

Writing Creative Briefs



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IN MOST AGENCIES, THE DEFINING ROLE of the account planner is leading the development of the creative brief. In fact, it's often the most tangible output of the planner's work. Part of learning to be a good planner is learning to write good briefs.

The creative brief is a document that distills and summarizes the agency's strategic thinking and conveys it to the creative team. Usually no more than a page or two, it's the end result of a larger process that includes strategic business analysis, brand and target audience understanding, refinement and debate with the client and other agency players, and planning and conducting the meeting in which the brief is presented to creatives. Concisely and cogently, the brief has to engage the team responsible for creating the ads and inspire them to do great work.

Creative briefs can be written for any kind of strategic communication – not just for traditional TV, radio, magazine, billboard, and newspaper ads, but also for direct mail, banner ads, viral ads, mobile ads, sales promotion programs, brand names, logos, and websites. The length and amount of detail in the brief will vary, but the basic principles remain the same. A brief for an infomercial may have a lot of factual information and supporting material, while one for a billboard had better be quite

short. (At The Richards Group, a brief longer than one page required special dispensation from Stan Richards himself.)

In this chapter, we'll discuss why we have creative briefs, how to write a good one, what questions they answer, and how to maximize their impact on the process of ad creation. We'll end with a little food for thought about where it's all headed. But right now, let's focus on some basics.

Why Do We Have Briefs?

Simply put, we have briefs because they increase the probability that we will get the ads right. We increase our chances of success by:

- thinking through who the target is and why the message is important to them,
- making sure the message addresses advertising objectives, and
- considering alternative directions and debating them with the other members of the team.

Not only do we increase our chances of getting the ads right, but the process of brief writing also increases our chances of getting them right *the first time*. If you can get the rest of the team to buy into your thinking, you reduce the number of times the creative team brings you ads you have to send back. Good briefs actually save everybody's time, because they prevent the false starts that burn hours and demoralize the team.

Planners should become more like shepherds guiding gently and tending patiently, rather than some sort of master strategist managing with the all-knowing brief. And, in fact, first briefs are often just the first step in a process of refinement that occurs as creative output is developed and critiqued.

Briefs are neither written in stone nor chalk. On the one hand, the brief often evolves in the course of creative development. Creatives sometimes come up with new and compelling ideas in the course of concepting, and sometimes the strategy implicit in their work will cause us to change the brief.

On the other hand, there is the understanding that if the team agreed to a brief ahead of time, there shouldn't be a change without a good reason for that change. Any new solution that is come upon along the way has to fit the evidence that led to the brief in the first place.

A Division of Labor

Although the planner is usually the one to put the words on paper, he or she doesn't write the creative brief alone. In practice, the planner manages the process of getting input from other members of the agency team (and the client) and distilling their thinking. The planner plays this central role because he or she is the one who understands consumer behavior, follows consumer trends, has studied the latest market research, understands the competitive context, has talked to the product manager, and most important, has the greatest experience in performing this essential task.

The planner chooses from among all the things that might be said and picks the ones that he or she believes will be most effective, while the creative team chooses how to say it. It's a division of labor that allows specialists to do what they do best. In writing the brief, the planner provides the bridge between strategic thinking and the creative work.

A Contract With Creatives

The brief is a kind of contract between the creative team and the people who develop the strategy. While the brief should guide and stimulate the process, it also has to be flexible enough to allow the creative team to express their creativity. Then, when the ads are being evaluated, the judgment should be about whether the objectives have been met, the audience has been addressed, and the key thought communicated, not the exact way those things were accomplished.

By the way, if the planner doesn't make those decisions, the creative team will make them. They will create something whether they get specific direction or not. While they probably won't bother to write down their brief, their ads will nonetheless have an imagined target, main idea, tone of voice, etc.

An Ad To Creatives

Thinking of the brief as an ad to creatives is a good guide for creating them. When you think about it, good briefs and good ads have many things in common. Here's some good advice for both.

