

The Design Brief

A design brief is a written explanation given by the client to the designer at the outset of a project. As the client, you are spelling out your objectives and expectations and defining a scope of work when you issue one. You're also committing to a concrete expression that can be revisited as a project moves forward. It's an honest way to keep everyone honest. If the brief raises questions, all the better. Questions early are better than questions late.

Why Provide a Design Brief?

The purpose of the brief is to get everyone started with a common understanding of what's to be accomplished. It gives direction and serves as a benchmark against which to test concepts and execution as you move through a project. Some designers provide clients with their own set of questions. Even so, the ultimate responsibility for defining goals and objectives and identifying audience and context lies with the client.

Another benefit of the design brief is the clarity it provides you as the client about why you're embarking on a project. If you don't know why, you can't possibly hope to achieve anything worthwhile. Nor are you likely to get your company behind your project. A brief can be as valuable internally as it is externally. If you present it to the people within the company most directly affected by whatever is being produced, you not only elicit valuable input, but also pave the way for their buy-in.

When you think about it, the last thing you want is for your project to be a test of the designer's skills. Your responsibility is to help the design firm do the best work it can. That's why you hired the firm. And why you give it a brief.

How to Write One

A brief is not a blueprint. It shouldn't tell the designer how to do the work. It's a statement of purpose, a concise declaration of a client's expectations of what the design should accomplish. And while briefs will differ depending upon the project, there are some general guidelines to direct the process. Among them:

- Provide a clear statement of objectives, with priorities
- Relate the objectives to overall company positioning
- Indicate if and how you'll measure achievement of your goals
- Define, characterize and prioritize your audiences
- Define budgets and time frames
- Explain the internal approval process
- Be clear about procedural requirements (e.g., if more than one bid is needed from fabricators, or if there's a minimum acceptable level of detail for design presentations).

In the final analysis, design briefs are about paving the way for a successful design effort that reflects well on everyone involved.

Budgeting and Managing the Process

If the briefing effort is thorough, budgeting and managing a project is easier. It takes two to budget and manage a design project: the client and the designer. The most successful collaborations are always the ones where all the information is on the table and expectations are in the open from the outset.

Design Costs Money

As one very seasoned and gifted designer says, "There is always a budget," whether it is revealed to the design team or not. Clients often are hesitant to announce how much they have to spend for fear that if they do, the designer will design to that number when a different solution for less money might otherwise have been reached. This is a reasonable concern and yet, it's as risky to design in a budgetary vacuum as it is to design without a goal. If your utility vehicle budget stops at four cylinders, four gears and a radio, there's no point in looking at Range Rovers.

If you have \$100,000 to spend and you'd really like to dedicate \$15,000 of it to something else, giving the design team that knowledge helps everyone. Then you won't get something that costs \$110,000 that you want but cannot pay for. The trust factor is the 800-pound gorilla in the budgeting phase. Without trust, there isn't a basis for working together.

The ideal approach is to bring in your designer as early as you can. The design team can then help you arrive at realistic cost parameters that relate to your objectives in lieu of an arbitrary budget figure. At this stage it is quite feasible to put together a budget range based upon a broad scope of a project or program. Individual estimates can be provided, for example, for design concepts, design development and production, photography, illustration, copywriting and printing for a print piece (or, in the case of a website, estimates for programming, proprietary software and equipment).

The more informed you are as a client about what things cost, the more effective you can be in guiding a project. You should know, for instance, that if your design firm hires outside talent such as writers, photographers and illustrators and pays them, it is standard policy to markup (generally, 20 percent) the fees charged by these professionals. You can choose to pay these contributors directly to avoid the markup, but this should be addressed at the time they're hired. Printing, historically, has been treated the same way.

You should also be aware that photographers, illustrators and writers are generally paid a “kill fee” if a project is cancelled after work has started. That’s because talent is in constant demand and accepting one project often means turning other work away. In the case of photography, expect to pay when a photo shoot is cancelled. And remember that unless you stipulate otherwise, you are buying one-time usage of the photographs—not the work itself—and that copyright laws are in force the moment the shutter trips. If you want unlimited use, you will have to negotiate and pay for it.

Who Leads/Who Follows?

It is the client’s responsibility to lead a project and the designer’s to design and manage the design process. Don’t confuse leadership with involvement. As the person representing the client, you might want a great deal of involvement, or very little. If you provide leadership, your participation can be whatever you want it to be.

“The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you.”

Max DePree, CEO, Herman Miller, Inc., Leadership as an Art

There are countless volumes on the subject of leadership, so we won’t presume to give leadership lessons here. The same general principles apply. In a design project, leadership requires that you give clear direction at the outset. You must be available when needed by the design team and ready to make decisions in a timely manner. You should understand how the design supports your objectives (so you can sell it). And you’ll need to monitor major delivery points and be prepared to get the necessary approvals. On this last point, some designers are excellent presenters, and, in fact, like to present their work to the final authority. But while they can be persuasive, they are not the ones to get the final sign-off. As the leader of the team, you are the deal-maker, the closer.

If you identify and articulate your objectives, establish your process early, see that the design team has access to what it needs from you, have a detailed budget and schedule to measure progress with, and lead the process from beginning to end, there is no reason that you won’t be able to enjoy the design process as much as the end product.

At least, that’s how many of our members and their clients see it.