

The best way for a client to brief an agency

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“A brief is not about writing, it’s about thinking”

Dave Trott

The purpose of this guide is to help clients write the best possible briefs for their agencies. It comes at a watershed moment. Marketers have more tools at their disposal than ever before to connect with people and to measure the effectiveness of what they do. Except none of this matters if the one thing that everything hinges on – the brief – isn't clear, isn't thought through and isn't right.

A brief is a roadmap for creative thinking. It is a critical juncture in the transfer of information from marketer to agency. It defines the desired outcome of a given activity and guides the task at hand. Briefs play a crucial role in steering the creative process, which is elusive and unpredictable by nature.

Briefs written by marketers for their agencies should command attention and care. By its very definition, a brief is about giving an agency the right information so that it can come back with the best possible solution. Often however, what's briefed lacks direction at best and is confusing at worst.

So, the role of this guide is two-fold. Firstly, to provide a practical tool to help marketers write better briefs underpinned by rock-solid strategic thinking. And, secondly to create a shared understanding between marketers and agencies as to what constitutes a good brief (and briefing). Because ultimately, we all want the same thing: more impactful and effective work that delivers better business results. This guide is about putting the thinking back into the brief.

The importance of briefs

There is a lot of pressure on marketers and agencies to create ideas that deliver a positive ROI. And briefs are one of the most important tools marketers have to create impactful and effective work¹. However, the quality of the briefs brands sent to agencies leaves much to be desired; 4 in 5 agencies believe that marketers don't understand what they need from briefs². And with growing scrutiny on marketing budgets, poor quality briefs are putting brands in peril.

1 BetterBriefs Project global report 2021: 90% of marketers and 89% of creative agencies agree "It's difficult to produce good creative work without a good marketing brief"

2 BetterBriefs Project global report 2021: 80% of creative agencies indicate their clients have a poor or limited understanding of what they need from a brief

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of marketers
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agree

Poor briefs don't allow agencies to solve problems or seize opportunities identified by marketers. If briefs are unclear, then agencies can't be sure what's expected of them. At which point the second guessing begins. Good briefs guide creative thinking and act as a neutral reference point for assessing the work. Often, the root cause is marketers' and agencies' inability to see eye-to-eye on what a good brief looks like. 80% of marketers think they're good at writing briefs. Only 10% of agencies agree³.

Unchallenged, poor briefs trigger a raft of negative consequences. They lead to confusion, shallow creative thinking and often mediocre ideas. Which in turn lead to unhappy clients, rounds and rounds of creative work, rebriefs, de-motivation and ultimately less effective work in-market. The BetterBriefs study found that one third of all marketing budgets⁴ are potentially wasted due to poor briefs and misdirected work.

In its simplest form, a good client brief defines what a brand wants an agency to do. It explains succinctly the need for a creative idea.. It summarises the need for advertising and the marketing strategy that's in place. It clearly defines the boundaries for creative thinking, sets clear expectations and provides the essential information. A simple rule: if there isn't a well-defined marketing strategy in place, there can be no brief.

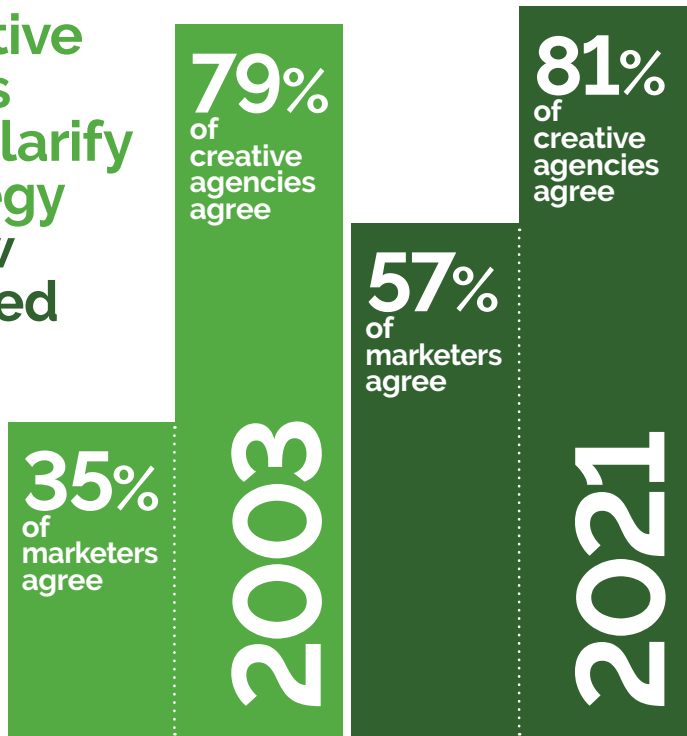
It is the agency's job to take this strategy and use creative and media smarts to achieve the defined goals in the most efficient way possible. Unfortunately, 60% of marketers use the creative process to clarify their strategies⁵ rather than being clear about these from the outset. In fact, UK data indicates this behaviour is only becoming more prevalent.

