



The ins and outs of briefing the agency

What do customers want from design? Impact, awareness, sales, credibility, response, kudos, differentiation, variety, innovation, colour, mood. As many qualities as there are briefs.

What do all customers *need* from design? Connection with their audience.

At AIT Marketing Associates we receive design briefs of varying scope and quality. Our first task is to interpret what is intended by the marketing director's choice of adjectives. The popular briefing phrase "corporate feel", for example, as applied to a brochure, is a minefield of multiple meanings.

As the design brief progresses we have to make judgements about the balance of message, copy, argument, illustration, etc., and develop a design with lasting interest and integrity, to keep the audience fully engaged by appealing to both the intellect and the emotions.

A less apparent balancing act is sometimes involved as we attempt to answer the preferences of two distinct briefing camps, one that demands "practical" design and another that wants "wow factor" design.

The former design style is characterised by staid typography, excessive bullet points, literal photo montages of the company's service lines, prominent logos and more than a smattering of corporate colour. The latter style displays a fondness for quirky fonts, depth-of-field photography, guess-the-product graphics, a different identity on every page and colours that will only be found in Pantone swatches next year.

In the past we have usually been able to satisfy the marketing director's desire for impact and the M.D.'s morbid obsession with the content of paragraph four. A simple device such as a background tint or heavier font usually accommodates the two. It is *a/ways* paragraph four, for some reason.

The newer media present us with a different problem. The practical/wow camps have become further polarised over easy-to-update design battlegrounds. We can find ourselves yo-yoing between animated positioning pages and click-here information buttons. The argument is no longer settled by the conclusive delivery of palettes of six-colour print.

We recognise that different industries and products require different design solutions. Are rotating silk-lined mahogany sleep-right Yo-Momma coffins appropriate on the Mafia e-mortician's site? Be quiet, no, they are not. Just because web graphics *can* spin 360 degrees does not mean rotation is obligatory. Even if it were, we'd still have to agree a culture for the navigation and the content, the interactivity, the benefit statements, the relationship with printed collateral, the use of email over posted material, and so on.

How are you going to brief the agency? Compromise briefs comprise over-elaborate graphics, to appeal to fine artists, and over bulleted content, to impress phone directory readers, and frequently incorporate a split decision on tolerable levels of scrolling.





It cannot hurt to reflect on a simple definition. Any slim self-help booklet on the subject serves to remind us that marketing is about identifying customers' needs and satisfying them, profitably. (The Sales Director will continue to argue that marketing is American for selling.)

It should be the first impulse to ask what the customer/consumer/user wants from the site, or indeed from any design. The intelligence gathered from customer surveys provides us with, probably, today's most powerful single marketing tool. The claim "we know what our customers want" should be treated with caution as it usually reveals that customers' tastes, coincidentally, exactly mirror the speaker's.

Taking into account customers' needs has to take priority. It is advisable to have select users test a site's functionality during development. However, infuriatingly, customers portray all the left-brain, right-brain partisanship of those giving design briefs. And to be truthful, agencies tend to follow one tack or another, either the picture-and-paragraph catalogue layout, or the fully-interactive site that takes an account rep's lunch hour to find the navigation pop-ups (usually hidden in flower beds).

Some common sense, core design "givens" can of course be identified for any web site, among which are ease-of-use, clarity, rich content, as well as aesthetic appeal. A temptation can then develop to work to the same formula for every site, because it matches the agency's technical competence or design philosophy. It is at this point that we should return to the customer's needs and expectations.

In early web development days, we were certainly guilty of misjudging the user profile. Today, it is the first thing we explore, very carefully. Many sites house large amounts of data. The prospective user does not have to be irritated by unnecessary awareness pieces, as a 'skip' option suffices. However, if you install video conferencing equipment or run an up-market golf club, hotel or restaurant, it is reasonable that you would want to promote your company's services dynamically. The web offers some highly persuasive tools for educating users, for demonstrating uniqueness and for whetting appetites.

Whatever the design medium, it is finally an appropriate blend of engaging functionality and creative design that forges a meaningful connection with the audience.

We tend to mention *connection* so much in-house that half of us sound like E.M. Forster readers muttering spiritual mantras - "only connect" - while the other half resemble football supporters imploring the late substitute as he outjumps the opposition defence in injury time - "connect, you *****!"

Our *connection* credentials were fully tested, last year, when appointed by a religious publishing house to create two new brands. There were no formal briefs as we know them, and client comment resulted in only small changes. People of great conviction place their faith in a higher editor, it seems. The final objective for the site is to create a communication hub that provides easy access for everybody to a wide range of spiritual resources. The site is in its infancy but has already received praise for its direction and design-led content. Plans are ongoing to develop the site's unique interactivity and to launch ISP services. If you've read this far, you may want to visit ShineOnline.net to see if it strikes the right balance.

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From a series of 6 articles on Agency Life.

