



Design Briefs How to get the best from your designer at the best price

Commissioning design and layout

Although customers all have different needs and approaches to working with their designer/layout person, all have one thing in common. They want someone who can express their ideas and achieve their aims – visually.

You, obviously, need to employ someone with technical skill, someone with the ability to use their tools properly who has knowledge of the processes of the medium, so that the desired effects can be achieved in a technically printable fashion. Nothing decent appears without this – it's a given – the backbone of what's being crafted.

But, to use a designer as a mere technician would be to miss out on the real benefit of commissioning a piece of work. An experienced designer has knowledge that comes from many years of study and working daily with design ideas and concepts. It is these two elements, the practical and conceptual, that are the service any good designer will offer. They can interpret and clarify what you are looking for and express this visually on your behalf and on your own terms.

To be able to provide a suitable visual response – one that achieves your aims – the designer, therefore, needs to have a clear idea of what you want. Not the technical detail of what you want where (this is the stock in trade of the designer), but your vision for the project. What your aim is and what you want to convey. This is the role a design brief plays.

What is a design brief?

When commissioning design and layout of a project, the design brief helps to establish a set of creative rules within which the designer can operate. This, along with any supporting material, is an important tool for the job in hand. It is the most effective way to communicate what you want, to get the best from your designer and to keep your costs to a minimum.

The design brief is a starting point. It provides a basis for further dialogue, discussion and clarification. From this initial brief the designer may even be able to suggest other possibilities or alternative solutions for effectively conveying your ideas and realising your aims, within any given material and brand boundaries. Such as, tips on how to best connect with your target audience or considering different print options.

A design brief is really just a list of requirements. The real work for you is the thinking that comes beforehand. You don't need to be concerned with exactly how it will be achieved (that's the joy in commissioning something), but you do need know what you want to achieve with the piece of work. We find that sitting down and thinking through what you are looking for is actually invaluable in helping to clarify – and develop – your *own* thoughts and ideas.

This is part of what the designer does as a job – but they cannot simply be a replacement for your own insight and knowledge of your organisation, audience aims and vision.

For example, take the opportunity to consider which of a series of key points should be the central and leading point? Or, which image of a series would most effectively express the aims you wish to achieve?

We would suggest that it is in this consideration – *while preparing a design brief* – that you play a leading creative role in the overall process, rather than, for example, expressing personal opinions during the process (although these may also pertinent aspects of the design in specific instances).

Preparing the design brief

When preparing a brief, the following information should be considered and included as appropriate:

- What is the target audience?
- What response do you require?
- What message do you wish to put across?
- Is there a 'key' message?
- What tone should be adopted?
- What medium or mediums do you intend to use?
- Examples of work that represent styles which are, or are not appropriate?
- Are there specific technical requirements, or format limitations?
- Are there 'house style' guidelines?
- What are the budget requirements or limitations?

There will be other points that will need to be addressed, such as terms of business and copyright ownership. These should be discussed prior to commissioning.

Once the design brief has been agreed, practical considerations such as file formats, images, logos and timescales can be finalised with the designer.

Most experienced designers are prepared to assist in the brief-writing process if you feel you need help please do not hesitate to ask.



Design Briefs How **not** to get the best from your designer

The awkward stuff ...

We do hope that this very direct and honest explanation – one that comes from decades of experience – will assist customers in achieving both coherent & consistent visual solutions to their design aims and receiving the best out of the people who are working for them at a cost-effective price.

1. Consider the design brief before you commission

You would be surprised how often a designer is asked to “create some initial ideas” without any knowledge of the needs of the message required, no initial key message text, or any appropriate images to use, let alone any copy. Obviously, this makes the task of the designer, even with the best will in the world, somewhat difficult.

The situation would be a bit like asking a bricklayer to build a wall, without telling them how high the wall is to be, what material it is to be built in and where you wish it to be built!

2. Avoid drip feeding the design brief to the designer

This also happens more often than you might imagine.

There could be a number of reasons for this somewhat mistaken approach. But, the most obvious seems to be that the customer has not actually worked out what they would like before they ask for the work to be carried out. This is especially awkward for the designer – because it may well be less than diplomatic to point this simple fact out to their customer!

To take an analogy from architectural practice – from *Grand Designs*. Throughout this television series a central point is repeated – it is always much more expensive to keep changing specifications. It simply does not make sense to build a house brick-by-brick without an overall plan, deciding where to place the walls in the building one at a time.

In graphic design it's the same – each element directly affects all the other elements on a page – drip feeding is slower and more costly. And, like *Grand Designs*, it impacts on the overall concept. If you're a viewer, you'll know the difference between an architecturally designed building that stays on brief and one that's built one brick/idea at a time.

Graphic layout frequently develops from its initial starting point – things can change as initial design idea evolves. This is part of the creative process in which both customer and designer are involved.

But there has to be a starting point and/or overall idea or concept to begin from if the process is going to result in a consistent and cohesive design within reasonable budgets. Please see ‘how to get the best from your designer at the best price’, which details the importance of a design brief.

3. Do not mistake micro-managing of each design element as effective commissioning of a design project

It almost goes without saying that the customer knows best what their overall *aim* is – what they wish to achieve. As such, their opinions and insight are essential.

Sometimes, though, a customer may mistake their lead role in the overall process of commissioning for the need to know and advise on the detail of the creative process. It is this kind of detail that the designer is being paid for – an inclusive part of the deal to which the designer is bringing years of study, knowledge and experience.

If the customer is overly involved in such detail, rather than saving time or producing a better and more cost efficient result, it has the opposite effect. In short, experience suggests, micro-management hampers the design process. It can greatly affect the cohesiveness of the resulting design and increase time and, therefore, expense.

It's understandable to want to get involved in the detail. There may well be something about design work that makes offering an opinion on each element almost irresistible. It is a problem very specific to the progress of the practical work following the commissioning process in design and arts and not something that tends to be experienced by other skilled professions.

Everybody has personal opinion and feelings on how things look – what colours they ‘like’ for example – but, mistaking such personal opinions on the detail of a design as being either necessary or informed input cannot replace the years of study, training and day-to-day work in the field. One may well end up with the poorly-designed results of unskilled input over-riding the knowledge one was employing in the first place.

Customers *do* have a significant and central role to play by:

- Providing a thought through design brief in advance of commissioning
- Providing finalised content *and...*
- Providing feedback on initial designs to let your designer know whether you feel they are and/or are not meeting your aims. Remember that if other members of your organisation are involved in the commissioning process, compiling together varied opinions as singular feedback will also save time and costs.

No customer should feel that they need to know about page design and layout when employing an experienced designer. When you've done the work listed above, you can simply await and feedback on the results of the designers work. Take a look at ‘how to get the best from your designer at the best price’ and give this a go – it is a tried and tested process.