A good brief doesn't guarantee success but it improves the chances greatly. However, while most marketers and agencies agree that briefs are important, they are currently being neglected⁶.

3, 4, 5 BetterBriefs Project global report 2021

6 BetterBriefs Project global report 2021: 90% of marketers and 92% of creative agencies agree 'The brief is one of the most valuable and paradoxically most neglected tools marketers have to create good work'

The creative process is used to clarify the strategy more now than it used to be



“Writing bad briefs is the most expensive way to write advertising”
Sir John Hegarty

Marketing strategy shapes briefs

By Mark Ritson

Most marketers, a whopping 95% of them, don't provide strategic direction to their agencies. They fail for two reasons. First, because they don't have strategic clarity themselves. Second, because they cannot communicate it to their agencies via the brief.

Let's tackle the first of those two challenges because, without first achieving strategic clarity, it's impossible to provide it to others. And because the second challenge is covered later in this guide. Almost like we were planning it that way.

Strategy before Tactics

Your first job is to resist tactical temptations.

Too many marketers busy themselves with these before they have articulated the strategic problem. Think of strategy as the plan of attack and tactics as the means by which that plan will be executed. Every time someone talks prematurely about YouTube or a direct distribution model, whack them over the head with something heavy.

Note: Strategy comes from "strategos", the Greek word for "general", one who make decisions, not those who throw spears.

Strategy is Sacrifice

Badly run brands try to do everything, all the time, to everyone.

Better brands are selective and selfish. Their strategies revolve as much around what they will not do, as what they intend to achieve. Be selfish, be different, be ready to say no to what everyone else says yes to. The essence of strategy, as Professor Michael Porter always reminds us, is what we are not going to do. Our subsequent focus is stored for what remains.

Note: Always subtract, never add. There will be other years and other opportunities. For now focus is your God.

Complexity breeds Simplicity

We've all seen super-complex strategies that can't fit into less than fifty-pages or two hour presentations.

Each is the result of under-thinking and culminates in a pointless strategy that no-one can understand or execute. Think long and hard and often about your strategy. Dwell on it. Revise it. Test it. Rewind and replay it in the shower. Run it past the smartest person in the room. As you work your strategy it will become shorter, simpler, more elegant and beautiful. Sometimes so beautiful the people that are meant to follow it give you the ultimate compliment: that it is obvious. Yes, you smile warmly. Yes, it is. Go and do it.

Note: Learn to separate the complex, uncertainty of strategic thinking from the simplicity of the strategy that emerges from it.

Who will the strategy focus on? Targeting

One third of your strategy should be occupied with the 'who'.

Targeting is immensely complex because it encompasses both the challenge of sophisticated mass marketing and the potential for multiple target segments. Be clear who the brand is going after and equally clear on who it is not. Use data to create a portrait of the target: a realistic, contextualised picture of who these people are, what they want and how they decide. Don't talk about the brand here, talk about the target. They are more important and bigger than your brand.

Note: Demographic cliches like "millennials" are as sure a sign as any that you have not got a strategy.

What is the offer to the target?

Positioning

A third of your strategy should focus on the brand position.

Positioning is not an end in itself. It is not the creation of a long report or the application of lots of concepts like essence, purpose, identity and proposition. All these words are synonyms. The ultimate aim of a position, or whatever you choose to call it, is to create that thought in the mind of the target. Focus on the distinctive assets of the brand and the intended message you want the brand to stand for. Three words are always more effective than thirty.

Note: If you cannot remember the various claims of your brand without the assistance of Powerpoint, you are doomed. So is your brand.

How will we win with this target?

Objectives

It's one thing to know the position, quite another to know what the objective is.

