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# Giving Good Brief

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How to successfully brief your copywriter (or yourself)  
to ensure you get the results you want from your  
marketing investment!

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*by Cara Tipping Smith, Copy Carats*

## Giving Good Brief

So you are about to hire a copywriter or perhaps you're wanting to make your own copy a little easier to produce. How can you ensure you get the end-result you want? It all comes down to your brief.

Giving good brief is a skill like any other and it's easily learned. Even better, this document will teach you exactly how to do it, and give you the template so you'll never miss a step again. You'll be giving good brief for the rest of your life, and it will come with ease.

*Cara Tipping Smith is a professional copywriter who has worked in the NZ, UK and US markets since 1998. With degrees in English and Psychology, Cara and her team blend the art of language with the science of motivation to write compelling sales messages; messages that work!*

*Copy Carats specialises in providing quality marketing and communications content for small to medium sized businesses for digital, print, press, voicing, online and on air. See more at [www.copycarats.co.nz](http://www.copycarats.co.nz).*

### 1. What is your brief?

*Back in my days of radio, I remember asking an upmarket car dealership client what their offer was (for their radio ad). He responded with, "Isn't that your job to make it up?!". "Sure," I replied, "I can sell your cars for '£50 a pop - this Saturday only!'... but you may not be truly happy with that."*

I'm not suggesting you're that kind of client but it's important to understand where your responsibility ends and the writer's responsibility starts. While all good copy is a collaborative process the very first step sits firmly with you – it's called 'The Brief'.

So what is your brief?

On its simplest level, your brief is your instructions. But "write me an ad that sells my business", is not a useful instruction (unless you want your cars sold way under value). Your brief takes just a little thinking on your part to define the boundaries in which your message is going to work.

In practice, your brief is where you tell your writer (or even just for yourself) what you want to achieve and equally importantly - the parameters of your power to effect that end.

Let me explain a little further. You don't want your writer making stuff up, and yet you do want a writer (or yourself) to have space to be creative. There's two things you should know about writers; the first is that they are by nature creative and the second is that they really want your ad to work.

Because your writer really wants your campaign to work, if you don't give them a genuine selling point to write about they may be tempted to make one up for you – *you* need to be in charge of your business goals.

Further, without a genuine selling point, all you'll be left with is creativity and that can take you in a direction you don't want to go (remember the national embarrassment "Abstain for the Game", aborted during the 2011 Rugby World Cup).

So your brief will outline the boundaries within which your writer (or yourself) will work. It will make sure you have a good proposition for your customers *and* ensure that your writer isn't tempted to make the wrong stuff up. I'll outline how you put together a great brief in the next few pages but the key point about your brief is that your project's success depends on it, so put some time into it.

A good copywriter will talk you through your brief. Be open to their suggestions and listen to their advice (they're in the industry and they know what a good offer is and what it isn't). But unless you set the parameters first, getting what you want will depend on good luck, not good management.

### 2. What must your brief include?

*As a new copywriter, my boss asked me how I was going and I answered, “not bad, I’ve got a few ideas but I’m not sure I like any of them”. He laughed and gave me a piece of advice that’s stayed with me all these years, “Don’t limit yourself before you even start. Your clients will limit you and your colleagues may clip your wings, but before you can critique, you must first write”. Thanks Dave Couch!*

The very easiest way to start preparing your brief is to think about the what, who, where, why, when, and how of your advertising campaign. Even if you’re just wanting a flier for a mail drop or an e-newsletter to send out – you still need to define the goals. Writing your brief really isn’t hard, you just need to start.

1. What – are you offering?
2. Who – are you offering it to?
3. Where – are your buyers likely to be?
4. Why – should they buy your offer?
5. When – do you want your buyers to act?
6. How – do you want your buyers to act?

#### What are you offering?

Think about this one. Do you have a special offer or are you wanting to promote your services / products in general? Having a special offer does make an advertising campaign more compelling; everyone loves a bargain! But if you’re hiring a writer to write your website or company profile, you need to tell them what makes your products or services desirable over and above your competition.

What makes your products or services better than the competition are called USPs (Unique Selling Points) in marketing speak. And yes, your special offer is actually a USP. Your writer needs to understand what makes you unique and your offer worthwhile. If you’re not sure, a good copywriter will help you identify your USPs.

#### Who are you offering it to?

Understanding your buyers helps your writer tailor your copy to meet the buyers’ interests. In very few cases is the answer truly “everyone”. While “everyone” could use a first aid kit, only some people are likely to buy one. Defining your buyers allows the writer to speak directly to the people who need to know your message most. In many cases you’ll find there are specific subsets of people who are your most likely buyers.

In marketing speak, this is called your Target Audience and the subsets you identify are your Market Segments.

Which is more compelling?

- Buy this first aid kit – it's good and cheap!
- Mums, make sure your newly driving teen is prepared for an on-road emergency!

