THE DESIGN BRIEF

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It is good practice for design students to follow their commercial counterparts in responding to a brief. All design briefs should bedocumented as they form the yardstick against which all work will be directed and, ultimately, assessed. Some briefs are delivered entirely verbally by clients or, following a verbal presentation by the client, accompanied by a written brief

On occasion, the client may not have a formal brief and it will be necessary to tease this out during discussions. In all cases, it is a good plan to produce your own document encompassing your understanding of what you have been asked to do and receive approval from the client on this. The reasoning here is that, almost certainly, the verbal presentation will contain additional information not indicated in any client version of their written brief (if they have one at all), and this needs to be recorded. Also, when clients present their brief, there is likely to be opportunities to ask questions that may add more information to the final (writen) design brief. A document such as this is standard practice for commercial design studios and is an essential precusor to any design work (note: it is true that some design studios do not operate with written briefs all the time – but that realy is poor practice so be wary of this if you encounter it).

A written brief is in effect a written contract between the client and the design studio!

As the brief is gong to be the yardstick against which success, or failure, is going to be measured, it is vital that there is complete understanding between client and designer. Having the document signed by both parties minimizes the chance of misunderstandings arising later, particularly when invoices start arriving in clients offices.

When working for a client, the brief is also going to form the basis for deciding how to tackle the job, scheduling and costing. Designstudios normally respond to the brief by preparing a document, which, in addition to including their understnading of the brief as discussed above, will also describe how the project is going to be conducted on a stae by stage basis, the proposed dates of interim meetings and the final presentation. As accurate estimation of costs would also be provided, accurate costings might be given for the first stage only, accompanied by an estimation of the overall projected budget required.

The first stage in the design process is to fully understand the brief. Read and re-read it, taking on board every detail. If there is some aspect that you are unsure about, ask the client to explain.

The rigour required to meet a design challenge is pointless if the challenge itself is changed or the goal posts are moved or revised. If, for example, you are working on a vitamin supplement for five-year-old children, don't be tempted to modify the age range stated in the brief just because, on reflection, you realise that your design work is actually more suitable for 12 year olds.

At the start of each semester you are usually provided with a brief or indeed several 'briefs' for each module – these briefs usually outline the nature of the projects and assignments you are being asked to undertake and usually provide some information regarding deliverables you are being asked to submit and the project assessment milestones and deadlines and you then use these to produce your work.

Are these really Design Briefs – NO – these are what can be termed as 'commissining briefs' – naturally busy working designers receive commissioning briefs from clients all the time but even if they are well crafted these briefs seldom contain all the information or type of information designers really need to create an effective design solution and rarely provide the opportunity for meaningful dialogue regarding the brief.

So What exactly is a Design Brief?

It is important to understand that there are as many approaches to creating a design brief as there are designers and unfortunately there is no magic formula – designers lives would be so much less complicated if there were – so don't look for a one-size-fits-all 'perfect' format. But there are ingredients that and good design brief should contain and there are critical processes involved in creating a good brief that is useful to all the individuals involved.

The best design brief process is a business-orientated, strategic management process. It is important to remember that there are a variety of design disciplines, and each requires slightly different information if the brief is actually going to be useful. A brief for a print project such as a brochure would probably not require many of the elements that a web design project might. A design brief for a packaging project would likewise need to contain information specifically related to packaging graphics and packaging engineering. Therefore it is necessary for each design organisation to create its own specific set of standards, processes and guidelines for its design briefs.

Many people use a variety of terms for what I am referring to as a 'design brief' – some call them 'creative briefs' – others use terms such as 'marketing brief', 'project brief', 'job ticket' or even 'innovation brief'. Whatever term is used, we are talking about a written description of a project that requires some form of consideration and design.

My least favourite term is 'job ticket'. This is usually no more than a one-page summary of the title of the project, the deadline,the budget, the name of the client or requesting person or group and mostly other technical date such as quantities and delivery details. In my opinion these job tickets are more or less usless for the actual process of developing a design solution.

It can be argued that 'innovation brief' is the better description because of what it implies. Unfortunately, even today, a lot of businesses don't understand the design process and don't really regard design as an innovate, or even strategic business process, but rather, they think of it as a merely decorative service – and this can and does lead to problems for designers.

So what is a design brief and what format should it take?

As mentioned, there is actually no single correct or preferred format for a design brief. I have seen really good design briefs that are totally narrative, written in paragraph form and others that employ the bulletted list format. Increasingly, I am seeing design briefs that have been developed with a computer program format that simply require the filling in of the blank fields for a list of key questions. I have even seen some excellent briefs formatted as PowerPoint presentations.