Obviously, it is ultimately sales and profit. But these are the outcomes, not the objectives that will deliver them. Do we want to make the target aware of us? To prefer us? To visit our website? To buy us again? Review all the contingent steps in the consumer's approach to the brand and focus on the very few things that will tip the balance in your brand's favour. Research suggests that as you add more objectives the likelihood of any of them working diminishes dramatically. Keep it tight. A handful of objectives at most. Focus here more than anywhere else.

Note: Learn to write objectives smartly – with benchmarks, realistic but valuable goals, and a time stamp for their achievement.

Strategy then Brief

Don't even think about briefing until your strategy is complete.

Never be afraid to re-visit it with a big, red pen. Remembering all the time that when it is ready, it will never be perfect because such things are impossible. However, it will not be what most brands brief agencies with these days: a half-baked strategy that continues to change. That's like changing the ingredients while the dish is cooking in the oven. Nail the strategy, only then turn to the challenge of briefing it in.

Note: This is not a final reminder to work hard and finish ahead of the brief. It's a reminder to start on your strategy months before the briefing is scheduled, so you have enough time to do it properly.

Writing briefs

By BetterBriefs

A good brief is never easy to write⁷.

Think of it as a series of decisions that together makes a well-reasoned case for advertising. It is never a box-ticking exercise.

⁷ BetterBriefs Project global report 2021: 82% of marketers and 83% of creative agencies agree "Writing briefs is hard"

Define the need for advertising

Brands use agencies to come up with ideas they can't think of themselves.

A good brief is laser-focused on the problem or opportunity the creative work needs to solve and acts as a compass for creative thinking. It clarifies the need for advertising and establishes expectations for the agency. It is the responsibility of the marketer to provide clear strategic direction in every brief. You'll soon discover this is what agencies thrive on.

Note: Clearly articulate 'why' this brief is necessary.

One brief = one strategy

Briefs are an exercise in binary thinking.

Brief writers must be clear in their choices. Deciding whether a brief is acquiring new customers, upselling to existing ones, or increasing frequency of purchase requires a choice. When it comes to briefs they are mutually exclusive. The need to address more than one of these choices requires multiple briefs.

Note: Writing more than one brief is often a valid solution.

Build the backbone

A good brief requires a strong backbone.

The backbone consists of the objectives, the target audience and the budget. Together they set the parameters of what's possible and what's not. They are intrinsically linked, so think about them holistically.

The objectives shape the budget. The budget determines the audience size, and the size of the target audience must be able to realise the objectives while staying within budget. You can't target everyone in the category if the budget isn't big enough. And if one changes, the other two must be modified. A lower budget means less ambitious objectives and a smaller target audience.

Note: Justifying an investment in marketing (budget) to the business is easier when the objectives and target are well-defined.

Set linked objectives

Businesses invest in advertising to drive better results.

Objectives are the most critical yet most poorly defined element of every brief⁸. Well-defined objectives outline the desired outcomes a brand aims to achieve. They paint a clear picture of success and how it will be measured. To help set the direction of the brief, three types of objectives must be considered.

⁸ BetterBriefs Project global report 2021: 61% of marketers and 71% of creative agencies rank objectives as the most critical element of marketing briefs

- 1 **Commercial objectives** capture the ultimate effect that the activity will have on the organisation (e.g. sales, profit, cost savings to the community). It is what the CFO and non-marketers look at most.
- 2 **Behavioural objectives** underpin the commercial objectives. They specify the change needed in people's behaviour to realise the commercial objectives (e.g. signing up, downloading, adding more items to the basket, quitting a bad habit or making healthier choices).
- 3 **Attitudinal objectives** are crucial because people don't just suddenly change the way they behave. A shift in the way people think or feel is required to trigger the desired change in behaviour.

Note: These three types of objectives should be linked and logical. Avoid being wishful.

Target the right people

Your audience isn't everyone, and not everyone buys your product.

Few brands have the necessary budget to reach everyone, so most brands need to be selective about whom they target. Audience definitions need to be meaningfully different from the population generally; they need to be sufficient in size to satisfy the objectives; and the brand has to have, or create, a valid right to win them over.

Note: A well-defined target audience is a vivid picture of demographics, psychographics and needs or wants.

Marry the message with the proof points

A message is only as strong as the truth that sits behind it.

While there may be many things to say about the brand or product, the reality is that people in the real world don't have the time or inclination to process lots of information.

A single-minded brief contains only one key message. That message is not a tagline. It does not try to be creative. Its sole focus is pinpointing where the creative solution should be. Good single-minded messages are supported only by relevant proof points. They are not shopping lists.

