

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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DEVELOPING A MORE PRODUCTIVE CREATIVE BRIEF – Part 4

Tony Hayward, CEO of British Petroleum, was quoted in the New York Times, following the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig in the Gulf of Mexico, as asking his executive team, “*What the hell did we do to deserve this?*” Similarly, many senior marketing executives, whose marketers seem to be unable to develop leadership advertising (the kind that not merely gets noticed but develops a positive ROI), should be asking themselves the same question. Perhaps, it would be very wise for these same executives to reflect less on their marketers and more on their corporate culture, and their leadership role in shaping it.

This is the final installment in a four-part series of DISPATCHES articles titled “Developing a More Productive Creative Brief.” We are using the Deepwater Horizon ecological disaster as a metaphor for what goes wrong in the development of the Creative Brief. (And what can go wrong will go wrong!) Specifically, we contend that four broad areas are emerging as contributing to the Deepwater Horizon disaster: faulty engineering; errors in human behavior; lack of oversight; and dysfunctional corporate culture resulting from a lack of leadership. These aforementioned four areas provide us fertile ground for investigation into the failure of many marketers, and their organizations, to develop Creative Briefs that provide strategically appropriate, single-minded direction for the development of leadership advertising, and its subsequent assessment.

Part 1 addressed engineering, the structure of the Essential Creative Brief. Part 2 addressed errors, or human behavior issues in developing the Creative Brief. Part 3, tackled the lack of meaningful oversight in supervising the development of more productive Creative Briefs. This last article, Part 4, deals with *dysfunctional corporate culture and the lack of strong leadership contributing to it*.

Corporate Culture

Corporate culture reflects and manifests the company’s values and beliefs in its operating systems. Ultimately, it’s about how individuals, and the organization, behave consistent with those (shared) values and beliefs, both with each other and those outside of the company. It helps guide everyone within the company to make decisions, and take what senior corporate managers believe are appropriate actions.

When it comes to corporate culture, actions speak louder than words. It has been reported that while BP publicly advocated safety, its corporate culture allowed extreme risk taking, ignoring of expert advice, and overlooking warnings about dire safety issues. While the leadership professed safety, a rig survivor of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, which claimed eleven lives,

told “60 Minutes” that BP ordered its partners to cut corners in an effort to meet aggressive drill schedules. If this is the case then clearly behavior and beliefs are inconsistent, which suggests that the corporate culture is dysfunctional.

In our work we hear senior marketing executives, and their agency partners, proclaim the need to develop Creative Briefs that provide creative resources with strategically appropriate, single-minded direction. Yet, we observe so very few Creative Briefs that are technically sound such that they provide anything near being strategically appropriate, or single-minded. They’re a hodge-podge of conflicting thoughts and direction. You may ignore our observations and experiences but if you think about it, how many managers are satisfied with the Creative Briefs developed for their brands and organization? Not many!

As a consequence marketing committees are assembled to study the issue and reshuffle the chairs on the deck of their proverbial Titanic. A new Creative Brief is developed that represents a compromise, with little or no basis in the reality of how things (in this case, communications) work. The same old garbage gets produced, only now it has a new, fresh look. It’s like painting over a house when it has termites eating away the structure. It looks good, and everyone on the committee feels a sense of accomplishment, but the end product is a Creative Brief that lacks the requisites that will lead to guiding the development of leadership communications.

This insanity of *doing the same things* that lead to the same poor results, or *reinventing the wheel* when a new manager comes on board or management decides it is time to focus on raising the bar on Creative Brief development underscores a dysfunctional culture and lack of leadership. We’ve already dealt with the structure of the Essential Creative Brief, how to address each element within the CB, and how to provide thoughtful and timely oversight through the Creative Brief ScoreCard. Now we need to address the final, critical issue, corporate (or on a smaller scale, brand team) culture and leadership.

Causes of a Dysfunctional Culture

There are a number of factors contributing to a dysfunctional culture (as it relates to developing sound Creative Briefs and the development of leadership advertising), among which are the following:

- ***Absence of a shared vision on the need for leadership advertising.*** Do you and your managers really believe that leadership advertising can make a difference? Do you and your managers really believe that a sound Creative Brief provides the requisite guidance needed for the development of leadership advertising, and its assessment? It’s easy for managers to say that they “agree” on the importance of advertising, but it is totally another thing to back-up the belief with action, as in increasing (as opposed to decreasing) ad spending. It’s one thing to talk about the importance of advertising, but it is another thing to ensure that it is given priority, as reflected in providing single-minded attention to the development of the Creative Brief, over actions such as taking care of something as mundane as emails. *A sane culture requires shared values regarding leadership advertising and alignment between individual and corporate actions and beliefs.*
- ***Ignorance about what are the correct things to do and/or how to do them correctly.***

This traces to a lack of understanding of what it takes to create effective communications. And, ignorance is never really bliss. It's an opiate that will cause the world to come crashing down upon you as the Deepwater Horizon disaster has crashed down upon BP, our citizens and the ecology of the Gulf Coast. *A competent culture requires knowledge. Not the theoretical stuff! But knowledge born of real world experiences, coupled with thoughtful analyses. It requires knowledge and adoption of best practices. And, as Peter Senge, MIT professor and the author of The Fifth Discipline, might counsel, it requires the development of a learning organization.*

