

Decoding the creative brief

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For as long as I have been working, I have heard moans and tantrums about briefs from creatives who just want to deliver fantastic results - without wasting time practising some wizardry in guessing what the brief may be entailing.

For me, the strength of a brief determines the amount of enthusiasm and input that creatives arm themselves with before diving into a job. And details, like whether the deadline or target audience is realistic, show how serious the compiler of the brief or client is about the end product.

A problem for most

I've worked at small agencies with claustrophobic cottages for offices to big agencies with glittering awards as walls for their receptions, but the brief has always been a problem for most.

I used to sometimes think that client service people should always have a branding background (or enough common sense) to know that although a brief isn't about providing answers, it should have enough information to guide creatives towards solving the right problem - and here 'enough information' shouldn't be misconstrued as 'a lot'.

I know an art director who, instead of rejecting unclear briefs, would vent his frustrations by doodling sexual questions and objects on the briefs. Then he'd send them back to client service department. Once he drew a wrinkled weenie tattooed 'Viagra Needed' with the question "Is this the 'men' you're talking to or do you have specifics for me?" Ok, maybe he was generally sexually frustrated, but I got where he was going.

Client service people as gatekeepers

The problem with most agencies is that they allow their client service people into going about their jobs as mere messengers. And what worries me is that these are the same people who sell our ideas. How do they stand in front of clients, holding the results of our sleepless nights, the work that cost us our lovers because we were never home enough to practise real sacrifices such as being forced to follow seasons of 'Revenge'?

I expect client service people to be my gatekeepers - like those two pals of Hamlet's who accompany him as he pursues his father's ghost in the forest (yes, that's how I view certain clients: elusive ghosts who we have to catch and bottle for the consumer to grasp - ghosts we can only bring to life if we get a well-written brief).

Moving forward

So where does one go in the land of unrealistic deadlines promised by people who hardly understand the work involved, with briefs that are unclear and often misleading, plus creative heads who have adopted a there-are-only-so-many-battles-one-can-win attitude? We can't always afford to reject briefs - especially if you work at a company that has popularised the myth that creatives are spoilt creatures who have a phobia for reading and deciphering anything longer than a tweet.

A brief isn't 'The Da Vinci Code'. If the person who wrote the brief can't understand the objective, where will the creatives find this magic mirror that contains the answer? If, for example, a brief demands that the brand must be positioned as a 'pioneer in global technology' without backing this up with some facts, then how do we sell this fiction to the unknowing audience?

Clear, to the point, relevant

A brief should be clear, to the point and contain relevant info (not some windy content that was Googled and pasted in the 'background' section of the template because someone was too lazy or meek to ask the client for clarity). I feel powerless when it comes to this - and the number of uncertainties on briefs is directly proportional to the number of times my mind deviates from doing online research to clicking on a cute cat video on YouTube.

I know there are some amazing client service people who write briefs that shine like magic tickets to Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. And I know that sometimes clients are at the root of it all. But if the gatekeeper can't control what comes in, or lacks the confidence (or basic human trait) it takes to ask about whatever isn't clear, then by all means they ought to be advised that mind-readers and miracle problem solvers work at the circus - or can be found on those Bring-Back-A-Lost-Lover pamphlets distributed in downtown Johannesburg.

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