Be brief. At its most basic level, the creative brief tells the creative team what to do. It functions as a work order that specifies the objective, target, and main message of the communication – all the essential information they need to do their job.

Because the amount of information you could put in a brief is potentially very large – there are usually dozens of things you can possibly say about any product or service – often the toughest decisions are about what to leave out.

Like a good ad, good briefs get their point across in a concise and compelling way. A common mistake in brief writing is giving the creative team too much information. (Why do you think they call it a “brief”?) Unnecessary or distracting information makes their job more difficult and forces them to make choices they may be ill-prepared to make. This is sometimes called understanding the importance of what's important.

Avoid jargon. Good ads speak in the language of their audience and so do good briefs. Since the target audience for the brief is your creative team, it makes sense to write it in language they can understand. Marketing is rife with jargon that marketers hide behind. Sometimes the planner's task is to take the client's brief to the agency, trim out the unnecessary information, and translate the jargon into everyday English.

Inspire your audience. The brief is your chance to provide creatives with your best, most original thinking. If the brief is fresh and insightful, you improve the chances that the ads will be, too. Here is where much brief writing falls short. It doesn't go that extra step of expressing the idea in a compelling way.

There's a big difference between an unfocused proposition like “Corona is a great tasting beer from Mexico” and something more specific and provocative like “Unlike the posturing, self-conscious brown-bottled

beers it competes with, Corona is relaxed and unpretentious.” Which one do you think it would be easier to write ads to?

What Questions Do They Answer?

Most briefs answer four basic questions. This is true whether they are for TV ads, websites, sales promotion programs, or whatever. In addition, many agencies have their own “proprietary” formats for the creative brief. No doubt, these can be very useful in highlighting the agency’s distinctive approach to creative development. At the end of this chapter, we’ll describe one distinctive set of questions used by Crispin Porter + Bogusky. But for the moment, let’s cover the four basics.

1. What Are We Trying To Accomplish?

The goal here is to convey the objectives of the communication as specifically and straightforwardly as possible.

Ads do more than raise awareness or get people to buy. Often the real objective of advertising is to create a new occasion for use, or justify a higher price or boost the morale of the people who serve customers, or just to get people talking about the brand. Starbucks’s 2007 holiday advertising had as its primary goal to evoke warm feelings in its audience with the hope those feelings would transfer to Starbucks and translate into sales of gift cards for family and friends.

The ultimate goal of communications may be to increase sales, but that is far too distant a goal to be useful in a brief, and more important, it doesn’t help creatives. The real question is: *How* will sales be increased? By getting customers to buy more often? By attracting new customers? By changing perceptions? Or by getting regular customers to purchase a gift card?

If you are at a loss about finding a sufficiently specific objective, check out the 4A’s book called *One Hundred Reasons to Advertise*. It’s a little dated, but it’s a handy reference for thinking about all the things ads can do.

One more thing: Clients are sometimes wildly optimistic about what communications can achieve. Ads can accomplish wonderful things, but in most business situations they don’t make the sale alone. By being honest

about what the ads will achieve, you can save yourself some trouble down the road when the sales figures or tracking study results come in.

For example, the goal of the Motel 6 advertising, a very successful radio campaign that has been running since the 1980s, was to make guests feel comfortable about staying in a low-priced chain motel. Many worried they'd be perceived as too poor or too cheap to stay anywhere else. So the advertising had to create another reason for staying there, one that transcended merely saving money.

2. Who Are We Talking To?

This part of the brief tells creatives what they need to know about the target audience in order to write ads to them. Thus, the question is sometimes posed as “What do we know about the target audience that can help us?” or “What is the consumer insight that will drive the work?”

