

Introduction

Design briefs are an essential part of the design process. They are the beginning of the design process, and without them it can be hard for designers to understand the communication problem which they are required to solve.

What is a 'Brief'?

A design brief is a written document that thoroughly explains the problem that needs to be solved by a designer or designer team. It should primarily focus on results of design, outcomes of design, and the objectives of the design project.

It should not attempt to deal with the aesthetics of design. This is the responsibility of the designer.

What should go in a brief? (cont)

A design brief assists everyone involved in the design project. The designer must have every bit of information possible in order to develop an effective design solution.

It is like a relationship with a doctor. If the doctor isn't told about all of the patient's symptoms, then the doctor cannot offer the best treatment for the problem.

The design brief becomes a written agreement describing business objectives and the design strategy to meet those objectives. The design brief describes the problem and the desired outcomes of the design work.

A brief should answer these questions.

Why are we doing this project?

Why are we doing it now?

What specific business outcomes, or results, do we expect from this design project?

Who are we designing for (this requires a very precise and complete description of the target audience for the design project)?

Who are the key stakeholders (eg sales, marketing, law, distribution, procurement, manufacturing, etc) in this project?

What is the current and anticipated business environment for the results of this design project?

What, precisely, are the phases of this design project?

How much time must be devoted to each phase?

How much will each phase cost?

What is the competitive environment like?

Who will approve the final design solution?

What criteria will be used for this approval?

How will the design solution be implemented?

How will the results be measured?

Challenges you may face.

Sharing accountability

Using a brief to measure results

Breaking down boundaries

Sharing accountability

A challenge for decision-makers in the design brief process is to accept the new reality that design is a strategic problem-solving discipline and not simply an 'art' service. Sharing accountability for the outcomes of design projects equally with the designers represents a dramatic 'company culture' shift for many organisations.

Using a brief to measure results.

It is crucial that the approval and measurement of design solutions changes from the highly subjective,

'I like it, or I don't like it,' to the more objective, 'This design solution works to solve the problem because...'

The only accurate method to measure design quantifiably is to measure the results of the design project against the stated objectives of the design project.

Breaking down boundaries.

A significant challenge for all parties will be to eliminate the terms, 'client' and 'customer' while developing the relationship between an organisation and a design group.

In the future, these relationships will need to be described as 'equal partnerships'. Such a relationship will demand accountability from both partners.

Common questions...

Of course each project will throw up different questions, but there are some common questions encountered during the briefing process.

Common questions...

I know in my own mind what I want my new brochure to look like, but I have trouble explaining this to the designer. What should I do?

For a start, do not attempt to tell designers how to design. Instead, talk to them about the business need for the brochure, the key business objectives behind it, and the desired outcomes and describe the target audiences in detail.

The designers are the ones accountable for creative visual design solutions to your problem. It is not necessary for you to describe what those design solutions should look like. That is their job.

Common questions...

We often work on very tight schedules to get design work completed. Do we have to devote a lot of time to writing a design brief?

A comprehensive design brief doesn't need to take an inordinate amount of time to develop. Once in hand, it will actually shorten the time needed to complete the design project, since every critical aspect of the project is clear to all stakeholders, and a phase process for completion of the project has been agreed upon.

All of this works to ensure that you end up with a design solution that is very effective at solving the business problem.

Common questions...

Do I have to do a proper design brief for every design project?

Comprehensive design briefs should be mandatory for all major, or critical, design projects. However, routine design projects such as updating a price list, slightly revising a package to include new mandatory ingredient listings, or developing name badges for a meeting would not need a full design brief. Essentially, the latter are usually referred to as 'production' work.

However, even the smallest projects should have a written statement of the business objectives, desired outcomes, and target audience for the design project.

Common questions...

Once we have created a written design brief, doesn't that lock us into a specific direction and thereby stifle creativity?

Since a design brief does not specify any specific design elements at the outset, it gives the designers creative freedom. The design brief deals with the desired outcomes, the reasons for doing the project, the business objectives, and the audiences you are designing for.

It should not say things like, 'The colour scheme must utilise only earth tones.' The design brief is a background tool to get to highly creative, design concepts quickly.

Common questions...

How much do designers really need to know about our target audience? Isn't that information really most important to sales and marketing?

If a designer, or design team, doesn't thoroughly understand whom they are designing for, there is no way they can meet the stated objectives and desired outcomes for the design.

Cursory target audience descriptions such as 'women aged 18 to 30' or 'customers who are homeowners' are of no use to designers. It is critical for designers to understand the target audience for their work in great detail.

Top Tips

Prepare a design brief in advance of design concept development

Ensure your brief includes business objectives, desired outcomes and a clearly articulated design strategy

Get the most out of your design briefs design briefs provide an opportunity to ensure that all are in unanimous agreement

Assume nothing. Many design projects go wrong because someone 'assumes' someone else knows what they know.

Write it down. This avoids comments such as, 'Don't you remember I told you...', or, 'I don't recall saying that'.

Top Tips

Remember partnership means working 'with' people, not working 'for' them. 'Accountability' means accepting responsibility for outcomes.

Don't have a standard design brief. Design briefs should vary according to the discipline involved.

Always include an appendix of some sort to include competitive samples, and other 'inspirational' materials useful to a design team.

Archive all your design briefs. Many projects undertaken later will have similar objectives, and you can save time by referencing past briefs for projects.

Send a copy of the design brief to all parties involved.

What this all means

Basically if you put all this together, you can create a written document that describes the objectives of the brief and the strategy to meet those objectives. It is the roadmap for the process, the outline for the presentation, the approval of the project and the plan for the implementation.

The brief should not dictate how a designer will actually execute the design, it describes the problem and the desired outcomes.

It is up to the designer to create the most effective and creative solution, for the problem that is outlined in the brief.