- **No uniform operating system.** There is no standard operating procedure that reflects a quality process. It's everyone for him or herself. Managers do it their way, or the way their agencies do it. If three different agencies are working on behalf of different brands within a company then one can expect, at minimum, three different Creative Brief formats. If the marketing managers report to different senior marketing managers then the elements in each brief, way of handling each element, the process undertaken, the assessment by each, etc., can be expected to be different. This is exacerbated when managers come from different organizations and believe their way is superior. It becomes "war of the words." Please don't even try to tell us that this represents healthy independence. That's pure B.S. There are generally accepted accounting principles that all organizations follow. Why wouldn't it make sense to, or couldn't they, follow generally accepted marketing principles and practices? *An intelligent marketing culture requires a uniform operating system that captures the correct things to do and how to do them correctly (best practices incorporated into a quality process). Thereafter, every agency, every brand team, every senior marketing manager adopts these standards and follows standard operating procedures (SOP) that serves to ensure that actions are consistent with beliefs.*
- **Absence of leadership.** Once the operating system has been developed, it's time for everyone to step-up to the plate and to make it a reality. This starts with senior marketing managers. It's up to senior marketing managers to model and reinforce the behavior for their direct reports, and everyone within the marketing department. *This requires that everyone, no exceptions, is trained to follow understand the uniform operating system and follow SOP. This includes senior managers!* What we hear time and again is that senior managers know this stuff and don't need the training. Well, if they really knew it then they would be far more satisfied with the Creative Briefs their direct reports and agencies develop. If they really knew it, they would be developing, on a consistent basis, leadership advertising. The fact is they really don't know it! *It also requires that managers take time to learn.* No one practices more or works harder than a champion, regardless of their endeavor, regardless of their talent. We hear that managers don't have two or three days to devote to training. In that case, we advise anyone who feels that way to revisit the first bullet-point. *It also requires that senior managers provide feedback. Specifically, it needs to be quick and consistent with the operating system.* This will serve to reinforce and inculcate positive actions, while it remedies negative actions, in institutionalizing best practices to help make the culture strong.

- Lack of personal accountability. It would be irresponsible for marketers to conclude that corporate culture is the responsibility of senior management. No, it is everyone's responsibility. *This requires that despite the pitfalls and shortcomings of the organization or your leadership that you take personal responsibility to ensure that the Creative Brief is developed based upon sound principles.* If the direction is not single-minded then it is your duty to ensure that it is made single-minded. No excuses! This will help instill a responsible culture.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

Mark Twain said, "Everybody talks about the weather but no one does anything about it." It's time to stop talking about the failure to develop more productive Creative Briefs and to achieve leadership advertising. It's high time to do something about it. We've provided you with a number of actions for your consideration in each of the previous three articles in this series "Developing a More Productive Creative Brief." We've also identified requirements for correcting a weak corporate marketing culture when we identified some "causes of a dysfunctional culture." In order to get on the right track here's what you can do to build a sane, competent, intelligent, strong, and responsible culture that will leverage everyone's thinking in developing more productive Creative Briefs:

1. ***Come together*** – What do you, and your marketing management colleagues, really believe and value. Get it on the table and capture it on paper. Then take a hard look at actual practices regarding the development of the Creative Brief (and for that matter the advertising process), yours and others. Are your beliefs/values and practices/actions in harmony? If not you've more work ahead of you. Fess-up and face-up to the differences and address them. Don't walk away until you have forged shared values and beliefs regarding leadership advertising, and identified specific actions that ensure alignment between individual and corporate actions and beliefs.
2. ***Adopt best practices*** – We've done what we can to make you aware of best practices by sharing the Essential Creative Brief (sound engineering: structure and composition of the CB); identifying how to address each element (avoiding human error: enhancing competencies): introducing the Creative Brief ScoreCard (to avoid lack of oversight: conducting the stewardship), and alerting you to common causes of dysfunction (addressing a dysfunctional corporate culture and lack of leadership: requirements for overcoming these). You should have everything you need. Or, if you prefer, you have a lot more than you had before we started this series. (Don't waste time on rethinking each piece and debating over a word here or there. Get focused on the big picture, what is really essential from the organization's behavior and leadership to developing more productive Creative Briefs.)
3. ***Develop a uniform operating system that captures the best practices and quality process, and make them SOP (Standard Operating Procedure)*** – C'mon, that's what really good managers do! Anybody can have a success but to be able to produce successes on a consistent basis will require that you, and your organization (whether it be at the level of the brand team or the corporation), institutionalize best practices in a

uniform operating system. Taking an intelligent uniform operating system (which, by the way, is inherent in the Essential Creative Brief and the Creative Brief ScoreCard) and making it SOP will serve to ensure that actions are consistent with beliefs.

4. **Work at it** - This requires that everyone, no exceptions, becomes actively involved. The organization isn't actively involved if it sends its junior marketing people for training but those who are responsible for reinforcing that training and approving the work product don't undertake that same training. Senior managers must provide "knowledge-based" feedback based upon the training and uniform operating system. All feedback to work on the Essential Creative Brief needs to be immediate and consistent with the operating system. This will serve to reinforce and inculcate positive actions, while it remedies negative actions, in institutionalizing best practices to help make the culture strong.
5. **Do the right thing!** And do it in the right way. Don't pass the buck. You have more leeway than you can imagine if you focus on true (which reflects proper intent) versus blind obedience. That's real leadership. It's up to you to help develop a responsible culture. Enough said!

As one of our colleagues is fond of saying, "clients get the advertising they deserve." Practices and actions determine what you deserve. BP got what they deserved. Dysfunctional culture and lack of strong leadership lead to disaster. Are you getting what you deserve? Choose to make your culture sane, competent, intelligent, strong and responsible!

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