

6 • Developing the Creative Brief

With all the noise, infinite brand touch points and multiple marketing partners working for a common client, it's critical that creative briefs be exactly that: brief. Without a crisp, elegant statement to guide us and keep us honest, none of us stands a chance of pulling off what we get paid to do. If the next brief you see contains more than one idea or has to be explained to the team working on it, kill it. Or it'll kill you later.

—JOHN COLASANTI, president and managing partner, Carmichael Lynch

Setting the objective

It's easy to see the virtue of analyzing consumer behavior, defining target markets, understanding your client's product, and examining possible strategies; but it's easy to forget that a precise objective is as important as anything else. Some advertising problems may sharply define your objective, others will be looser; and, if you're working on ads for your portfolio, you'll have no objective whatsoever until you give yourself one.

A hearty endorsement—"This product is good, so buy it now"—might feel sufficiently precise. But unless you're creating reminder advertising, whose purpose may simply be to wave hello to the consumer, your advertising objective should be as specific as possible—utterance, not gesture. Otherwise you'll create advertising whose effectiveness can't be determined, partly because you've never asked what it ought to be doing.

"There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept."

—ANSEL ADAMS, photographer

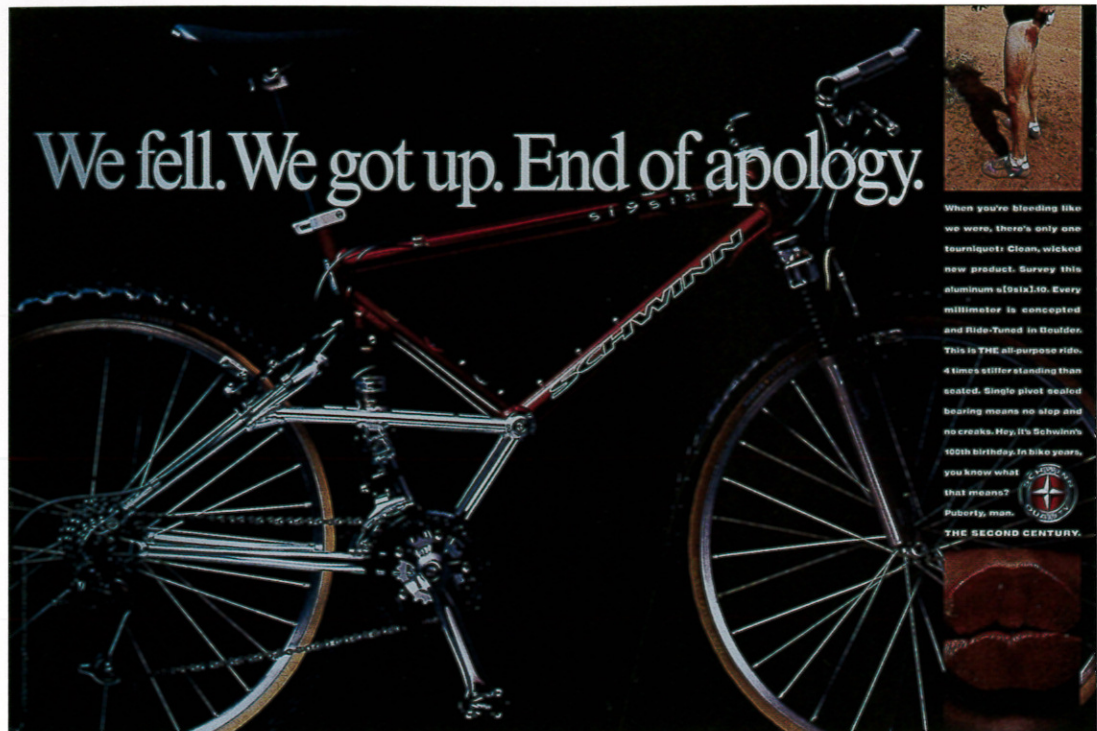
So what's a good objective? That's obvious: one that solves your advertising problem. What's your advertising problem? That's often not so obvious, but it is something your research should suggest. Information about consumer behavior, target market, product, and position in the marketplace—all the issues this book has been discussing—should be coming together to indicate what your advertising needs to do.

