (6 issues) for just
that's a **savings of**
the newsstand price!

Name

Address

City

State/Province

States

Country

Submit My Order

Sometimes thoughtful and well-researched briefs are issued, but on further investigation it transpires that they are attempting to address the wrong thing. We've had instances of brands being included in a range redesign that just don't sit comfortably in the portfolio, where the issue is really one of portfolio architecture and not the redesign we were originally briefed to do.

Sometimes things happen because that's the way they have always been done, so that's the way they continue to be done, until an outsider is bold enough to challenge it. For example, clients often say that they want six potential creative directions. Why? Three or four allow designers to concentrate on giving their very best work rather than casting around for ideas.

You'll be doing yourself and your client a service if, having got a formal brief, you analyze it, challenge it and debate it. Be prepared to be bold and to question elements you feel are misguided, wrong or just plain not achievable. Any agency worth its salt should want to do those things. Healthy debate leads to a more robust brief, which can only be good for all those involved for all the reasons already discussed.

Building a Brief

All briefs should include background issues, audience information, brand positioning, creative stretch, timings, budget and sacred cows.

- Background information—is the brand losing market share? Has the category dynamic changed? Has the market changed? What is the brand's history and heritage? How has the brand's design evolved over time?
- Audience demographics and insight is critical—you need to know for whom you are designing. Pen portraits are very helpful because knowing what other brands the target consumers buy can inform the early stages of concept work and at the latter stages as you can look back and assess designs against existing purchases.
- Proposition and positioning—it's vital that you understand what the brand offer is and what your client wants the brand to stand for. How does it want consumers to view the product offer and what does it want their takeout to be?
- Creative stretch—get a proper explanation of the degree of stretch within the brief. Honesty is really important so that you can understand the parameters within which you are designing—how far along the scale of evolution to revolution your client is willing and able to go.
- Timelines—understanding your client's long term ambitions for the brand or brand portfolio is as important as knowing how quickly a new look needs to be on shelf. As is knowing the commercial imperatives and the retail trade's expectations and what your client's NPD pipeline looks like.
- Budget—you need to know up front how much you have got so that you can allocate an appropriate amount of resource to it and deliver the project within budget. Be prepared to challenge the amount of money you've been allotted, particularly if you have been asked for a lot of routes across a large number of executions.
- Sacred cows—what must and must not change; color, logo, positioning and anything else your brand is wedded to or violently against.

Using the Brief

Once the brief is agreed and you've written a distillation in the form of a creative brief to inspire, inform and excite your designers, you should send the creative brief to the client for approval before it goes into the design studio and planning department. It's vital that the client agrees with the interpretations contained within it.

During the immersion stage, when you're really getting under the skin of the brand, questions of a technical nature are likely to occur. It's vital that designers know and understand the technical limitations. At the end of immersion check that the brief is still right and that none of the elements in it has changed.

Things do change. Research runs late. Consumers change their minds between one research stage and another. Commercial considerations change, the scope of the brief alters and sometimes it becomes apparent during the course of a project that other brands in the portfolio need attention. The environment changes and projects get put on hold or need to be rushed through. All good design agencies live in the real world and are prepared for such eventualities. We recap at the end of each stage to make sure that we are on track, on time and on budget.

The really exciting moment is when concept work is presented. All the work leading up to this point, on both client and agency side, is encapsulated in that "ta-da" moment when creative work is unveiled. If the brief is solid, it should be a great time.

The next stage is to get your client to generate consolidated feedback, and this can be a tricky area. It's immensely hard for human beings to avoid subjectivity, but it's vital for the success of any creative project to avoid subjective feedback. Encourage your client to relate it back to the brief and strive to strip away the emotion until you're left with objective feedback that you and everyone else can make use of. You need to receive all feedback at the same time. If your client drip feeds feedback, you may end up having to take U-turns that slow down the job.

There's always a further phase of design development after initial creative work, and this is when clients frequently give in to the temptation to add in another concept, another execution or some other form of messaging. The difficulty is that extra work a) needs to be paid for and b) may slow down the progress of the original project. Again, this is when a robust brief can really make life easier. Go back to the brief; remind your client of what they're trying to achieve and help them stay focused on the task at hand.

A really good brief helps designers at the start, in the middle and even at the end of a project. It enables them to be both highly creative and highly effective—and isn't that what everyone wants?

Catriona Crombie is senior account director, and Roger Hart is client services director at [Blue Marlin Brand Design](#) in London.

- [Subscribe to Print Magazine and SAVE 66%](#)
- [Get all 2007 issues of HOW Magazine on DVD](#)
- [2008 HOW Conference MP3's now available](#)
- [Check out *Complete Color Index Boxed Set* by Jim Krause](#)
- [The Savvy Designer's Guide to Success CD by Jeff Fisher](#)
- [Enter HOW Interactive Design Awards](#)
- [In-HOWse Designer Conference](#)
- [Mind Your Own Business Conference](#)

HOW BOOKSTORE BEST SELLERS

1. [The Web Designer's Idea Book](#) by Patrick McNeil
2. [Caffeine for the Creative Mind](#) by Stefan Mumaw & Wendy Lee Oldfield
3. [Designer's Guide to Marketing and Pricing](#) by Ilise Benun and Peleg Top
4. [In-House Design In Practice](#) by Cathy Fishel
5. [Design Essentials Index](#) by Jim Krause