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# The State of Creative Briefs

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Improving the way assignments are initiated in a  
\$310 billion industry

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8/1/2009

## Executive Summary

The potential to repurpose millions of dollars in marketing budgets lies in improving the way agencies receive assignments from their clients. Agencies invest significant resources to shore-up creative briefs or to keep pace with fluid goals and objectives, and that has hard-cost implications. In many cases projects must move forward despite incomplete and imperfect information, and that presents opportunity costs in the form of misdirected messages and wasted media buys. With Marketing Communication expenditures forecasted to be over \$310B in 2009 either scenario represents significant opportunities for agencies and clients alike.

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## Research Catalyst

When marketing organizations look to cut costs, they typically focus on fee or scope-of-work reductions<sup>i</sup>. But addressing inefficiencies in the briefing process can represent significant opportunity, not only by minimizing unnecessary cycles but also by maximizing the quality -and effectiveness- of the creative output.

## Spending Over \$310 Billion

Marketing Communication<sup>ii</sup> expenditures are expected to exceed \$310 billion in 2009<sup>iii</sup> and agencies will be asked to shape virtually every element from messaging to media placement. Agencies typically receive their assignments in the form of a Creative Brief, making the document one of the most important created by a marketer. Although the Creative Brief is well-established in the Client/Agency process, its content can vary greatly from client to client since there is no definitive answer for “the perfect brief.”<sup>iv</sup> Fundamentally, an agency needs to understand what their client is trying to accomplish in order to perform their job. At the simplest level the agency needs to understand:

- WHY the endeavor is being undertaken (to drive demand, shape perceptions, etc)
- WHAT the client is attempting to promote (product, service, brand image, etc.)
- WHO is the target of the effort

Of course marketing is a complex, multi-dimensional undertaking so additional context is critical to honing the deliverable to achieve its maximum effectiveness:

- Target Audience insights (demographics, psychographics, buying behavior, currently held perceptions)
- Brand Positioning and Desired Image
- Competitive Landscape
- Compelling support points for why the target should believe the client’s claims.

Like anyone asked to create from scratch –a builder, a composer, a software developer- an agency must be given clear direction on what is to be created as well as a complete understanding of the environment in which their creation will be placed. Loose definitions and partial descriptions result in end-products that fail to deliver on their goals because they fail to resonate with their target audience.

### Measure Once, Cut Twice. Repeat.

Unfortunately, the initial project assignment is rarely in good enough shape to begin work immediately. Agencies spend significant time sorting through the information they are initially provided, throwing out the superfluous, working with the Client to fill-in missing information and clarifying goals and objectives (to which financial incentives are frequently tied). This costs money and time and distracts from creating good work (Figure 1).

