

Briefing creative agencies

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A key element in the creation of any marketing communications is the creative brief. Historically, advertisers have not been particularly good at providing the sort of briefs that agency creative people find inspiring (1, 3), and it has become the role of the agency planner to translate the advertiser's intentions into a more focused and directly relevant brief to the creatives (1, 12).

Agencies have developed their own, mostly very similar, briefing forms, as an essential element in their production processes - though the UK's 2005 APG awards (available in full on www.warc.com) saw a wider variety of brief formats than in previous years.

The changing nature of marketing communications has made the development of effective creative briefs a greater challenge than it used to be in the days when the default ad campaign consisted of 30-second TV spots, and the creative team simply of an art director and copywriter (9, 16).

It is by no means clear, however, that best practice has fully caught up with the changes, and typical ad agency briefing forms seem substantially unchanged.

This paper, therefore, can be regarded as an interim view, for which the input material is more to be found in critiques of traditional planning processes than in published descriptions of new briefing formats and practice.

That said, the nature of creativity and creative processes has not changed: creativity, especially of the harnessed and directed kind required for commercial communications, continues to follow the pattern proposed by (for example) Wallas: a four-step process consisting of preparation, incubation, illumination and verification (2).

This means that the creative group/team/whatever still requires, amongst other things, a comprehensive understanding of the brand, the proposed target audience and the market situation it is addressing, including a steer as to direction. This may, still, include a brand positioning statement, a core proposition and, perhaps, a 'brand story' (14).

The creatives will need, too, an actual briefing that enables them to get, as far as possible, under the skin of the brand and its target consumers. This has been, and remains, an area where planners and account managers have the opportunity to make a genuinely creative contribution to the creative development process, which may involve a variety of forms of 'theatre' to embody the key insights about the brand (e.g. 17, 22) or, occasionally, something even more drastic (18).

New demands

The changing nature of the typical communications campaign means that the development of the creative communication is likely to be a matter of several stages.

It can be argued that the most significant change to campaign planning in recent years has been the rise in importance of media, or more widely channel, planning (6, 8): the need to define as far as possible in advance of creative content development the range of channels and disciplines to be deployed against the target audience, and the definition of the roles that each should perform (5, 7).

It is, arguably, only once the shape of the campaign has been broadly agreed (with the recognition that it may need to be modified in the light of the ultimate creative proposals) that the next stage, of developing the campaign Idea (aka the Big Idea) should be undertaken (13, 15).

As it is recognised that the campaign Idea must be capable of implementation across a range of disciplines and media, it is important for media-neutral planning that it should not be too dominantly (for example) a TV idea.

It is only when the Idea has been developed and agreed that it can then be reflected in specific creative briefs for the individual elements within the campaign. At this stage, the process becomes closer to traditional creative briefing, as applied in a variety of rather different ways to different disciplines (11).

The effect of this change in emphasis should be to change the role of, in particular, the agency planner.

In recent years, there has been a clear tendency for planning to move closer and closer to the creatives, with an expectation among creatives that the brief they receive from the planner will provide both clear direction and creative inspiration, so much that the resulting campaign might almost be a joint effort (10, 12).

The new scenario outlined above places much more emphasis on the planner's ability to understand the complete communication process

whereby the target audience can be influenced to buy the brand: and the resulting brief is likely to be more focused on the answer to questions like 'what do we expect people to do as a result of seeing our (ad, promotion, sponsorship, placement, and so on)?' (19, 20, 23).

Changing teams

This change should be paralleled, too, by changes in the nature of the team responding to the brief.

We are no longer looking at two individuals who are especially skilled in the art of coming up with compelling ideas for a TV commercial (9). We need to be putting together a larger team that is focused on the task of finding ways to bring a brand to relevant, vibrant life in a whole range of contexts (4).

We are looking not for (specifically) ad ideas, but, more generally, for business ideas that may be carried through in any of a variety of media and activities.

Sutherland (4) suggests that this calls not so much for a Big Idea as a Big Ideal - a sort of brand vision statement that can then inform all the creativity that surrounds the brand.

Formats

All this does not mean that the traditional agency briefing forms need to be thrown out. They have long had the virtue of concentrating the key information about the brand into a simple - typically one-page - format that enables everyone to see at a glance what is required, and what it is trying to do.

They operate perfectly well at the individual discipline stage of the process, and the type of information about the brand that they contain can reasonably act as a summary of the material that goes into the 'idea' briefing.