Maybe your client's product is new, so you need

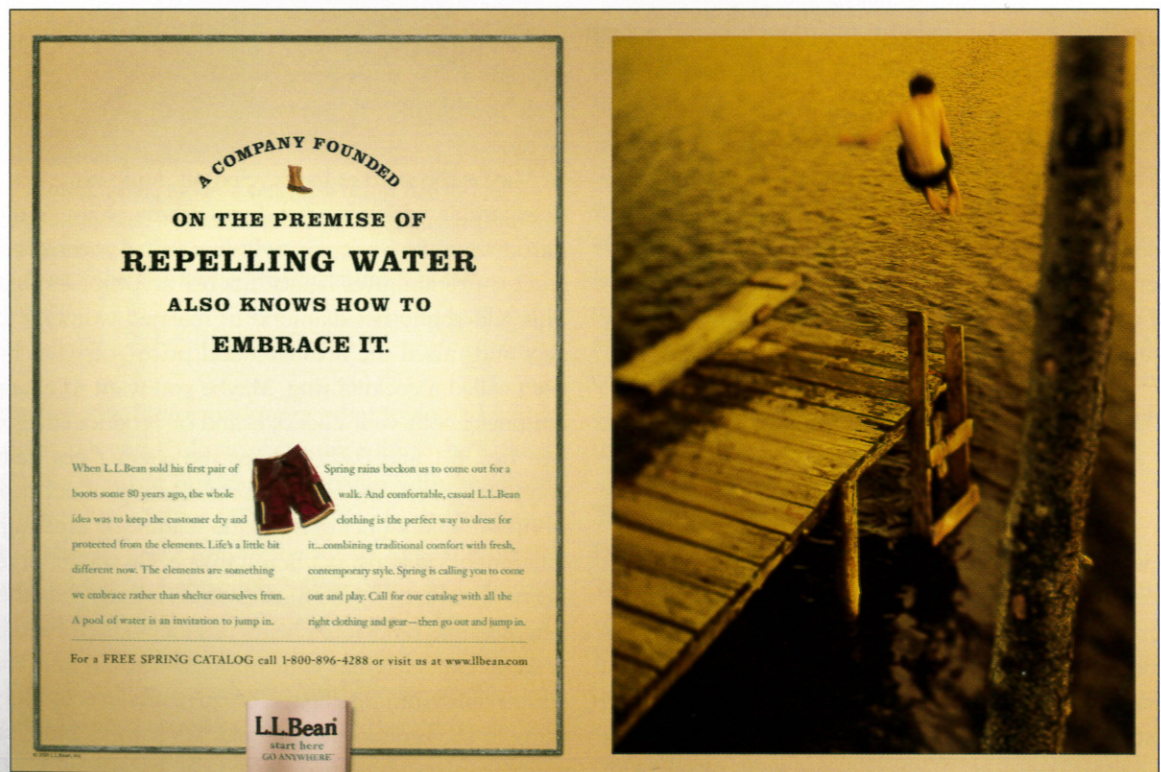
to generate awareness. Maybe the product isn't new, but it's got new, more convenient packaging or better flavor; so communicating that becomes your objective. Perhaps the product is on the downhill slope of its product life cycle, and you're trying to reverse its direction, or at least slow the slide, by proposing new uses, as Arm & Hammer did for its baking soda—encouraging consumers to put it in the refrigerator, sprinkle it on the carpet, use it on insect bites, on their toothbrush, in the washer, in the cat litter, and so on.