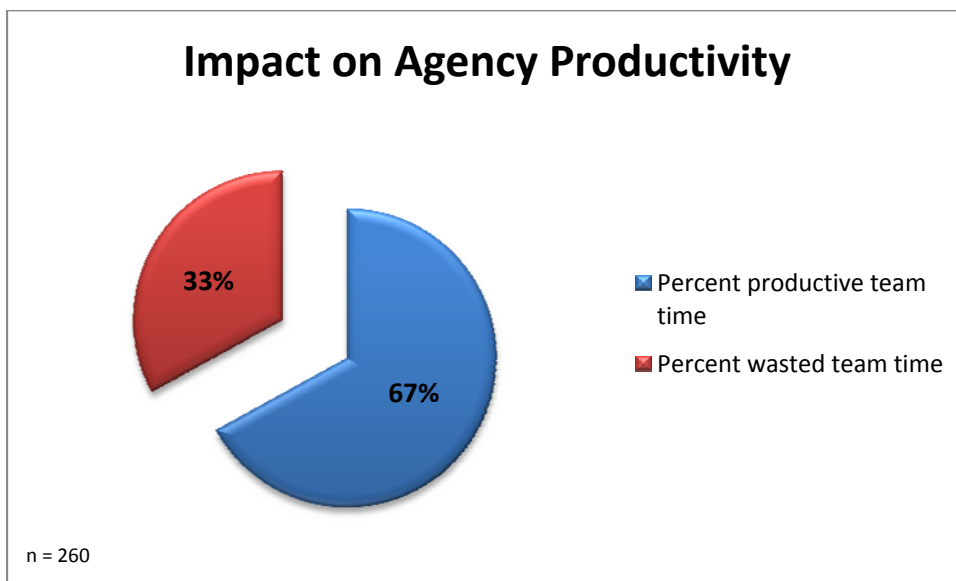


Figure 1: “In general, what percentage of your entire team’s time is made ineffective or wasted due to poor input from clients?”

Further analysis the data to identify key drivers reveals three storylines:

### 1. Assignments are often launched prematurely

Having a clear outcome in mind is critical to the success of any project. However, survey respondents report that two-thirds of the briefs they receive do not contain clear and measurable goals (Figure 2). Moreover, survey respondents report that nearly half of projects experience significant changes in direction after the briefing process has concluded (Figure 3). And when direction does change, it rarely results in a single update to the original brief, but rather multiple iterations (Figure 4). All data points suggest a rush to get projects underway, even in the absence of clear goals or consensus on the project's objectives.

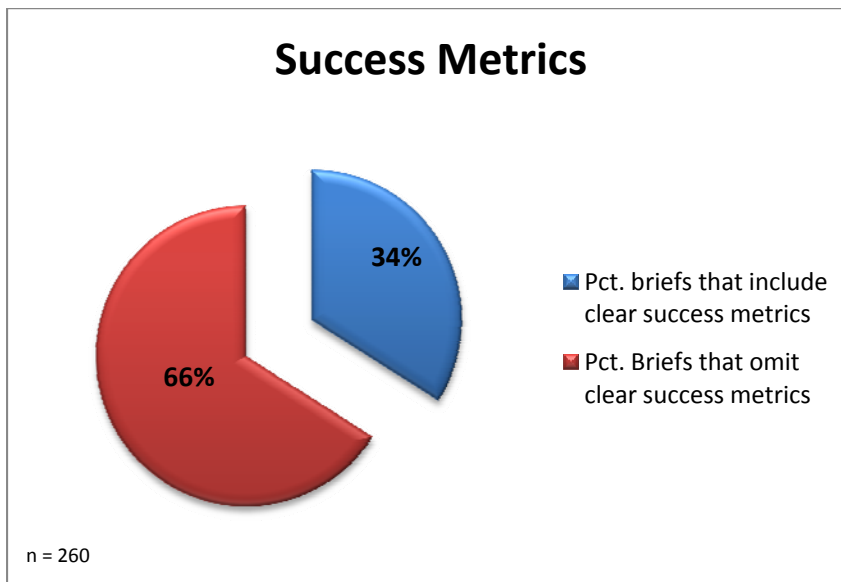


Figure 2: "What percentage of client briefs that you receive include clear and quantifiable metrics or goals for business success?"

