



PREPARING
A DESIGN BRIEF



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Preparing a Design Brief

INTRODUCTION

A design brief is a written document outlining, in complete detail, the business objectives and corresponding design strategies for a design project. Among a number of other things, the most critical elements of a design brief are: a complete description of the project—what is it that is trying to be done; why is this needed now; what business outcomes are expected; who is this being done for (the target audience); and who are the key stakeholders in this project.

A thorough and articulate design brief is a critical part of the design process. It helps develop trust and understanding between the client and designer - and serves as an essential point of reference for both parties.

Above all, the design brief ensures that important design issues are considered and questioned before the designer starts work. In order to assist me in finding a starting point and to bring me closer to understanding your design needs please answer the following questions:

COMPANY PROFILE

Introduce your company with a short description of your organization.

- What product or service you provide.
- A company mission statement or philosophy.
- Give a concise company history.
- Describe your company niche and how you fit into your industry sector.

PROJECT GOALS

Good design can have a huge influence on the success of a company's marketing strategy. In order for me, as the designer to provide the best possible design for your needs, clear goals must be set. Sitting down to write the design brief will help you set those goals. For example, do you want to:

- Generate sales?
- Encourage enquiries?
- Gain newsletter subscribers?
- Obtain information from your audience?
- Encourage them to tell a friend?



Be clear, concise and concentrate on the key objectives you wish to achieve. Remember, at this stage, anything is still possible. Explain clearly what you expect to see but challenge the designer to think a bit further and provide you with ideas.

YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

Identify your primary audience and address new markets you want to reach. Be specific with any demographic figures about your audience that you have. These figures will be useful to the designer. Include age, gender, household income level, occupation, and geographic location.

YOUR BUDGET AND TIMESCALE

Providing budget expectations will give the designer a good idea of the type of solution they will be able to provide. You can state your likely maximum cost and request that the designer looks to provide as much value for you within the budget as possible (pros: relevant costs and, potentially, less time wasted for you. cons: Lower quotes than your maximum budget are unlikely). This method tends to be of value when you feel your budgets could exceed your requirements e.g. Charities, some Public services and start-up businesses. Withholding this information for fear of being overcharged is a common misconception about working with designers. Start with honesty up front and most likely you will receive good service in return. Let your designer know if there is a specific deadline, such as a holiday or special event that has to be met.

The other "traditional" route is to send out the brief and await the costs that come back (pros: Lower than expected costs possible from Designers. Cons: Likewise, costs could be much higher than is affordable meaning a round or two of re-specification and quotes).

SUPPORTING INFORMATION/DESIGN EXAMPLES

Collect any visuals, typefaces, colours you like as you prepare the brief. Design is a visual medium so a verbal description of "the cool web site with a rock background" has little meaning. Include a few of these examples in the brief describing what you like about the colours, imagery and typography. Also attach samples of your company's current marketing materials for further reference.

Providing examples of what you consider to be effective or relevant design can be a great visual help to support the written part of a design brief.

If there is a design style that you particularly like or dislike – then explain why in the brief. If you're not entirely sure why you like a certain design style, then good starting points include:

- Colour
- Imagery



- Quantity and quality of text
- Typography
- The atmosphere that particular designs create

Don't feel that you have to stick to the medium that you are designing for when giving a list of inspiration and influences. If a television advert or music video creates the atmosphere that you want your design to create, then that is a perfectly reasonable statement to include in a design brief.

The more clues you give about your design tastes, the more likely the designer will be able to produce something close to your aims. Expecting your designer to second-guess what you require rarely produces the best results.

Remember that professional designers will not copy the ideas you send them... but will use them as the start of the design process.

Have a look at websites around the Internet critically and note what you do and don't like about the designs on/of them. Try to look at sites in a similar industry to your own and keep this as reference material.

Ambiguity tends to get punished by an increase in the estimate to cover all eventualities.

This will not apply to every brief but you may wish to include some of the following documents:

- Competitor List

Listing who your competitors are, quick note on brand strengths and weaknesses and website details can give an agency a very quick overview of your market.

- Trade Advertisers / Suppliers

Again, as with competitors, if you advertise regularly it will be useful to see where and how you do so.

- Brochures, Letterheads and other Marketing information

All corporate identity information should be supplied, as it is invaluable in achieving a consistent message to market.

TIPS:

Maintain flexibility

Whatever you write in the brief, you will change your mind about some of the issues at some point. For this reason, give yourself the room to do so within the brief and request that there is some provision for flexibility with specific points or within the project as a whole.



Consult with colleagues

Consult with as many people within your organisation as possible before sending the brief to the designer. Showing the design brief to different people may reveal remarkable differences in the way people see your organisation's aims and objectives. Resolving any differences in opinion will save considerable time and expense further down the line.

If your project will involve the approval of other people in the organisation make sure they have helped you write the brief or thoroughly reviewed it. Resolve any differences now to ensure the brief is as effective as possible. Also explain the approval process. It is helpful to include an organisational diagram of how the team will work together.

Language

- Whilst you should write in clear, concise way - there is no reason why you cannot use emotive language to emphasise exactly what you are trying to achieve.
- Write with professional language but you can also include a voice that reflects the unique personality of your company.

Review and refine the brief before sending it out. This is the first step of the project and the attention spent now will guide its future success.

FAQS

- How does a design brief differ from a marketing plan.

A complete design brief must take the marketing plan several steps further. The design brief is not a description of what the design solution will actually look like. Rather, it matches a strategic design approach to each of the business objectives described in the marketing plan. The design brief also includes the detailed process that will be followed to develop and test concepts, as well as the process which will be employed to determine the best possible final design solution.

- Who is responsible for developing, or writing, the design brief?

Design briefs must consist of collaboration between two equal partners. One partner represents the entity with the need for design work. The other partner represents the design function that will actually do the design work. Both partners are equally accountable for the final results of the design project. It is never appropriate for one group to prepare a design brief and simply hand it over to the design function for execution.

- I traditionally have very short time periods to complete a project. Do I always need to develop a complete design brief?



No, not all design projects require a complete design brief. It is important to differentiate between simple "production" work and "strategic" design work. Creating a price list, or developing tent cards for trade show exhibits, would probably be considered production work. Designing a new product, package or the development of new sales collateral materials are generally considered "strategic" design projects. It is also important to remember that the time it takes to develop a complete design brief is more than made up during the ensuing design process. Using a complete design brief actually shortens the time it will take to complete the project.

- What are the best ways to measure the effectiveness of a design solution?

Design can be a very subjective thing. You can't rely on an individual's subjective, personal opinions, usually expressed in terms such as, "I like it" or, worse, "I don't like it!" Unlike art, which often tends to follow the axiom, "Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder," strategic design is a problem-solving discipline. The only truly accurate method of measuring design is to determine to what degree the design solution met the stated business objectives. Clearly developed and articulated business objectives should be measurable in a quantifiable way.

- After a design brief is created and approved by appropriate stakeholders, what happens if a situation develops that requires changing the approved brief?

Although this should be a rare occurrence if the design brief was carefully crafted, it does happen. In this event the partners who developed the brief must make the decision to modify it and then communicate the changes to all stakeholders in a timely fashion. It is important to note that as the individuals held accountable for the brief, only the partners should be able to authorize changes to it.