The demographic definition of the target audience should be only a starting point. “Adults 18-64” really doesn't help the creative team much in their search for a solution. This is the place to tell the team how and where consumers use the product, how it relates to their life goals or their lifestyle, how it relates to their psychology or culture, why they stop or start using it, how they use advertising in the category – anything that will help the creative team envision who they are writing to and give them a way into consumers' lives.

Another feature of the description is that it must link in some way to the proposition presented in the next section. There are many interesting things about any target audience, but only a few offer an insight that will be useful to creatives.

Motel 6 knew a lot about the segments of travelers it appealed to: young couples on a budget, retirees seeing the country, per diem business travelers – their demographics, travel habits, likes, and dislikes. But the most important thing about them was that they all needed reassurance they would still get a clean, comfortable room even though they were spending less.

3. What Is the Single Most Persuasive Idea We Can Convey?

This section contains the focal point for the communication. Sometimes it's called the Main Thought or the Proposition. This is the idea we want the target to accept, and it's usually the single most motivating and differentiating thing we can say about the brand.

Ideas can come from anywhere, though often they are grounded in our knowledge of what the brand's strengths are, what's really motivating to people, and some aspect of what the product or service is or does.

If the communication is to be single-minded (and for most kinds of short-form advertising, that's the only kind that has a prayer of being noticed and remembered), it has to be focused.

Let's say the ad needs to generate interest in a new mobile phone. Should it focus on the phone's quality, reliability, famous brand name, low price, or one or more of its new and unique features? Or, maybe the most important message isn't about the product at all. Perhaps it's some practical customer benefit like keeping track of your kids or succeeding in business or being able to leave your camera or your PDA at home. Or maybe the thing to emphasize is an emotional benefit like being the first to have it or being cooler than your classmates or having a phone to capture embarrassing moments so you can tease your friends.

Choosing among these alternatives depends on good product knowledge, recognition of the brand's strengths and weaknesses, and a deep understanding of the target's needs and motivations.

Not only is there a lot of work in choosing the one most important thing to say, but there is also the challenge in saying it in a provocative way. Try to state the proposition as imaginatively and succinctly as possible. The agency for Motel 6 could have chosen a proposition like "Really low prices." Instead they chose "A smart choice because you don't pay for what you don't need." A good proposition points the way to a solution and has in it the seeds of good creative executions.

4. Why Should They Believe It?

Sometimes a proposition requires factual support to change attitudes or behavior. Sometimes it's the way the proposition is stated or the attitude it projects that supports the main idea. One thing is certain: the amount of support must be appropriate for the media you are planning to use. If it's a 30-second TV spot, one support point is often enough (and some think one is too many). Thus, briefs for outdoor advertising tend to be short; those for infomercials or websites are much longer.

As Mike Hall says in his chapter in this book, all kinds of things can make advertising persuasive: offering a functional benefit or unique selling proposition, communicating brand values that resonate, identifying the right call to action, or simply making the brand stand out from the crowd.

Sometimes the ad's attitude or tone of voice can make it more persuasive. If the planner has a point of view about tone of voice, it should go here. Should the ad be authoritative, humorous, factual, emotional, spiritual? What will work best with this audience?

Some Tips on the Process

Brief creation doesn't occur in a vacuum. Although the planner leads the team, strategy development is usually a collaborative enterprise. Here are some tips for increasing the odds of having maximum impact.

- Make sure you have the facts.

Although the amount of information you will have in any particular situation will vary greatly, the brief should be based on the best information available. It's amazing how often a client has an untested hunch about what to say in advertising that bears no relationship to the target's reality. And the agency team certainly isn't immune to personal prejudice or wishful thinking. Fortunately there's usually a set of facts that has to be accommodated. And the planner is often in the position to recommend additional research to settle differences.

- If you can, write multiple briefs.

Multiple briefs often clarify the advertising problem. So if there's time, it's usually a good idea to write briefs organized around several propositions. Planners and account service people can compete to produce the best solution. "Dueling briefs" create useful debate and elucidate the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. Not only does this create better briefs, but it also generates more conviction in presenting your case.