Maybe the market has leveled off, and you're trying to expand it, which is what diamond merchants did by introducing the diamond right-hand ring, meant to be a gift a woman gives herself for her accomplishments. This added another diamond to married women's fingers and raised the prestige—and price—of what had been called a cocktail ring. Maybe you want to change attitudes about your client's brand or product category (see figs. 6.1 and 6.2). Perhaps the client faces heavy competition, so you must communicate product superiority—by announcing a unique feature or creating a differential via a distinct brand image. Or you're targeting new markets, so you must create ads that speak their language and bind your client's product to their needs.

Who can say what your objective should be? That comes only from intelligent, creative analysis of everything in the product's force field. It's complicated, but you need to become simple and single-minded; distill all that you've learned into one advertising objective. Just what, exactly, do you want to communicate?



6.1. When Schwinn's product quality went south, the company needed to admit it. Casting the apology into tough talk and bike metaphor gave Schwinn an attitude that suggested they really had fixed their bikes.



6.2. L.L.Bean, known for its winter-worthy, no-nonsense clothing and gear, wants to be known for other seasons, too. Good use of opposition in the headline.

What one thing do you want the consumer to believe, or understand, or feel, or do about the product? Unless you focus on a specific objective, your ads will suffer from blurriness. Be an arrow, not an ink blot. As Norman Berry, executive vice president of Ogilvy & Mather, put it: "Vague strategies inhibit. Precise strategies liberate."¹

Developing the creative brief

In its shortest form, your creative brief needs to answer just three questions:

What benefit are you promising, what's your selling argument?

Who are you making it to?

Why should they believe you?

And you can put that in a sentence or two:

Ads will target environmentally conscious users of household cleaners and persuade them that Murphy's Oil Soap cleans thoroughly without damaging the environment. Support will be that it contains no harsh detergents or alkalis: it's 100 percent pure vegetable oil.

Ads will target upscale women, ages 22 to 32, and persuade them that Limited Express clothing will help make them successful, professionally and socially. Support will be the creation of a brand personality: fashion-forward, self-confident, hip.

Typically, however, ad agencies flesh this out into a page or two, and so can you. Creative briefs often cover these areas:

Key Insight	These combine to
Advertising Problem	tell you what your
Advertising Objective	ads need to do.

Target Consumer	
Competition	These focus
Key Consumer Benefit	your approach.
Support	

The following sections explore each area.

KEY INSIGHT

Bill Westbrook, when he was corporate creative director at Earle Palmer Brown, began each of his creative

briefs with "a single-minded statement that sorts out from all the information about product, market, competition, etc., the element that is the most relevant to advertising."² Many advertising strategists agree. Begin your strategic thinking by looking for the key fact or key insight (think of it as an Aha! moment). Why? Because it will cast the light by which to see the advertising problem you must solve.

Westin's "Heavenly Bed," for example, is an idea central to the hotel's advertising. It came about, says Tom Kelley, chief executive officer of design firm IDEO, after anthropologists (yes, they work in advertising and design, too) discovered that the bed was the problem hiding in plain sight for hotels.³ If the bed's the problem, make the bed the solution, so all Westin visitors experience the now-iconic "heavenly" beds, pillows, and bedding.

Since the key fact can be less than obvious, or there can be several key facts, finding the advertising problem they point to can be tricky. The creative brief helps you think things through.

ADVERTISING PROBLEM

"We spend more time finding out what the problem is than we spend solving it. Most designers skip the 'identify-the-problem' step, they're so bristling with solutions, like puppies leaking everywhere."