The format that you might eventually adopt will depend largely what a particular design company finds useful and on the specific type of design work your are involved with (A web design project might require a bifferent format than a packaging design one).

However, the format is, of course, critical in that it should be easy to read and track through.

Other than that, what is most important is that the brief contains ALL of the information and data necessary for every stakeholder in the process. It must also be available in hard copy and well as online.

The computer program-generated type of format seems to offer the biggest challenge for designers, which a somewhat ironic, as for tha most part, designers have been responsible for generating these particular formats. The main problem with these formats is not so much that they are poorly designed but that they are not used properly, with many fields being left blank or filled with incomplete information. For example there might be a field titled 'Audience' which is typically filled in as 'Our Customers' and that is really not a suitable entry.

How Long should A Design Brief be?

The quick response to this question is "As long as necessary". Often designers are asked to make design briefs as short as possible. That should not be the goal. The real goal is to make design briefs as complete and useful as possible. The final length will ultimately be determined by the requirements of the specific project and its complexity.

So how should you go about creating a Design Brief?

A Design Brief should be the starting point for discovering 'core creative concepts' and a comprehensive design brief should be produced before beginning the process of developing these creative concepts.

Kim Zarney describes the process in this article in the Design Management Journal.

THE CORE CREATIVE CONCEPT IN BRANDING: A STREAMLINED APPROACH.

Anyone who enjoys stir-fry cooking knows the key to producing a good meal is having all your ingredients ready before you get started cooking. Stir-fry is a rapid process and it works best when you add each ingredient at just the right time. It is an easy way to cook – if you are prepared.

Implementing a sucessful packaging program in today's business environment is a lot like stir-fry cooking. There is a sense of urgency; everthing is a priority, it seems, and it all has to be done at the same time. As designers, our responsibility to help clients achieve botton-line results is constantly challenged by limited budgets, inflexible retail merchandising requirements, tight production schedules, and shrinking delivery times. The pressure is on to make sure packaging solutions will work. At the same time, with more product choices and increasing quantities of visual clutter all competng for the same consumers attention., it's more important than ever to simplify branding messages.

The best way to achieve all these goals is to have a core creative concept to drive all the branding elements nedded for a launch. Think of it as a recipe for fast tracking the entire process. In order to establish a clear, simple message in the minds of cosumers, we first need a clear understanding of what this concept needs to communicate. The more specific the message, the more effective it can be in generating the results we want.

Print advertising has always understood how this creative formula works. The timeless appeal of a great ad is its ability to tell a story, without the need for a lot of extra words or explanation. The visual impact pulls the audience in, and the intellectual delight keeps it there. Even though packaging is physically more complex than the printed page, the opportunity is still there to tell a simple story and make an emotional connection with the larger audience.

THE INGREDIENTS

To create that special meal, you need to find the right recipe – one that outlines all the ingredients, instructions, and special techniques you're going to need. The same rationale is true for developing a core creative concept to help guide your new packaging program. The process starts with a review of commissioning brief to determine what you actually have to work with. It's the only place that lists all the key ingredients of the 'what' of your message; analyzing those ingredients, and combing them with market place observations, will eventually help determine the 'how'. The end result of this front-end review and analysis should be a written brief that links the creative objectives with the business objectives. It will serve as a benchmark to test your concept as you move through the process.

The benefits of putting your brief in writing rather than just 'talking it through' will become abundantly clear once your program gets underway. Everyone needs to be in sync and have the same information as things heat up. Remember, it's all about speed. Getting products to market faster, connecting with consumers quicker, and moving off the shelf faster gets the bottom-line results everyone wants.

The Inflexible Elements

Building a core creative concept should always start with a review of all the inflexible elements – the parameters within which you must work. First on the list is finding out how much time you have; that way you'll know how much 'wriggle room' you have to explore alternative solutions – the amount of time ou have is not just whatever time there is between getting the job and the deadline – it's up to you as a professional to be able to manage several different jobs and tasks at the same time and certain things will always need to be done before other things can be addressed. For instance, a product launch may require multiple packaging formats, which could well mean multiple vendor sources – and vendor deadlines usually aren't coordinated to maximize your time or budget - so time management is an extremely important aspect of design – it doesn't matter how great your ideas are if you cannot manage the design process and your time in a professional manner – well maybe if your ideas are the best ever in the world – ever – maybe then clients will be happy to allow you to mess around – but probably not even then.

