

How to prepare an effective web design brief

Part 1 - overview

Get your web site project off to a flying start with a well thought out brief.

Why preparing a brief matters:

- Knowing what you want from your web site will make it easier and quicker to make decisions about the content and presentation - you will get your web site online faster.
- You will find it easier to compare different design companies' services and fees.
- The brief will form the starting point for your designer to draw up a clear project specification.
- You'll be in a good position to judge the success of the project.

What will be in the brief?

The essentials: ideally your brief should provide the following information:

- A profile of your business
- Project objectives
- Web site content
- Target market
- Project constraints
- Point of contact
- Project scope

Part 2 - the key elements of a design brief

A profile of your business: even if you are a household name the designer still needs to hear your own view of your business. Include a succinct description of your company, products and services, its history, unique selling points and who its main competitors are. Also include a few words on the company image, brand or personality.

Project objectives: identify the main reason for having a web site as well as any secondary objectives. Here are some typical reasons:

- Marketing - improve brand awareness, expand on traditional marketing materials such as brochures, advertising and direct mailers.
- Selling - sell products, advice or services.
- Customer services - provide clients with information or support.
- Recruitment - advertise vacancies and attract suitable candidates.
- Public service - make information accessible to a local, national or international community.

Web site content:

List the main elements that you want to see in the site, for example, company background, news and press releases, client list, project portfolio, product information (specify how many products both now and in the future), contact details including location map, enquiry form, etc. Identify any elements which already exist and in what form, and which will need to be created specifically for the site. Also think about how often you want to update the content and whether you want to be able to do this in-house.

Target market:

Briefly describe your traditional market and who the web site will be targeting (if it's not the same thing).

Scope:

Specify what you are expecting the design company to do (or not do). For example, do you want them to provide you with?

- A domain name (e.g. www.mybusiness.co.uk), web site hosting (a host provides the online computer space for your web site) and e-mail to go with it.
- A new logo - and remember to specify if you want it suitable for using in other media as well
- Copy writing or proof reading
- Photography
- Illustrations
- Animation, video or sound
- Database development
- Search engine optimisation and registrations

Also describe the scale of the project - either estimate roughly how many pages you expect to be in the site or the number of individual products or services it will cover. The figures can be very general since a few pages more or less will rarely alter the cost or timing of the project.

Project constraints:

Set deadlines for appointing a designer and for the site to go live. Timescales for the stages in between can be worked out later. A rough idea of the budget will make sure that you don't waste time with companies who will turn out to be too expensive.

Point of contact:

Provide the name, phone number and e-mail address of one person that the designers can approach with any questions that they may have about the project. Ideally this person will be their point of contact throughout the work and will have the authority to make decisions and sign off each stage. Note that if the designers are not dealing directly with decision makers the process will tend to be slower.

Part 3 - how to use the brief

Use the brief in your first approach to web design companies: extract the main points into a couple of paragraphs which you can use in your initial letter, phone call or e-mail. The companies' responses should enable you to draw up a short list of 3 or 4 consultants.

Use the brief to request a fee proposal: invite each of your short listed companies to a meeting to discuss the full brief so that they can provide a detailed fee proposal. Don't expect costing on the spot - good designers will need to go away and put some thought into their proposal. This raises the question of whether you need to meet face to face. Personally, I prefer to meet the people I'm planning on doing business with. However, if you're on a tight budget, the designer may be able to save time (and money) by taking your brief by phone and e-mail. You wouldn't expect to pay up front for briefing meetings but whoever wins the job will certainly have calculated the cost of travel and meetings into their fee proposal.

Your chosen designer can use the brief to draw up a project specification: this will explain how the design company is going to meet your brief. For a simple site the brief and the designer's fee proposal document may do the job. For more complex sites there will be additional information such as timings for different stages and technical specifications. Note that a major project may require a research phase before the final specification can be written.

In conclusion:

A well prepared brief saves time and makes sure that everyone knows what you expect from the project.