—STEPHEN DOYLE, Drenttel Doyle Partners

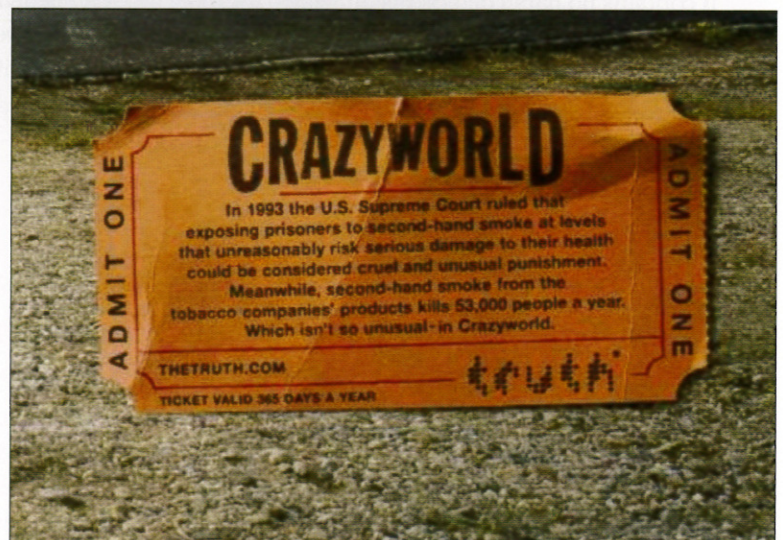
"People who think advertising is about writing good ads will be disappointed. Advertising is about solving problems for clients."

—SUSAN GILLETTE, president,
DDB Needham, Chicago

Once you've located that key fact or insight, what is it telling you? What is the product's biggest consumer-related problem? Let's say you're trying to get people, especially young people, to stop smoking. One key fact is that telling people that cigarettes are bad, which stop-smoking advertising has done for years, doesn't work. People know cigarettes are harmful, and still they smoke. Teenagers, especially, find authoritarian injunctions counterproductive. Telling them not to do something is often encouragement enough to do it. So the insight, the Aha! moment, from the American Legacy Foundation and its agency partners—Arnold Worldwide and Crispin Porter + Bogusky—was to give young people another authority figure against whom to rebel: Big Tobacco. The argument of the **truth**®



6.3. Ironies of tobacco industry malpractice were highlighted in the fictional (but factual) upside-down Crazyworld. Said Mike Howard, one of its creators, "With the Crazyworld campaign, we wanted to leverage [teen-agers' strong sense of right and wrong] and show young people a world in which most businesses are held to one set of rules and standards, while Big Tobacco operates in a parallel universe in which their actions are relatively devoid of consequence."



youth smoking prevention campaign became, then, not "Stop smoking" but "Don't Let Big Tobacco Get You." Cigarettes aren't the enemy as much as are tobacco's corporate honchos who play people for suckers by telling them lies. In other words, the strategy is to make Big Tobacco the bad guy, not cigarettes or parents

A related insight is that if cigarette brands are cool,

truth better be cool, too.⁴ And so it is. Crazyworld, one of many creative executions from the **truth** campaign, posits a world gone mad, where up is down and wrong is right, as a symbol of the "logic" of tobacco advertising (fig. 6.3).⁵ Another creation, Shards O' Glass, a faux company satirizing cigarette manufacturers, claims on its website, "Our goal is to be the most responsible, effective and respected developer

of glass shard consumer products intended for adults. Our Shards O' Glass Freeze Pops are the nation's top-selling frozen treats containing glass shards. Little wonder, considering all we put into them! . . . And remember, Shards O' Glass Freeze Pops are for adults only." (See fig. 6.4 for two ads from a campaign using the theme line "Infect the knowledge. Spread **truth**.")

ADVERTISING OBJECTIVE

Given the problem, what should your objective be? What effect do you want to have on the consumer? An advertising objective is really a communication objective: what you want people to understand, believe, or feel about the product. (You can't set marketing tasks for yourself—like improving sales by 20 percent—since these can be realized only by the entire marketing effort operating in an economic climate, not by advertising alone.)

For example, American Standard, makers of toilets

and sinks, faced this problem: a marketplace misperception was limiting sales. "We had to make this product seem not-so-standard. A lot of people felt American Standard was fine for airport restrooms, but not for 'my house.' It wasn't considered special," explains Kerry Casey, Carmichael Lynch's executive creative director.⁶ The advertising objective became to persuade consumers that American Standard cared about bathrooms—their bathrooms. The ads Carmichael Lynch created were witty and beautiful and featured great-looking bathroom fixtures, all to change that marketplace perception of the brand (see fig. 6.5).