- Involve others.

Brief writing is a team sport. Everybody brings something to the party. Try to involve your client because he or she has a lot of experience with the product or service being advertised. Try to involve creatives because they are the best writers and are, well, creative. In any case, creatives must be involved somewhere along the way because only they can tell you whether the brief makes sense to them and provides a starting point for an interesting creative execution.

- Plan the briefing.

If a brief fell in the forest would anyone hear it? The brief is only part of the task. Having a meeting or meetings to communicate the brief to creatives is far more effective than slipping it under the door. The briefing is not an afterthought but an opportunity to provide additional information and make the brief come alive for the creative team. Often the most useful part of the briefing is the supplemental materials and ideas the planner brings to it. Music, images, ads, and other artifacts of the consumer – anything to bring the brief to life – are all fair game.

- Stay humble.

Never lose sight of the fact that the brief is merely a means to an end. Ad agencies are in the business of creating memorable and effective advertising. So our briefs are only as good as the ads that come out of them. As one advertising sage remarked, "You don't have a great brief until you have a great ad."

Where Briefs Are Headed

Life was simpler in the days before agencies had such a broad arsenal of new media to choose from. Because marketing is being asked to do more things in more ways, many of the old formulations – including the questions asked in the creative brief – are changing in response to changing times.

Crispin Porter & Bogusky is an advertising agency that has had some rather spectacular success recently – in a world where advertising success is no easy task. Their unique ads for Burger King, beautifully designed work for the Mini, clever “Man Laws” for Miller Beer, and “Truth” anti-smoking campaign seemed to hit the right note in a cynical world.

CP+B is also a perfect example of an agency that has created a brief that reflects both the new roles advertising has been asked to take and the agency’s unique approach to creative communication. Their brief addresses each of the four basic questions discussed above; but it does so in a way that evolves and elaborates their meaning.

First, let’s look at how these questions are similar, yet different, from what we’ve been discussing. My comments are in italics.

The CP+B Creative Brief

- **At-a-Glance.** What is the most relevant and differentiating idea that will surprise consumers or challenge their current thinking or relationship with the brand?

In an over-communicated world, it’s important to boil the issues down to something quick and simple. The CP+B brief instructs us to reduce our complicated idea to its essence.

- **Tension.** What is the psychological, social, categorical, or cultural tension associated with this idea?

CP+B believes that engaging stories (and engaging communications in general) are based on tension between opposing forces. Is the brand an upstart in an established category? Can the brand be a “good guy” to a competitor’s “bad guy,” or vice versa? Tension creates emotion, drama, and suspense. Often it begs for resolution, causing people to act.

- **Question.** What is the question we need to answer to complete this assignment?

The communications problem can often be solved by identifying — and then answering — a key question. Charles Kettering said, “A problem well-stated is half-solved.”

- **Talk Value.** What about the brand could help us to start a dialogue between the brand and our target, among our target and/or within popular culture in general? It could be the little rationalizations that people use to support their emotional decision.

As much as any other US agency, CP+B has found ways to multiply the impact of their work — and extend their clients’ communications budgets — by getting people to talk about it. Their 2004 viral campaign “Subservient Chicken” for Burger King generated 20 million hits as it was passed around the world.

In many ways, the CP+B brief points the way to where briefs are heading.

1. Rather than describing merely the business context, it places the communications problem in a larger social and cultural context.
2. It acknowledges that people are consuming media in new ways and that what people tell each other about the ad may have more impact than the ad itself.
3. It reflects a unique model of how advertising works by advising creatives to exploit the inherent tension in the brand’s situation.
4. It uses language that is “media neutral,” that is, it makes no assumptions about what kinds of communications will be needed to solve the problem.

As communications problems and media options become more complex, there will be an increasing need to strategize, prioritize, and distill until we have a document that helps the creative team get it right.

In brief, we’ll always need some kind of brief.

