



How Should the Creative Brief Change in the Always-On World?

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Published
December 2015

In this edition of Firestarters, we focus on a topic near and dear to planners' hearts: the creative brief. Industry leaders share how they've adapted creative briefs at their agencies to help drive projects in an always-on world.

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Advertising has radically shifted to be more agile, useful, and relevant in the always-on age of mobile. Yet the foundation of creative work, the creative brief, remains largely unchanged.

It's time for an evolution. The brief was designed for a world that no longer exists: a world of scarce media, in which brands could easily attract people's attention with cleverness and creativity. Now, people have endless media options. And the consumer journey features hundreds of real-time, intent-driven [micro-moments](#). Advertising must still be creative—but also relevant—in these moments to win hearts, minds, and dollars. So, how does the creative brief need to change to keep up?

As part of our on-going Google [Firestarters series](#), we gathered leaders from top agencies (Droga5, Deep Focus, and betaworks) and clients (Mondelez) to share how they've adapted their briefs to this new world. Here are some of their tips on how the brief, and the creative process it kicks off, should evolve.

1. Work in three-person teams

What kills creative work? Often, it's layers upon layers of review that lead creative teams in circles, wasting weeks or months of effort. After transitioning to the client side, [Eliza Esquivel](#), the VP and global head of brand strategy at Mondelez, found large companies often succeed by systematizing processes (like, say, marketing briefs). But “with too many templates, too many cooks in the kitchen, and too many layers of approval, the deck can get stacked against the possibility of great creative work,” she said. “We cannot have 20 layers of approval for campaign work.”

Instead, Mondelez is experimenting with working in three-person teams that brief, decide, and create all of the work. Two people on the team are from Mondelez, including a strategist and a person with expertise related

to the brand. The third person, a creative or technology partner, comes from the outside.



Eliza Esquivel believes too many layers of approval can get in the way of great creative work.creative work.

"It starts with a conversation among three people who design an experience that allows us to define and solve the right problem with the right people," Esquivel said.

Not only does this new model create an environment where creativity can flourish, cutting out complexity and layers of approval, but it also allows Mondelez to get work to market more quickly.

2. Develop mini creative briefs for your advertising

Too many ideas can destroy focus. Many agencies avoid this by elevating one simple brief to serve as the foundation for the big idea of a campaign. But sometimes new pieces or side projects can arise midstream. Droga5's process is designed to ensure the big idea brief isn't forced into serving as a catch-all for every part of a campaign.

Droga teams use insights about the audience along the [customer journey](#) to develop mini briefs. Each mini brief then ladders up to the big idea, tackling a specific purchase behavior. [Chet Gulland](#), head of strategy at Droga5, said he works to keep the big brief consistent, but he's found it's best to let mini briefs be flexible.

"Once in a while we think we should formalize what all these mini briefs look like, and then we decide to keep it flexible and really simple," he said. "Designing them specifically around what you're trying to brief makes the most sense as long as you really know what problem you're trying to solve."

"We have to think beyond 'we need an idea that works in social media.' That cannot be the brief. We need ideas that are actually platforms that can sprout other mini ideas."

In Droga5's work with Prudential, the team settled on the idea that Prudential should be about making America financially smarter. That single core idea generated many more modular campaign elements. The latest was the Run 4.01K race in Washington, D.C., designed to kick off a national conversation about saving for retirement. Gulland said they used up to 50 mini briefs for just the Run 4.01K piece.

"Every last piece had its own brief, from the social experience, to the website, to the sign-up page. Each one had its own insight about the user and how we want their experience to look and feel. So the creatives could keep the big idea in mind, but focus in on what we want someone to do at each point in the process," Gulland said.

[Ian Schafer](#), global chairman and founder of Deep Focus, said he agrees with this method, adding that the big brief should be broad enough to generate a wide range of executions and ideas.

Ian Schafer believes the creative brief should generate big ideas that can sprout lots of smaller ideas.



"We have to think beyond 'we need an idea that works in social media.' That cannot be the brief. We need ideas that are actually platforms that can sprout other mini ideas, that all have the potential to grow and be something bigger than the main idea that we had in the first place," he said.

3. Plan for advertising creative beyond the launch

Plans can change quickly after launch. Thanks to the immediacy created by mobile video and social media, campaigns have become [real-time conversations with always-on consumers](#). Droga5 uses the brief process to think about possible reactions to the work and how the brand can smartly rejoin the dialogue.

Gulland and his team map out different scenarios and ways in which the brand could respond to each. They plan for how to respond if people really love the work, or if people have issues with aspects of the campaign. The idea is that better work comes when teams think about what could happen next, instead of having to react in the moment.

For the Honey Maid [“This is Wholesome” campaign](#) they helped create, consumer reactions could have varied widely. The campaign featured mixed-race and same-sex couples and families, and before it even launched, the team crafted plans for different sentiments and levels of response.

Most people loved the campaign, but there was enough backlash to warrant a response. Thanks to the beyond-the-launch planning, Droga was ready. Gulland said the team had “decided from the beginning we were going to have a strong response—we weren’t going to back down. We were going to take the hate and turn it into love, which is what we did in this response video, created a week after the original campaign launched.



Click through for
Honey Maid: Love

“The response video ended up being the the most effective part of the campaign, reinforcing the idea that advertisements function best as dialogues.

“It felt to the world like we did this in real time, like we just had an idea in the moment. But we had been planning and scheming all along. With all

of our campaigns now, we try to map out what cultural moment is going to happen and how we can attach to it," Gulland said.

4. Spend more time *making*

Instead of using the brief to set up and develop a campaign released all at once, some agencies just start creating and see what happens. As [James Cooper](#), head of creative at betaworks put it, "We just do it; we get out there."

[Poncho](#), a weather service that sends people weather forecasts in the form of funny emails and texts, emerged from this process.

"We started with a very small group of users in New York and then expanded it to a few neighboring states," Cooper said. "This test helped us find our voice and figure out what sort of jokes work in the forecasts before we went national."



The Poncho weather service came to life through several rounds of testing.

Cooper said that Poncho is really a utility; it provides data, but with a culturally-aware attitude people can connect with. All of this came from

a group of people sitting around a table at betaworks, coming with up an idea and trying it out. The brief process (if you could call it that), was short.

Betaworks took its name from the idea that beta, or the process of testing products, *works*. So instead of a formal brief process where you present a deck, make changes, research, and make more changes, Cooper said betaworks “makes products, puts them out there, and sees what people have to say about them.”

“We change them; sometimes we kill them. And sometimes, they go great, and we pour resources into them.”

For your creative campaign strategy, focus on the process

All of our panelists agreed that no matter how a brief comes together today, it’s less about getting to one final piece of paper and more about a process that allows for flexibility, quick reaction, and ongoing iteration. Be sure to spend time reviewing your processes to determine how your creative brief process has (or hasn’t) evolved to serve your team.

Firestarters is a continuing series of events to bring the media strategy and planning community together to discuss and debate the most interesting and challenging issues facing the industry. To learn more check out our [recaps of past events and conversations](#).



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