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ADVERTISING, ANALYSIS, OPINIONS

Darren Woolley | Nov 22, 2021

Where is it written that marketers must write better briefs?

Clients think they write great briefs. Agencies disagree. Who's right? In search of an answer, the founder and CEO of pitch consultancy TrinityP3 compares the situation to other professions, such as architecture, the law and medicine.



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Writing a brief is so central to the advertising process, you'd think even a marketer could do it. But apparently not. According to the [Better Briefs Project](#), which commissioned a global industry survey, it seems this is not the case.

It appears, from the input of 1700 marketers and their agencies around the globe, that there is a significant gap between advertisers and their agencies when it comes to briefing competency.

While around four out of five marketers believe they are good at writing briefs that provide clear strategic thinking and use clear and concise language, it does not appear to be the same for the agencies on the receiving end. In agency land, fewer than one in 10 agreed with their clients' self-assessment of their brief-writing ability.

In the words of the report, "Marketers are in the dark about the quality of their briefs, which creative agency staff complain are 'unfocused', 'unclear' and 'dull'".

But at least agencies and marketers can agree that it is "difficult to produce good creative work without a good marketing brief". They also appear to agree on the consequences, with both believing on average 33% of marketing budgets are wasted because of poor briefs.

Mark Ritson puts the blame at the feet of the marketers, saying "Their failures begin with a total lack of strategy". Meanwhile the contrary Bob Hoffman takes this to support his belief that the "whole briefing process is a ridiculous shitshow and waste of time". He recommends that "A perfect brief is one sentence long. Anything more is just evidence that the marketing people are confused".

Perhaps Bob has seen the one-sentence brief sent by a client to the account director by WhatsApp late on Friday night that read "Need an ad on Monday morning to sell more \$%&# (this being the name of the product)". It was certainly a succinct brief, if not very enlightening or timely.

Joe Talcott, former global marketing and creative director at McDonald's, recently replied to my question 'who should write the brief?' with a cynical and amusing "the person who has the most to lose if it all goes wrong". I think he may be on to something.

But who has the most to lose in this process? If the briefing process goes badly, resulting in bad work, you can always blame the agency. But if the marketer has written a succinct and yet detailed brief, there is not much wriggle room if the whole thing goes south.



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It got me thinking as to how other professionals deal with this issue. If I commission an architect to design my home, the architect does not expect me to have a detailed brief. Instead, they are inclined to ask questions, listen carefully, use examples to stimulate responses, and explore options to construct a clear idea of what is required. Likewise with a lawyer. They are not expecting their client to come in with a full outline of how the case should be handled. Instead, they again ask questions, listen, probe, and discuss options to get a clear understanding of the problem. And don't mention the medical profession. Doctors are sick to death of patients Googling their symptoms and coming in with a fully formed diagnosis. Instead, they also prefer to ask questions, listen, observe, order tests, and form the diagnosis for themselves.

Yet agencies seem to want their clients to know exactly what they want, and then they complain when the agency gives it to them and it doesn't match what they want to do. Perhaps, rather than complaining because their client appears incapable of writing a brief the way the agency wants it, agencies could demonstrate and reinforce their capability and expertise by guiding the client through the briefing process.

After all, is brief writing in the position description of every brand and marketing manager? If Mark Ritson had his way, all marketers would be doing his mini-MBA and becoming brilliant brand and marketing strategists. Then perhaps the briefs would almost write themselves. But I am not sure this is necessarily the most important skill for a marketer.

Now that the Better Briefs research has highlighted the gap, the question is, how do we fix it? If 80% of those writing briefs think they are doing a good job, why would they want more training? Better the agency takes on the responsibility for writing a better brief, rather than complaining about the client's poor skills. After all, in many ways the agency is the beneficiary of that 33% 'waste' in marketing budget, which gets consumed in agency hours and fees.

Darren Woolley is the founder and CEO of marketing consultancy TrinityP3.



Source: *Campaign Asia-Pacific*

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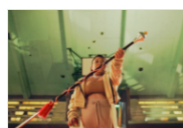
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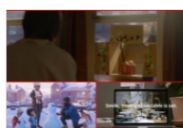
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