The next inflexible issues to be addressed are production and retail merchandising requirements. This is where design plans and reality often collide, and usually it happens at a point in the process where it's going to cost someone a lot of time and money to make the necessary changes. With retailers calling the shots today on how their floor and shelf space will be used, you need to know ahead of time what physical or production constraints are going to be imposed on the program. Moreover, because retail packaging and merchandising systems change frequently, you need to keep asking a lot of questions to make sure you have the latest information. Try to take advantage of these constraints rather than just deal with them. They may even provide you with an opportunity to reconfigure the product or to sell more as sets or kits.

Once deadlines and technical issues have been determined, it is time to see what financial resources are available. While creativity doesn't necessarily depend on having a large budget, it does depend on knowing what the budget is – before the process actually gets started.

Trying to jump-start design before the budget is determined rarely saves time and usually leads to false expectations. A big part of the planning process is creatively working with the given budget to accomplish what you have been asked to do. In finalising budgets, it is also important to make sure concept development and all the main creative elements (photography, illustration, copy, and so on) have their own specific budget amounts itemised. It's the only way to guarantee you'll have the cash available to implement the creative strategies you have promised – it is very easy indeed to lose money on a job if you don't.

While the inflexible issues aren't usually considered as the place to start the creative process, having them well documented before moving on to the more subjective issues is time well spent.

They are the informationial foundation on which you'll base the rest of your thinking.

REVIEWING OPPORTUNITIES

Next on the list is a review of the creative opportunites found in the heart of the commissining/ marketing brief. In the haste to get to new products launched, it is surprising how many times critical business and marketing issues are still in flux long after the design process has started. Design shouldn't be used as a tool to try to resolve these issues (unfortunately in Ireland clients frequently use the design process to clarify their own thinking about aspects of the job that they really should have resolved at an earlier stage – of course they still want the job on time and in budget – it's up to you – the designer to make sure they do not off-load unresolved issues onto you – unfortunately too many designers allow clients to get away with this behaviour and so clients think that it is a natural part of the process – it isn't and ultimately will cost you money and quite possibly quite a bit of your sanity) – So - before you move forward with any concept development everyone has to agree on the answers to the big questions:

- **Why are we launching this brand?**
- **What results do we want to achieve?**

The core creative concept needs to reflect and support these primary business objectives.
You also need to have clear understanding of who the target audience is. Even though most products today are created for a mass-market retail environment,the concept needs to resonate with the individual personalities who make up your target audience.

Is the new packaging speaking their language? Design can put a face on those markets by finding out about them. Are they decision makers who decide what to buy, influencers who offer complementary products, or users/recommenders who already know the brand and who are satisfied customers? nEach of these specialized audiences has its own unique point of view on what is important when it comes to the product and packaging.

What are their demographics?

What needs or desires will the product or brand satisfy?

Answers to these questions will help the design team to simplfy the message and make the right connections. In addition, it is important to consider how consumers are supposed to interact with the product and packaging information after they leave the store. Some of the best value-added branding opportunities can happen in this post-sale environment.

Post-sale is also where the internet can play an important role. Consumers should be able to easily access additional product information or detailed 'how-to' instructions, in multiple languages, online. Creative use of the internet will build brand loyalty by providing real value-added benefits for the consumer. It also gives the brand the tools it needs to be more competitive on the shelf. Packaging that clearly communicates the availability of additional information online has a selling advantage over brands that don't maximise the potential of internet as they should. The trick is to make sure that the experience is a good one. Don't make the consumer click through myriad pages to try to find what you promised; make it easy. Ideally, it should be a link right off the home page or a separate website entirely devoted to the specific product offering

Assess the Competition

Unless the product is a completely new category, the creative review should finish with an assessment of the competitive environment. While some of the competitive issues may have been answered in the business and marketing plans, design needs to test the water with its own observations and insights of how the competition is doing.

What's working for the competition? What isn't?

Are there opportunities for this new packaging to be more effective?

How do the producers want the brand to be perceived?

What messages do you want to avoid?

What visual "tone of voice" do you want to project?

Answers to these and other competitive questions will give design the opinions, observations, and concepts needed to visualise the core creative concept and, ultimately the new visual brand positioning.

The goal is to differentiate the brand in the eyes of the consumer. We know consumers connect with brands that match their own wants and needs. We also know that packaging is often the only expression of a brand the consumer will see or interact with. The first impression has to be a good one, and the brand position needs to be immediately understood. If you've done your homework, your core creative concept will provide all the visual cues the consumer is looking for.

When Do You Need a Design Brief?

Does every design project require a design brief? Absolutely not!

There are many design projects that could be classified as routine or ongoing that would not require a formal brief. In the print world, such items as price list revisions – tent cards for meetings or trade show exhibits and so on – may not require a design brief.