

**The only thing  
that matters in  
design is the words**

**Part 2**

Great communication is a great idea told simply, but getting to simplicity isn't easy. Ensuring the words and design work together to express one clear thought takes practice, skill, structure, a good foundation, and a bit of trial and error.

**Previously we explored 6 common challenges that get in the way. Here, we look at the practical tips and techniques that overcome these challenges and ensure you've got the best chance of success.**



### **A reminder of the six common challenges**

1. *Everyone thinks they can write*
2. *Bad writing is bad thinking written down*
3. *Writers write and designers design*
4. *Style over substance*
5. *Without the sector vernacular, people won't get it*
6. *Avoid groupthink*

## **1. Start by getting the foundations right**

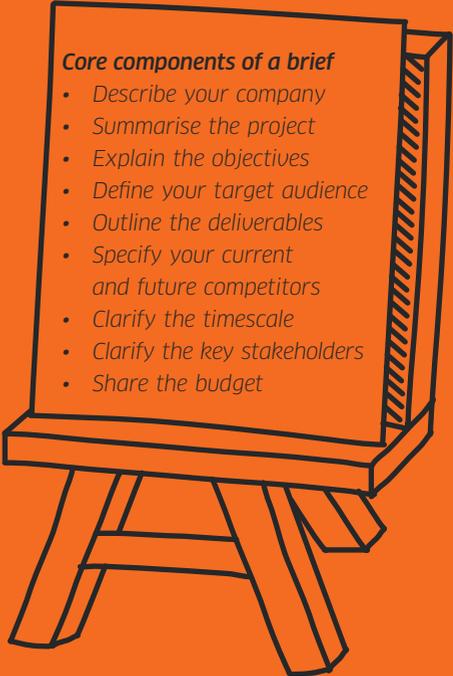
Communication is about design and words working together. It therefore goes that as much time should be dedicated to the words as it is to the design. After all, design starts with words. It's important therefore, to be clear what these words are or where you want them to come from. This starts with the brief.

### **The brief**

The key to a good brief is the time spent getting it right. I'm sure we can all think of a poor brief, where you're left scratching your head wondering what the key point is.

Good briefs have been thought through and contain just the right level of detail to inform without becoming overwhelming and unclear.

Put yourself in the shoes of the target audience: what do you want them thinking and feeling differently? What key messages do you want to land? If a strategic thought already exists, articulate it clearly, explaining how and why it was developed. If part of the project is to develop the strategic thought, list it as part of the deliverables.



### **Core components of a brief**

- *Describe your company*
- *Summarise the project*
- *Explain the objectives*
- *Define your target audience*
- *Outline the deliverables*
- *Specify your current and future competitors*
- *Clarify the timescale*
- *Clarify the key stakeholders*
- *Share the budget*

## **The briefing**

Great briefs are delivered face to face. Clearly this will depend on the nature of the project – if it's an extension of an existing project with the incumbent agency, then it's probably not necessary.

Meeting face to face, with all agencies present, or with each agency in turn, ensures absolute clarity about what is needed. It ensures there's understanding about what currently exists from a strategic perspective and what needs to be done. It determines the extent the agency will likely challenge the client on the strategic idea, and conversely the extent you, as client, wish to be challenged. It therefore gives you, the client, a sense of the agency you might work with, and the agency an understanding of how much creative freedom they are likely to have. Being specific about the budget will help indicate the role you wish the agency to play.

If the project is significant, then the briefing meeting is an ideal opportunity for the agencies to meet the key decision maker or project sponsor. We recently

pitched for a global rebrand against 4 other agencies, and during a very structured briefing meeting, each agency was given 30 minutes to ask the CEO any questions about the vision and strategy for the company. It guaranteed that all agencies had the opportunity to develop a creative idea based on real strategic insights and messages.

## **The kick-off**

The first meeting after the agency has been appointed is critical. Apart from dotting the i's and crossing the t's with the project administration, this is the opportunity for your agency to immerse themselves into the culture of your company. And from a creative perspective, this helps inform the tone and personality. Kick-off meetings should therefore be an opportunity to see the real company – walking about and talking to employees rather than sitting in a meeting room at the periphery. Depending on the brief, this should also be an opportunity to clarify the company strategy and start to define broad but essential messaging.

## 2. Develop the killer insight

Words need to be rooted in a clear strategic thought that addresses a human need or insight. The insights and strategic thought might be known already and shared at the briefing. The project might be about finding and expressing them. If it's a case of finding the insight, looking at the project through 4 lenses often helps:

### 1. Context

What is the world the company operates within and where problems exist?

What are the market and sector trends that are happening and what opportunities are available?

### 2. Company

How do key stakeholders currently perceive the company versus how you want them to perceive the company in the future?