TARGET AUDIENCE

To whom do you want to communicate this message? Which product users will you target? Define the target audience more specifically than simply demographically, just with numbers. What about psychographics—lifestyle and attitudes? Can you create a profile of the consumer you're addressing?



6.4. This idea—an ad within an ad (an ad that's a photograph of magazines opened to magazine ads)—encouraged teens to remove the ads from magazines and put them in public places or to do what the photographs suggest: go to newsstands themselves and open magazines to these **truth** spreads. In effect, the campaign said to teens, "Do something with this; pass it on." These ads, created by Arnold DC in 2001, are an early instance of interactive print. The agency often considered the work to be a "viral" campaign before "viral" became a marketing tactic.

6.5. Personifying the bathroom made American Standard very much at home in many customers' houses.



COMPETITION

Where does your client's product fit in the marketplace? How is the product perceived now, and how do you want it to be perceived? What product category should it compete in? Who are its competitors, both direct and indirect? Assess their strengths and weaknesses.

Graceann Bennett, managing partner/director of strategic planning at Ogilvy Chicago, believes that "at the root of every game-changing idea is a good enemy" and that "great brands push against something." She suggests using this three-part planning sequence to help you think your way toward an advertising strategy: First, what idea or circumstance is your client's brand pushing against or should it push against? Second, what, as a consequence, should the brand stand for? And third, can you create for this stance a succinct call to arms? She gives these examples:⁷

Target

Up against: You have to be rich to afford good design.

Stands for: Democratization of design.

Expression: "Design for all."

Nike

Up against: There are real athletes and the rest of us.

Stands for: There's an athlete in each of us.

Expression: "Just do it."

Bennett's agency was responsible for Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, created to move Dove from the soap category to the beauty category, the strategy being to

position the brand against the rigid and often painful definition of female beauty created over the decades. Here is how Dove's argument breaks out:

Up against: The overall beauty category claim:

"You are broken, and we will fix you," which has lowered women's self-esteem.

Stands for: Widening the definition of beauty.

Expression: Real beauty comes in all shapes, sizes, and colors.

You certainly don't have to use Bennett's three-part approach to strategy, but it's an interesting variant on positioning and may help you find your way. Try it and see.

KEY CONSUMER BENEFIT

If the objective is what you want to happen, the benefit sees it from the target audience's point of view. What benefit does the product deliver; what problem will it solve?

Here is how Evan Fry, co-founder of Victors & Spoils, sees the brief, especially this part of it: "I like a simple brief; one page. Personally I like to frame it as, what's the one thing you'd like the target [to] take away from seeing the finished work? I like that question because it keeps people on track and, oddly, it frees you up. It forces you to think about [the consumer's] mind-set. It's an efficient question."⁸

SUPPORT

Now, prove it. If you promise a benefit, what's your evidence? Support that claim.

Sometimes creative briefs also address two other areas. They include a tone statement, explaining the feel the ad writer envisions for the campaign. Whimsical, no-nonsense, aggressively competitive, off the wall? Voice and tone are crucial. What's best for the product, target audience, and advertising problem?

Creative briefs may also identify mandates and limitations. For example, Bill Westbrook includes in his creative strategy "any restrictions or client data which are necessary to a clear understanding of creative direction including legal cautions, carry-over of a successful slogan, items of line to feature, type of casting acceptable and corporate tags."⁹ Usually you cannot simply start over with a clean slate but must deal with advertising and branding constraints already in place. Taking the advertising in the direction you want it to go without rupturing current consumer perceptions in the process, making the transition toward your goals a seamless one, is often your real-world task.

Try to say all this in one page. Remember that the essence of your brief is simply:

What benefit are you proposing?

To whom?

Why should they believe you?