A list of 'ingredients' that a brief needs to cover off are:

The company

- Business, objectives, strategy

The brand

- Product details
- Product benefits and rationale
- Positioning
- History

The market

- Competitive context

Target audience

- Who? Where?
- Relationship with category, brand
- Key insight(s)

The task/project/campaign

- Issues/tasks
- Specific objectives (in consumer terms: what do we want them to do/ believe/etc?)
- The single most important point to be made about the brand
- Media plan: how the campaign is intended to work
- Budgets
- Mandatories
- Timetable

Execution guidelines

- Tone of voice
- Context, setting, etc

Some of these are essentially administrative, rather than contributing to the creative process itself, and a brief need not include all of them: the precise format ought to be tailored to the task, rather than a rigid template.

In practice, briefs can be exceedingly brief, if the focus and the task are absolutely clear, as one or two of those in the latest (2005) UK APG awards papers show (20, 23).

A good brief, in fact, can be summed up as one that is clear, inspirational and avoids all kinds of wooliness (1), but still provides enough

background to enable the creatives to understand the brand and the task (19, 21, 22).

A major danger for client-side brief-writers is the tendency to try to include a whole range of secondary product benefits or features in the brief. Most successful commercial communication is built around a single, compelling theme - which might once have been a USP, though these tend to be rare birds.

What is clear is that the brief needs to be shared between agency and client, whoever actually writes it. Unless there is clear agreement about precisely what is intended, there will be endless disputes and arguments later.

This is why a written brief is essential, but it is equally clear that this needs to be backed up by verbal presentation, while the creative team also need to be given enough experience of the brand (18) - and ideally its users (17) - to be fully in tune with how it fits into the world.

Current debate

The whole issue of what a brief should look like and what it should contain has recently begun to be aired in UK planner-related blogs - the most detailed of these can be found at: www.russelldavies.typepad.com/planning/2006/10/the_perfect_cre.html.

From these discussions, it is clear that forward-thinking planners are increasingly focused on aiming to answer a very few simple questions, relating to the problem facing the brand, the target audience and possible routes to engaging with them.

It is equally clear that there is no consensus as to precisely what is required: it seems generally agreed that a fixed format or template is too constricting, and that each project requires its own specific brief.

That said, the leading practitioners admit that they usually work with a set of headings in mind, which lesser mortals might readily turn into a briefing form.

Everyone, however, agrees that there is no substitute for detailed discussion around the brief to ensure that the brand and its situation, and key consumer insights, are fully understood by the creative team.

Core reading

1. D Barker: [How to write an inspiring creative brief](#). *Admap* 419, July 2001.
2. L Caller: [Creative thinking and the joy of process](#). *Market Leader* 37, Summer 2007.
3. P Gladman and A Melsom: [Breakthrough creativity: a blend of art and science](#). *Market Leader* 31, Winter 2005.
4. R Sutherland and J Shaw: [True crime, toolkits and the Big Ideal](#). *Market Leader* 37, Summer 2007.

Media issues

5. C McDonald: [Changing consumers: rethinking your strategy](#). *Admap* 439, May 2003.
6. T Regan: [Evaluating cross-channel communications](#). *Admap* 455, November 2004.
7. K Sirkin: [The future of communications planning](#). *Admap* 454, October 2004.
8. John Wood: [The impact of technology on integrated marketing](#). *Admap* 459, March 2005.

Planning

9. A Benvenuto: [Planning: the challenge of complexity](#). *Admap* 483, May 2007.
10. T Broadbent: [Planning and Creativity: Help or Hindrance?](#) *Admap* 419, July 2001.
11. J Griffiths: [Above and Beyond Advertising Planning](#). *Admap* 425, February 2002.
12. C Hackley: [Account planning: current agency perspectives on an advertising enigma](#). *Journal of Advertising Research* 43, 2, June 2003.

Creativity

13. G Ellor: [Generating big ideas that grow your brand](#). *Admap* 473, June 2006.
14. J Griffiths: [Writing screenplays for brands](#). *Admap* 466, November 2005.
15. S McIlrath: [Setting Communication Objectives: Are They Wrong?](#) *Admap* 419, July 2001.
16. C Peterson: [CGA: the creative destruction of agencies](#). *Admap* 482, April 2007.

Case studies

17. V Brooks: [Engaging the street, winning the game](#). *Admap* 442, September 2003.
18. H Chapman: Metamucil - [Stuck in the Shit\(ter\)](#). APG Australia Awards, 2004.
19. R Davies: [Honda - Isn't It Nice When Things Just Work?](#) APG (UK) Awards, 2003.
20. C Hutchinson: [Department for Transport - Speed campaign](#). APG (UK) Awards, 2005.
21. O Johnson: [How Dove changed the rules of the beauty game](#). *Market Leader* 31, Winter 2005.
22. O Taylor: [Virgin Mobile - Because Cheap Messages Are More Fun](#). APG Australia Awards, 2004.
23. M Wyatt, [Heinz Baked beans](#). APG (UK) Awards, 2005.

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