

How to Brief an Agency

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Introduction

Giving a thorough brief to your agency is the most important thing you can do to ensure brilliant, effective communications.

It sounds obvious but it's surprising how many organisations ignore the importance of the brief when they rush to have a campaign put together. The result is badly targeted, expensive and ineffective.

We've all seen ads that prompt the response "who's that aimed at?" and "what are they trying to achieve with that ad?" or, even worse, "I don't get it"

Chances are, that the ads were produced as the result of a poor briefing from the client to the agency. They could also be the result of choosing the wrong agency - [How to Choose an agency](#).

Briefing an agency is a matter of common sense and CAANZ, as the representative body of the communications industry, will provide impartial and practical advice on any communications queries you might have.

What makes a good brief?

One that saves you both time and money! It provides a clear basis to evaluate the creative content put forward by your agency. It also means that the agency is more likely to get it right first time.

A good brief ensures that the strategy behind communications is thoroughly considered and well informed.

Every agency needs a certain amount of information before it can prepare recommendations. It needs to know what your product or service is about; who it's aimed at; what they currently think about it - and what you would like them to think about it.

All this should be contained in the agency brief. Usually this is prepared by the senior account person at the agency after your comprehensive backgrounding.

As a general rule (except on minor work) make sure that the written brief is agreed to and signed off by yourself and the agency.

The brief is there to keep everyone on track. Remember creative presentations can be spectacular and tempting, but ask yourself: do they follow the strategy? For the strategy to be right, you need to be able to produce hard evidence about your product or service. It can't be based on your assumption or perceptions. It should be backed by research or other hard data.

A brief may come from a full service agency or from media specialists. A good media brief is every bit as important as a creative brief. In some cases the advertising brief may be exclusively media related. There are no firm rules, but the following guidelines are useful to start with:

Media Objective - what do you expect to achieve through the use of media? Unless you're briefing a direct response campaign the answer is unlikely to be sales. Objectives should be in terms of generating/maintaining/improving awareness and/or changing attitudes.

Your Target Audience - the more information you can provide on the target the better. Use demographics, attitudes and current behaviour. You should bear in mind that ultimately the media schedule will be evaluated against a measurable target group (usually demographic).

Important Steps to take

The name of the product or service

How is the product described - exactly? Precision removes any potential confusion over this marketing fundamental. Check that the brand name has been registered.

Characteristics of the product or service

Describe how your product or service works, what the ingredients are, or how people can benefit from buying your brand. What is it that makes people want to use your brand or service? And of those things, what could be used to motivate consumers?

Background research and information

Research about the consumer of your product, or your competitor's products is vital. How often do they buy it? Who uses it (which may not be the same as who buys it)? Is it seen as too expensive, or too difficult to use? Do people feel they don't really need it? Along with the analysis of the market your product is in, what about the positioning of your competitors?

New - or ongoing campaign?

Is this new communications activity part of an ongoing campaign? Or is it a complete relaunch? It's essential to know whether this new activity needs to actively build upon the brand you've already got, or reinforce its current position in the marketplace.

Objectives

What are you trying to achieve? Is it to gain market share from your competitor or to relaunch your product with new packaging? Is it to educate them about a new service?

The proposition

This is the trickiest part of the whole brief. And it's the most crucial. It is the one single idea about your product or service that can be presented as the unique consumer benefit - something that no one else has. The proposition needs to be focused and punchy. If your brief is the dartboard, then the proposition is the bullseye. Don't be afraid to test your proposition through research.

Supporting evidence

You need to be able to prove that your proposition is correct. It's no good saying that you are the most powerful widget maker in the country if you can't back it up. Or that your product has environmentally friendly ingredients if they're the same ones that everyone else uses in their product.

Positioning

What sort of image do you want your product or service to have? Friendly and reassuring? Sexy? Aggressive? You might find it helpful to start off with a statement beginning: The product (or company) should be seen as... It's worthwhile remembering that people often purchase for emotional as well as practical reasons.

Who's your target?

Be as specific as you can. It's helpful to know that your consumer is a woman aged between 20 and 40, and has an average income of \$30,000. But it's even more helpful to know how she thinks and behaves. Psychographics are just as important as demographics.

Campaign length

Are you looking for a three-month intensive burst of activity or a two-year brand awareness campaign? Is this only a seasonal promotion? Does it need to link in with your sales force capacity on a regional basis?

