

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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THE FREEDOM OF A TIGHT BRIEF

An oft-quoted ad agency saying is the one supposedly first uttered by a well-known head creative: *“Please, (client), give me and my teams the freedom of a tight brief.”* Perhaps one of the reasons for the saying’s frequent quoting is that clients so often fail to provide their agency creative teams with a tight brief—for example, when sending them off to work on a new campaign. But what IS a “tight brief” anyway?

A tight Creative Brief is, ideally, a one-page document that “specs out” the creative assignment in such a way as to (a) leave nothing open to interpretation, and (b) be incapable of being misunderstood. The tight brief, therefore, truly opens up (or “frees up”) the creative minds to explore a bounty of creative approaches...rather than bogging those minds down with endless questions or—worse yet—wild guesses at what the client really means or intends.

We think there are four criteria of a Creative Brief that is legitimately airtight:

1. **It is written in precision language.** This means that every word on the page—just like every word in a poem—carries its own weight. Overused and perfunctory expressions like “must be breakthrough,” “should feel introductory,” “must connote superiority,” and (the most abused of all) “should foster trust in the brand” have no place in a tight brief. At best, they merely state the obvious; at worst, they are so wide open to individual interpretation that they result in frustrating arguments when the creative is presented...frustrating for both the client and the creative team!

Precision language is not only hard-working language; it is also honest language. To place in the Customer Insight section of the brief, for example, a consumer statement that is indicative of already well-known or obvious attitudes/behaviors (like, “I’m not aware of anything really effective for migraines; if there were something that works harder on migraines I would try it”) is not only absurd but dishonest. This is no insight! Truly, if this is the best our research has provided us with, we would be better off leaving this part of the brief blank.

2. **It covers all the critical elements.** That means it always includes those essentials that any good creative team needs to begin developing advertising: The Marketing Objective; The Customer/Consumer Insight (expressed best in actual customer/consumer language); The Communication Strategy; The Brand Character; and the Assignment Requirements (media types and key “touchpoints” to be covered and timing for completion of each). It is hard to imagine any creative team beginning to work without these elements—spelled out in crystal clear, precision language—on any communication. And it’s even harder to

imagine any client reviewing the creative work without these elements in front of her/him.

But a tight brief is also known by what non-essential elements it omits: do the creative teams really need to know what business goals (volume, share) the brand must meet for them to create winning communications? Or, what key business issue the brand faces (say, gaining new accounts)? Doubtful, especially if the Marketing Objective—the desired *behavior*--is clear.

3. **It is co-authored by the Brand and the Agency Account-Creative teams.** When this happens, not only does the brief benefit from the joining of two perspectives, but it virtually obsoletes the need for a separate Creative Brief document written subsequently inside the agency. The fastest way to up-end all that clear thinking and precision language that went into the “Original Creative Brief” is to have someone at the agency translate it again into their peculiar format. New translations always mean new meanings...and that is the last thing anyone needs as the creative work is about to begin in earnest. If your agency simply cannot function without putting all their clients’ Creative Briefs into their particular format, then we would suggest you use their format from the very beginning—but just make sure all those essential elements are covered in that format.
4. **It is signed off by the highest-ranking client and agency people responsible for the investment in the brand’s communications.** How rarely this gets done! And yet, it is so important in underpinning the Creative Brief with AUTHORITY. Having the top client and agency approvers sign the brief is no mere formality; it “seals” the specs with conviction, with credibility. And, given the years of experience these types of signers typically have, it also says the thinking behind the brief must be pretty darn sound.

Why does this all-important sign-off so rarely occur? There must be a number of explanations, but what you see so often is a Brand-Agency team already running behind the timeline they’ve set to get in-market. They make an attempt to get on the Sr. VP’s schedule, but can’t squeeze in for weeks, so they keep on moving and hope for the best. Invariably, however, they lose even more time later when the senior approvers don’t understand or buy into the brief.

We don’t know of any other way to ensure the creative teams get the benefit of a tight brief than by meeting these four criteria. One of our longtime, respected agency friends has told us that within his agency they have as a driving principle: “The brief is the single most important piece of paper in the building.” How much better would be our chances of achieving really great communications if clients everywhere would think of the Creative Brief in the same way.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

1. Treat the Creative Brief-writing phase of your communications development process as if it were as critical as, say, the Annual Funding-pitch phase of your business planning process. Make the case airtight for what you want...for what you EXPECT.
2. Be stubborn. Simply refuse to move forward without securing the required time to gain senior understanding and buy-in of your Creative Brief.

3. When your “final draft” of the brief is to your high standards, ask a creative from another brand’s business to read it and give you feedback--a kind of 2nd opinion check.
4. Better yet, talk to us at BDNI about using our *Creative Brief Scorecard*—a sure-fire “technical-assurance” tool that will help your teams deliver consistently tight briefs.

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