



## THINKTHINK!

### Keeping it brief or To brief or not to brief



So you've had this great idea. It absolutely cannot fail, You are going to reach a trillion customers by the end of the year. You've got the okay from the board, now all you need to do is get those chaps in from the marketing agency, tell it like it is and ask them to get on with it. Do that design stuff and make sure the customers buy it.

**No problemo. That Bugatti is practically in the garage.**

But hold on. One of those designers from the agency is on the phone about a 'creative brief'. Says it would help the design team no end if they had a bit more information. Honestly. They're the arty ones. Can't they work it out from the notes you scribbled on the back of that menu? Oh right, they can work it out, but would we like them to write this brief thing for us and make sure they are going to cover all the points? Splendid. That sounds marvellous.

But whilst they are on ask them exactly what a creative brief is and do we really need one.

The above scenario is a fiction but it isn't entirely beyond belief and you can see how it happens. You have a product and you understand absolutely everything about it, down to the last widget. You have been sleeping and eating this idea for so long you know it backwards. And now you have to hand it over to a bunch of design and marketing specialists you hardly know for them to work out how to make the best of it.

So once ThinkThink had begun to consider this it seemed but a short step to start investigating the concept of a design brief and how important (or not) it would be to start a project without one.

Let's think it through for a minute. You have presented the product to your design and marketing agents, given them some really pretty pictures or graphics and of course the name. You have explained very little more.

Now designers are arty, imaginative and creative. Where we see a colour they see a whole rainbow, when we see black and white they have a kaleidoscope of shades in their head. Designers are rarely made, they are born. They just have it.

But before we get carried away with the whole idea of art for art's sake let us remember that these designers are professionals. These people aren't designing for themselves or because it looks pretty, this is commercial design. Commercial design is something that grew out of a need for skilled individuals who could present products and environments in a way that would appeal to people.

Without the commercial element design is simply art. Beautiful, of course, but of no particular use other than to adorn the waiting room wall.



You would expect artists to know about shape, form and colour and yes, that is going to be very useful in selling this marvellous product. But it won't be enough. Not unless you give these artists some direction, it won't. You'll get something visually superb from your photos and graphics; something that the MD can talk about over dinner for years to come, but you won't sell a bean. Not unless you link the flair and creativity of the design element with the whole purpose of the campaign. And that is where the brief comes in. If you can channel these arty types and inspire them to use their skill to place your product in the most dynamic and appealing light and surroundings, then you will really see some results.

So let's go back to our initial scenario. Let's revisit this go-getter with the great idea and see what would happen if he decided to 'wing it' and just leave the brief at a name and some shots (no not Tequila, photos).

Let's suppose that his product is linked in some way to people of pensionable age; it might be a financial product, a health plan say or some sort of investment. Anyway it's quite a 'serious' product. It has to be bought before the end of the tax year for it to be any use, it can only be bought by people who fulfil certain age and health criteria and the company has authorised a budget of £1m.

Now in the way of all good game shows, we know all that information but the design team does not. It knows that the product is financial in some way, but the brief is so woolly that it has no real idea of its client's target audience – where they live, work, shop; whether they watch TV, read newspapers, magazines, surf the net, have children or pets, drive a car, ride a bike, go on holiday... You get the picture. They know nothing. Zilch. Nada.

### **So what? Says laddo after a large lunch. You've got the graphics. Just Get On With It.**

So our designing friends do as they are told. They decide to take a sort of 'mean' age group – 30 sounds good; then they make up the rest of the information about the target audience until they have built up a picture of the sort of person they think they should be appealing to.

They're wrong of course and they are so fundamentally wrong that it is downhill from here on in. But let's follow them anyway, because it's not their fault.

The design agency people are now trying to decide what sort of a campaign their clients would like (and can afford). Are we talking brochures, flyers, TV ads, celebrity endorsement, a radio campaign, newspapers, glossies, a conference, exhibition material, internet ads, a website...? Can anyone read how many noughts there are supposed to be on that budget figure on the back of the menu? There's a stain of what? Has anyone from the client's company returned our calls? No. But they've sent an email saying 'is it ready yet?'

### **You get the picture. Mayhem.**

Someone has to take a decision. So a 20-page glossy brochure is designed. In it there are gorgeous photos of thirty-somethings frolicking in meadows, skiing, swimming and partying. It's got a jokey, comic font and cartoon figures feature quite heavily.

And it's handed over to the writers.

If we thought the designers were in trouble that was nothing. Writers are a very difficult bunch and they are very precise. They can spot a greengrocer's apostrophe in a heavy fog and need a lie down if they see one. They like facts, facts and a few more facts. Let's remember again that these are not arty writers of short stories or novelettes, these are commercial writers, copywriters, in fact. Their skills lie in being able to draw out the most important and appealing aspect of a client's campaign and write it in such a way that it hits you in the face and sells itself. They eat and sleep headlines, slogans and bullet points and can remember the words from ad campaigns when they were nine years old. And they can turn 1500 words of rambling, turgid facts into 200 words of tight and punchy prose.

But they can't do much with a few vague scribbles on the back of a menu. As well as the obvious product profile, without which they can do nothing, they need to know their target audience, how to pitch the prose – should it be jokey or serious, heavy on facts or easy to read. Are they appealing to readers of Hello! Magazine or the Financial Times?

The copywriters are given the 'visuals' (brochure) by the designers plus the client's instructions and are told to go away and not come back until it is done.

Now these are real professionals so unlike we mortals they can get the gist of what the product is about from the menu - but they aren't psychic. So they don't get the time limit tie-in to the tax year and there's a 55 that looks like a 65 and that changes all the figures. And so on, and so forth. It's a mess.

Now Laddo has spent the morning browsing the internet looking at infinity pools for his villa in Portugal. He's got the big one in the bag and he's as happy as the proverbial pig. So he's a bit miffed to get a call on his mobile over a very nice lunch with his broker telling him to get to the boardroom. Pronto. It's a bad line but it sounded like someone's briefs weren't up to scratch. Surely this is a matter for Human Resources.

Laddo is history by tea-time.

The long-suffering design agency people are asked to come and see the new head of marketing. They are briefed with time limits, budgets, target audiences and goals. The company love the campaign. It's a runaway success.

**ThinkThink has decided that good design is an investment not a cost. But it can only work if you get the brief right. My friends at Clear Focus believe that so much that they will even write the brief for you – they are good like that.**

With Clear Focus, your marketing is measurable, profitable and provocative. **Call us now on 0845 225 0325.**

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