Deadline

Given all these factors, how long has the agency got to present you with creative ideas and have the campaign executed? Always allow lead-time for the proper development of the creative and for the production phase. You may need up to three months for a large campaign. Conversely, you could just need a press ad by the following week. Be realistic about deadlines with your agency.

Choice of media

To be cost-effective about your media placement, it pays to book ahead. So give the agency advance notice if you're planning to triple your television spend at Christmas time - they may be able to secure a great deal for you from media. Be upfront about what you want from your media schedule. Do you want good radio exposure? Or is magazine advertising where you want to be? Whatever your ideas are, be prepared to listen to creative media suggestions from your agency. And be aware of the lead times involved with some media - up to two months for some magazines.

The 'MUST DO' basics still bear repeating

Things like your logo and full name of your product. Be very specific about what the ad must include. Check it if needs to be shown to your lawyers before it is approved.

Budget

How much can you afford for this campaign? The same as last year? Or 20 percent less? Is the figure related to market share, or simply what you need to get the job done? The reason many brand leaders stay brand leaders is because they maintain a share of advertising expenditure greater than the share of sales. Look carefully at the purchasing power of your media dollar and evaluate alternative media when costs rise to an extent where they are difficult to sustain.

Finalising the Brief

Before you finish your briefing meeting with the agency, give them a chance to ask questions. Is there anything they want to clarify, to dispute or to query? Give them the opportunity to throw in good ideas now.

This technique of discussing the brief before committing it to paper is extremely useful. It clarifies everybody's thoughts. And it allows new ideas to emerge through open discussion. It is the best insurance that the teamwork between the agency and yourselves will pay off.

Evaluating the Agency's proposal

How do you assess an agency's creative work? Take time to consider it because while it may not be to your taste - it may be exactly on strategy. And that's the most important factor. Ask some key questions.

1. Can you see how this communication came from the brief you gave the agency?
2. If the communication is different from your brief, does it reflect a brief you wish you had given?
3. The communication you're presented with is aimed at a person. Does that person belong to the group you want to reach? If so, will the ad grab their attention and make them want to hear more? Does it use the language they will understand and tell them what they'd want to know about the product or service?
4. Are the people used in the communication believable? Who will your target audience identify with most? Your brief should tell you which approach is right.
5. Does it have impact? Does it stand out from your competitors' communications?
6. What message does it leave behind? Is it the one you want left there and is it memorable?
7. Does it convince you and does the main selling point make a desirable promise? Does the rest of the communication justify the promise and will the product live up to it?
8. Is it believable? For some products with a highly emotional appeal, escapism is the best method.
9. Does the illustration or atmosphere create involvement? Is it likely to grab them and draw them in? Check if it's likely to lose impact in different media.
10. Is it likely to make the audience act in some way? Is there a sufficient call to action and the use of persuasive words? Does there in fact need to be, given your strategy? If you're dealing with issues rather than products, then is the ad likely to persuade them to rethink the issue or change their opinion?
11. Where will it appear? Is it suitable for the recommended media?
12. Does it conform to any applicable Advertising Code of Ethics or Standards, self-regulation codes or government legislation? Don't risk anything you're uneasy about. Get it checked. It could be disastrous to have to withdraw your ad once it has already been produced.
13. Finally, does the idea in your communication come across forcefully and truthfully? Would it worry you if one of your competitors ran it?

Does it excite you? Does it surprise you? Does it break new ground? Will people talk about it? If you can answer yes to most of these questions, then you've got a good piece of communication!

Don't be alarmed if you do feel nervous about it. It may break new ground or may be controversial. In that case, what you may have before you is a great advertising campaign. Check carefully and objectively that it meets the brief. If it does, then give it your full support.

Remember also, that communications are by necessity very public and not everyone is going to like it. Expect some flak with high-profile creative campaigns. Take notice only of constructive criticism and comment. Stick with it, defend it, as long as you are confident that it achieves your objectives.

That's the reason you took so much care and trouble in preparing for and agreeing to the agency brief in the first place.

postscript

We hope this advice has been helpful and will guide you to select the agency best suited to service your account. There is one thing that certainly won't surprise us however. And that is, that the agency you're most likely to select will be a member of our Association - The Communications Agencies Association of New Zealand. Does that really matter? A majority of marketers seem to think so.

For one thing, before any agency can become a member of our organisation, it must reach certain ethical and professional standards. And it must satisfy us that it is a soundly, responsibly managed company.

It must also satisfy its competitors and industry colleagues in CAANZ that it can provide a range of services in keeping with appropriate industry standards. Like any other professional, we believe healthy competition flourishes better when certain standards prevail.

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