Note: The number of proof points that can be used varies by channel.

Align on evaluation

Prevent costly confusion and the premature death of ideas.

Agreeing on how the ideas will be assessed is a crucial part of the process. Decide which brief (client or creative) should be used to evaluate the work and try to include assessment criteria in it. This will help structure more objective conversations about the work. Currently, only 30% of brands have evaluation criteria in place⁹. Ideally, these evaluation criteria are developed and agreed by the brand and agency and turn into a shared language around creativity.

Note: Good evaluation criteria help foster an idea's potential rather than act as a judgement tool.

Tips

Use simple words

Choosing the right words is critical to clear communication. Use words that bring clarity. Stay away from category speak, flowery language, and words that leave things open to interpretation. Too many briefs use language that creative people don't understand. Only 5% of agencies feel the briefs they receive from their clients contain clear and concise language¹⁰.

Keep the brief brief

A good brief requires reductive thinking. It should be succinct. It should contain 'everything you need and nothing you don't'. Invest more time in shortening it as most agencies believe the briefs they receive from brands are not succinct enough¹¹. Practise the art of sacrifice. Put all the extra information in the appendix.

Write and re-write

The first draft will never be the best brief. Give it the overnight test and continue to refine and craft. Don't be shy about sharing the brief with others for review.

¹⁰ BetterBriefs Project global report 2021

¹¹ BetterBriefs Project global report 2021: 54% of agencies agree that briefs are too long; 32% too short; and only 14% succinct

Insightful > insight

Making a brief insightful is more important than including an insight. Frame the problem or opportunity interestingly. Uncover something differentiating in the brand or product. Reveal an untapped need or a fresh take on the audience that unlocks a commercial opportunity.

There's no order

A brief is not a shopping list or a box-ticking exercise. Being linear about how you fill out a template (i.e. going from top to bottom) is often not the best way to capture and structure the information.

Don't prescribe the solution

Dictating solutions limits creativity from the start. Appreciate the expertise of the agency.

Scrum not relay race

Don't treat a brief as a baton pass. Get your agencies involved where appropriate before the brief is final.

Briefing the brief

By BetterBriefs

Nearly 3/4 of marketers believe that their briefing process could benefit from more structure¹² and often the importance of the briefing is forgotten or de-prioritised.

A brief is not a briefing

A brief written is a job only half done.

There's more to a brief than writing it. The brief is the tangible output, the briefing is the way this information is delivered. When a brief is finished, you need to give serious thought as to how you go about this. An email or lengthy slide deck may not be the best way. As good as a written brief is, a good briefing provides an opportunity to create a deeper understanding of what is required whether you're briefing one agency or multiple. It demonstrates care. It sparks enthusiasm from the brief's recipients. It is a chance for agencies to interrogate the task in front of them.

Note: Immerse the agency in the problem or opportunity identified in the brief.

Aim to inspire

Briefs should not be creative, but briefings can be.

A good briefing sets the tone and injects energy into the start of the project, whereas poor briefings can undermine the potential of even the best brief. The way we experience information is almost as important as the information itself. The briefing is a marketer's opportunity to be creative, share examples that inspire the agency, and kick-start the creative process.

Note: A brief sent only via email is an opportunity wasted.

Right people, right time, right place

Never brief alone.

Brands will always know more about their products and services than agencies. Immersion is priceless for agencies trying to better understand what's on offer and the task outlined in the brief.

Consider expertise or points of view other than the brief writer's to help illustrate or highlight certain elements of the brief. Consider places or settings that further the knowledge of the products or services being sold. And sometimes, certain times of day lend themselves to the best experience of a product or service.

Note: The who, where and when makes or breaks the briefing.

Get on the same wavelength

Don't assume it's clear.

The transfer of information is not finished until the agency fully understands the task at hand. A successful briefing isn't over until the agency says, 'I get it.' When being briefed it is essential to ask questions until every element in the brief is crystal clear. Agencies should be saying "no" to briefs they don't understand to avoid future misalignment. Too many agencies currently accept briefs that aren't clear to them.

Note: Check in with the agency after the briefing.

A transfer of responsibility

A brief is not a contract until the agency accepts it.

Once both parties agree the brief, the responsibility of addressing the problem or the opportunity becomes the agency's. An agency accepting a brief becomes accountable for the work, should resource the task appropriately and use the available budget effectively.

Note: Agencies should never accept briefs they're not happy with.



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