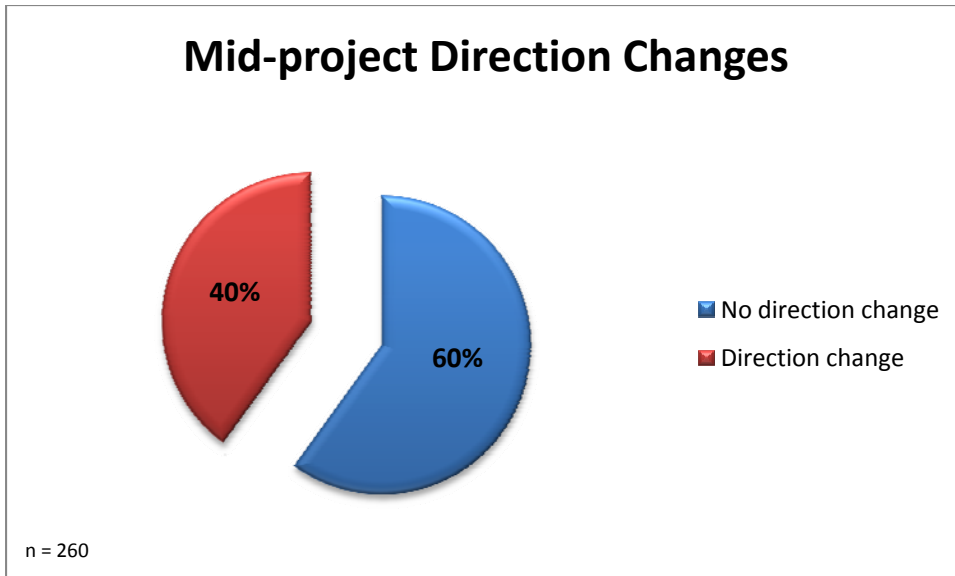


Figure 3: “What percentage of the time do you feel that projects are made more complex and difficult because client management changes the direction in the middle of an assignment happens with your clients?”

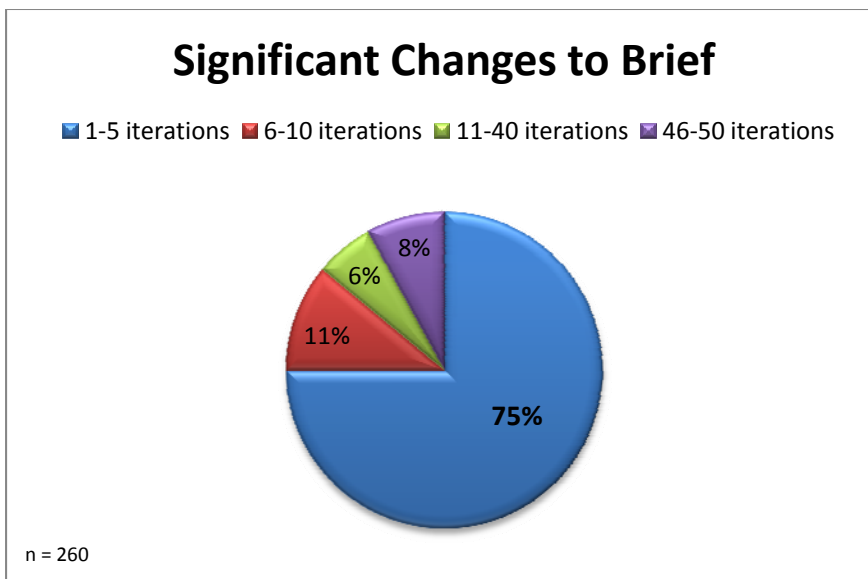


Figure 4: “On average, how many times are there significant changes to a client brief after a project has begun?”

## 2. Unclear expectations exist for input quality

Survey respondents report only about half the content of the average brief is useful in project development (Figure 5). The data is not a reflection on the effort put forth by the project owners during the briefing process, but rather highlights a disconnect between what clients and agencies believe to be necessary information to launch project. Further evidence of this disconnect is found in the quality

ratings of specific inputs common to all briefs. When asked to rate quality on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest score), no input averaged higher than 6.7 (Figure 6).