How is the company currently expressing itself visually and verbally?

### 3. Competition

How do the competition and aspirant brands position and express themselves?

### 4. Customers

What do customers think about the company?

The need for insights largely depends on the scale of the project, the level of investment and whether client-conducted desktop research is sufficient. Use existing research wisely. However, whilst a quantitative employee and customer satisfaction survey might tell you the current mood towards the company, the lack of deep qualitative research and pointed comments will restrict any rich, meaningful insights.





### 3. Articulate the idea in words

The final creative stage before commencing the design is to use the insights to clearly articulate the strategic thought or narrative. Without this, designers design in the dark.

#### **Narrative**

The narrative creates the emotional connection with the brand. It's a distinctive brand story that is relevant to the key audiences, looks to the future but remains true and believable to today. It's expressed with powerful, evocative and visually rich language that acts as the springboard for all copy and subsequent design.

Get buy-in to the narrative from key stakeholders to ensure the design development starts in the right direction.

#### **Verbal territories**

Start to unpack the narrative into verbal territories. Brainstorm interesting and defining points worth exploring. Spider-diagram words and thoughts associated with each point, and apply the common principle of 'no idea's a bad idea' – you never know how one thought may spark another thought, no matter how random or tangential.

## 4. Go with the creative journey

### **Don't panic**

You're finally at the point of design. The creative process is an art not a science, so what comes out at the end might be different from what you first expected or thought. Go with the flow but trust your instincts.

### **Start broad**

Explore all creative avenues, ideas and possibilities. These are conceptual ideas only at this stage – but a good place to start. Don't dive in too soon and narrow your thinking.

### **Mood boards aren't just pictures**

Bring the ideas to life. Unashamedly steal other work for visual reference. Make ideas as distinct and different as possible. Don't just use images, use words, and words and images combined. Remember that mood boards are exactly that – an expression of a creative mood to follow, not a specific idea or defined route.

### **Test against the words**

Review the mood boards against the narrative. Are they true to the sentiment articulated? Select the ideas that express the story best and share with the client to see what has potential.

Now is often a good time to share the shortlisted ideas with broader stakeholders. Don't underestimate peoples' appetite to get involved in the creative process. Even seasoned bankers and operational experts enjoy the creative freedom and escape. However, manage your stakeholders and their involvement carefully, and as a rule, always get your agency to present.

## 5. Know when you're at the end

Design and words are finally coming together. You're now at the point of selecting the right idea that addresses the brief, and is favoured by many, and will make you look good.

### **Remain objective**

Give objective feedback to the agency on what they present. Review against the brief and avoid personal opinions.

### **Never accept lorem ipsum**

This is about words and design working together, so always demand actual headline copy in example applications.

### **Test it with your key audiences**

If time and budget allow, test the ideas internally and externally. It doesn't have to be an onerous process. It could be done at the

last minute, gathering people into a room, or piggy-backing a different meeting. The important thing is seeing what lands with the audience and what doesn't – never get the audience to make the final decision, and accept the outcome may be a blend of all routes.

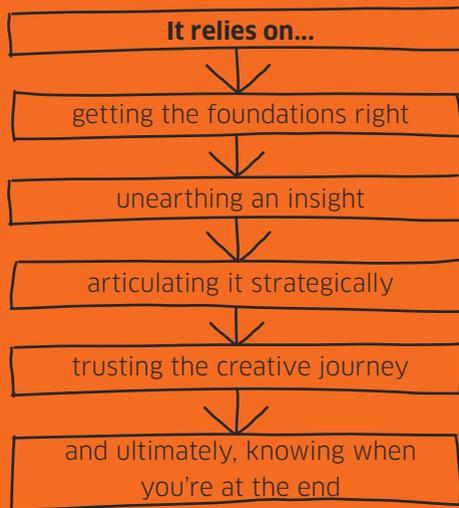
### **Be single-minded**

Above all, bear in mind the more people you involve, the more opinions you'll have, and the higher the risk the idea will be diluted. Be single-minded and focused. Share with the key influencers only, and seek forgiveness with others later.

# Conclusion

Great communication is a great idea told simply. It's no accident and takes time, thinking and structure. But there is no hard and fast rule.

It will depend on the nature of the project and must adapt to your company.



For more bountiful advice about creating great design, get in touch and we'll ensure your words and design sing together in perfect harmony.

## Michael Coleman

D +44 (0) 20 7833 6444

M +44 (0)7968 902 310

m.coleman@frankbrightabel.com

## Frank, Bright & Abel

326 City Road

London EC1V 2PT

T +44 (0)20 7833 6430

[www.frankbrightabel.com](http://www.frankbrightabel.com)

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