The categories above suggest areas to cover, but there's no one way to write a brief, except thoughtfully. The creative brief below, written for a diamond ad campaign, demonstrates one method of organizing the material.

Figure 6.6 shows two of the ads created from this brief. Christopher Cole, its art director, says, "Mark [copywriter Mark Wegwerth] and I focused on talking to men from a man's point of view. Up to that point most ads for engagement rings would talk to men, but from the woman's point of view. Both Mark and I had purchased engagement rings within a year of making these ads, so we were very much in the frame of mind of the target audience."¹⁰

CREATIVE BRIEF¹¹

Client: **Diamonds Direct**

What is the business objective?

To source a greater share of business from local competitive jewelers—both big-box retailers and specialty stores—in shopping malls.

How can advertising help accomplish this objective?

By demonstrating that Diamonds Direct is a prestigious jeweler that sells quality engagement rings at a reasonable price.

Who is the target consumer?

Men who are getting married for the first time.
Age: 23–32

Buying an engagement ring is one of the larger purchases a man will make. His future wife, her family, and friends will evaluate him based on the choice he makes. This leads to fear that he will make a mistake. At this stage of life most men do not have a great deal of disposable income, so they do not want to pay too much.

Getting a good deal will also mean he will have more money available to purchase a larger, higher-quality stone, which will in turn impress his mate. The fear of paying too much for a ring is potent, in some cases more potent than the fear of choosing the wrong ring.

Men will typically talk to friends and family, research diamond quality and contemporary ring designs, and, having settled on a type of ring they want to buy, will then factor in cost as part of their decision-making process. A premium-quality diamond jeweler that promises the right ring for less than its competitors would be a welcome ally in the process that men navigate when purchasing an engagement ring.


What do we want them to know about us?

That Diamonds Direct has high-quality engagement rings at a price they're prepared to pay.

Why will they believe this is true?


Diamonds Direct is not part of a large retail chain located in a shopping mall, so they can sell their product with less mark-up than their competitors.

6.6. Funny, simple, and painfully true. Other headlines were "Asking her used to be the hard part" and "Maybe commitment isn't what men are afraid of."



**MOST JEWELERS
HOPE LOVE IS BLIND.**

DIAMONDS DIRECT INC.
We sell diamond rings without the ridiculous retail markup. In the Americana Bank Building, 5050 France Ave. S. #200, Edina, 929-0054.



**WOMEN CRY AT WEDDINGS.
MEN CRY MUCH SOONER.**

DIAMONDS DIRECT INC.
We sell diamond rings without the ridiculous retail markup. In the Americana Bank Building, 5050 France Ave. S. #200, Edina, 929-0054.

As David Fowler, executive creative director at Ogilvy & Mather, points out, "It is infinitely helpful to realize that in advertising, as in life, there is no grand map that everyone is privy to except you. We are all muddling forward, through the fog."¹²

Nonetheless, it can help to see the maps with which agencies have "muddled forward." Here is one from Goodby, Silverstein & Partners:

1. Why are we advertising at all?
2. What is the advertising trying to do?
3. Who are we talking to?
4. What do we know about them that will help us?
5. What is the main thought we need to communicate?
6. What is the best way of achieving this?
7. How do we know we're saying the right things in the right way?
8. Executional guidelines.

The Richards Group has used a similar sequence for its briefs:

1. Why are we advertising?
2. Who are we talking to?
3. What do they currently think?
4. What would we like them to think?
5. What is the single most persuasive idea we can convey?
6. Why should they believe it?
7. Are there any creative guidelines?¹³

Final advice

"The quality of the solution depends entirely on how well you state the problem."

—CRAIG FRAZIER, illustrator/designer

Sometimes creative people mistakenly think that the brief is at best a perfunctory outline, a simple condensation of the obvious, and at worst a straitjacket against good ideas. But neither is true. The genuine complexities of the marketplace are what make this strategic document so essential, and they're also why thinking one through requires intelligence and marketing savvy.