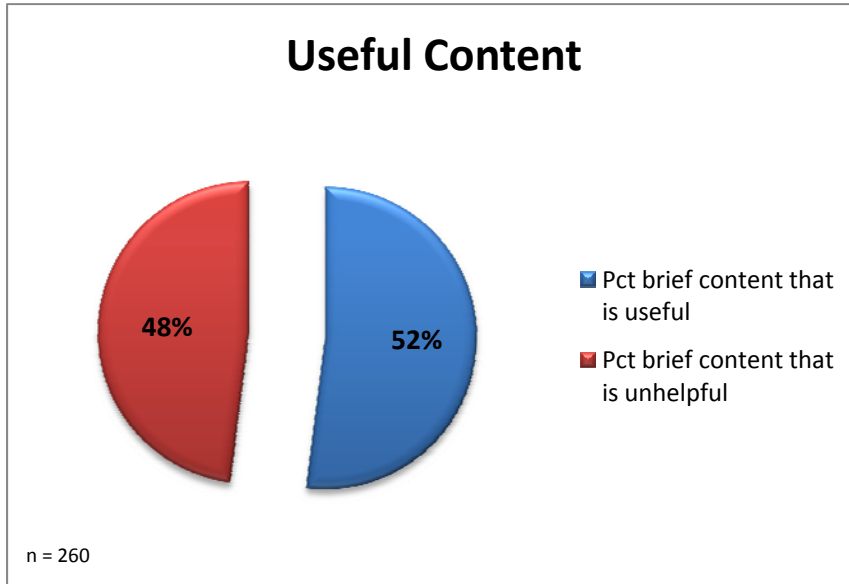


Figure 5: “What percentage of the information provided in an average brief do you believe is useful to agency teams versus irrelevant, conflicting or confusing information?”



Figure 6: “Please rate the general quality of client input you receive on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest).”

### 3. Complex approval structures are a further complication

The number of decision makers for a typical project varies, however the disparity between the optimal number of decision makers and the actual number is significant (Figure 7).

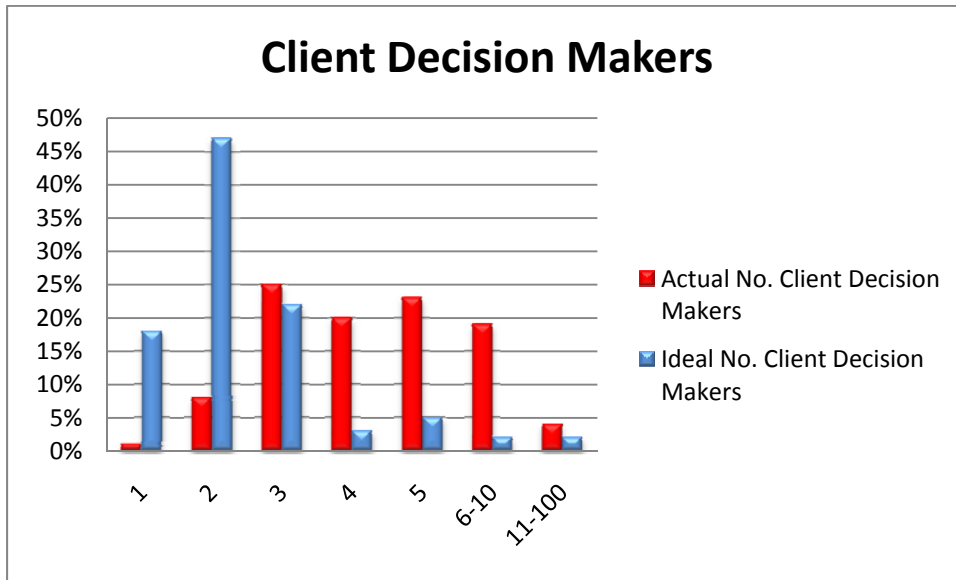


Figure 7: “What is the number of decision makers who provide the agency direction during the course of an average project” versus “what would be a manageable number of decision makers in order for your agency to do good work?”

### What it Means

With continued pressure on marketing budgets<sup>v</sup> and the growing strategic partnership between Finance and Marketing<sup>vi</sup>, marketing organizations and agencies will want to consider tackling inefficiencies in the creative assignment process since it charts the course for almost all Marketing Communication expenditures. Solutions to challenges identified in the survey data fall into three tenets:

### Ensuring good brief content is a shared responsibility between the client and agency.

#### Set expectations/definitions for all inputs

As an example, “Target Audience” can be described in one word (‘consumers’) or a thousand. The same can be said for every input on a creative brief. Establish standards for each input so that brief authors can easily identify if they are delivering acceptable quality.

### **Define and limit responsibilities**

Every client/agency relationship is different when it comes to the briefing process. One party assuming what would “traditionally” be the other’s responsibility is fine as long as everyone is clear. Most importantly, limit the number of approvers.

### **Monitor execution constantly**

Creative Briefs should be constantly measured against the standards previously described. Rotation of personnel is a constant risk, but “rush projects” and “executive initiatives” are commonly accepted excuses for abandoning a disciplined process.

## **Performance gaps need to be addressed**

### **Educate your teams**

Do not assume a common knowledge base. At best, marketers’ formal training is varied and skewed by previous employers. At worst, they are “accidental marketers” who have shown passion/aptitude for marketing but have no formal training in the discipline.

## **Upside can be material**

### **Streamlining the briefing process frees resources which can be repurposed**

Getting the creative brief “right” is critical, but doing so in fewer cycles is optimal. Marketing Manager, Account Executive and Creative Director time is easily calculated. Catching strategy flaws, audience overlaps and weak value propositions before a project is started has a real dollar value attached to it.

### **Better briefs improve return on investment**

Media (print, paper, broadcast, digital) is often the largest marketing expenditure and therefore offers the most financial leverage. It costs the same to deliver an ineffective message as it does an effective message, so ensuring the optimal alignment of target, offer and creative with media is an easy way to improve ROI.

## **Jones&Bonevac**

At Jones&Bonevac, we help focus national and global marketing and communications efforts. We help corporate marketers better understand their agency partners, giving them insight into how to partner more effectively for work that delivers greater impact. We deliver counsel to senior marketing management about what motivates their agency partners on a discipline by discipline and level by level basis.

### **Inquiries**

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In your email please give us two (2) contact options. We’ll contact you within two business days

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<sup>i</sup> 87% of respondents to the August 2009 Association of National Advertisers survey indicated they were in the process of identifying cost savings and reductions. The top three ways marketers were reducing costs and spending: 81% were reducing departmental travel and expenses, 74% were reducing advertising media budgets, 71% were challenging agencies to reduce internal expenses and/or identify cost reductions. See “ANA Recession Survey, August 2009”

<sup>ii</sup> Marketing Communications includes Newspaper (local, national, FSI), Magazine (consumer, Sunday, B-to-B, local), Television (network, spot, syndicated, cable), Radio (network, national, radio), Internet Ads, Internet Search, Outdoor, Direct Marketing, Catalogs, Promotions, Product Placements, and Events.

<sup>iii</sup> The Direct Marketing Association predicted Direct Marketing would represent 53% of all total US Marketing Communication expenditures in 2009. The DMA predicted US Direct Marketing would total \$183B and that total US Marketing Communications spend would be \$345B. See “Direct Marketing to Account for 53% of US Ad Spend in 2009”

ZenithOptimedia forecasts a 5.1% decline in Total US Marketing Communications spending which totaled \$396B in 2008. That suggests a 2009 forecast of \$376B. See AdAge “Total US Advertising Spending by Medium” and “US Ad Spend Trends 2008”

Allowing for a worse-case 10% spending cut triggered by worsening economic conditions, Marketing Communications spend would be between \$310B and \$338B in 2009.

<sup>iv</sup> Howard Margulies reports identifying 117,000 links in a Google search for “Creative Briefs” many pitching their own idealized construct. See AdAge.com “What Are You Packing Into Your (Creative) Briefs”, May 18, 2009

<sup>v</sup> 55% of respondents to the August 2009 Association of National Advertisers survey believe their Advertising budget will be cut by 20% or more in 2009. See “ANA Recession Survey, August 2009.”

<sup>vi</sup> Richard Young, former head of the London Stock Exchange, reports to the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants that Finance Directors “are clear that they cannot do their policing job without understanding” marketing while Marketing Directors have figured out “the best way to cement their position round (sic) the boardroom table is to show they understand the bottom line.” See accaglobal.com “When Finance Met Marketing” April 7, 2008.