If you can only afford one message, find your biggest subset of buyers and target them. Talk to your copywriter so you can target them effectively. This will maximise your sales (and you can tackle the other segments later... from the profits of getting this one right)!

#### Where are your buyers?

Knowing where to reach your buyers is a direct consequence of knowing who they are. This saves you money straight away. No more scatter gun approach to advertising, just tight targeted messages that reach the right people. If your audience is long haul truckies, then nighttime radio is cheap and going to reach your market. If your audience is trendy teens, then you'll be looking at online, social media and apps.

Back to marketing speak, this is called The Medium. It's the forum if you like, in which your advertising message will go whether that's online, in print, in press, on air, or in person (such as a speech or presentation). Each of these forums is different and different marketing rules apply. Not all writers write across all mediums, so make sure the one you hire is skilled in your medium of choice. And if you're writing it yourself – make sure you understand the rules.

#### Why should they buy your offer?

Understanding what motivates your buyers is essential, and you have to look at it from their point of view. It's not enough to say we have great customer service or better value for money, unless that's what matters most to your customers *and* is something you can prove or quantify. Generic advertising messages are not effective; your jaded customers have heard it all before.

In marketing speak this is your Key Message. This is your single opportunity to give your buyers the reason to buy from you! It has to be specific and simple. Work with your writer to make sure you have a gripping Key Message that your customers can easily understand.

#### When should they buy your offer?

The answer is commonly, "now". But not always. Limited time offers can be great to create urgency and get the buyers to act straight away but think about the bigger picture. Who buys at Briscoe's or Godfrey's when they *don't* have a sale? People are more advertising savvy nowadays than ever before. If you are truly offering a special for a limited time, make sure your customers understand why; clearance stock, end of season sale, new branch opening, early bird pricing...

In many cases, the "when" will be circumstantial; "when you're trying for a baby", "when your contract finishes", "when you're moving premises". Psychologically you're setting the scene for the customer and creating potential neural pathways that will link your offer to that situation and increase the chance of getting the sale at the time. Clever huh? Good copywriters know this!

### How do you want your buyers to act?

Do you want them to call you, email, visit your website or drop by? Deciding this has two major implications. The first is that you want the buyer to know what to do, no confusion, no chance that they'll get distracted from doing what you want. The second is to make sure you're adequately resourced to handle the response – too many calls to handle will turn your customers off!

This is your Call to Action (CTA) in marketing speak and a good copywriter knows how to make it clear and memorable within the message. Without a clear Call to Action, you won't get results and worse - you could actually send your customers to your competition! If they respond to your message (buy a vacuum cleaner, see a lawyer) but if they don't know how to get in touch with you, they'll act on the *next* sign they see.

### Summary

- |   |   |                               |
|---|---|-------------------------------|
| 1. What – are you offering?               | ⇒ | The Offer                     |
| 2. Who – are you offering it to?          | ⇒ | The Target Audience           |
| 3. Where – are your buyers likely to be?  | ⇒ | The Medium                    |
| 4. Why – should they buy your offer?      | ⇒ | The Key Message               |
| 5. When – do you want your buyers to act? | ⇒ | The Urgency / Embedded Timing |
| 6. How – do you want your buyers to act?  | ⇒ | The Call to Action            |

### 3. What separates a good brief from an adequate one?

*A client wanted me to write an e-newsletter and gave me a draft of the content he'd written. Like any good copywriter, I pulled the common threads out of the stories he gave me and created a sparkling and consistently themed whole. What he hadn't told me was that his business partner had bailed on his business the week before and emailed all his clients slagging off the company. Context!*

So once you've got the what, who, where, why, when, and how nailed, you've got an adequate brief but not necessarily a good one. Context is critical and it can change everything.

When you're briefing your writer, you need to give them the context under which they're working. If you're writing yourself or briefing an in-house team it's still worth outlining the context because you may not realise the assumptions you're making, until you go to write them down; a good copywriter will help you verify your assumptions.

#### 1. Project Context

What prompted this project? Are you responding to a competitor's offer? Is this a new product or service? Write down the reasons why you want to advertise or promote your business – why now?

#### 2. Market Context

Where do you fit in the market? Think about your competitors and your customers' perceptions about you and them. Yes, this does come back to your USPs but also what's happening in your market right now? What's new, interesting, or eye-catching that can help catch your customers' attention?

#### 3. Product / Service Context

What sets this product or service apart? Why has it been developed (if it's new)? Why is it better? What are the problems it answers or solves? How does it make people's lives better? Why is it necessary?

#### 4. Brand Context

What are your brand imperatives? Do you have a tagline you use? Does this campaign have to take a similar look or feel to your existing marketing? Is this a stand-alone product? Do you need a "fresh" approach?

#### 5. Production Context

What timeframe are you working to? What are your budget constraints? Have you got the images / content you need or does the writer need to wait on these/ source these? Is there anything you are waiting on that the project requires (e.g. website being built, photos being taken)?

#### 6. Reference Context

Where can the writer go for more information? Who can they speak with? What research do you need them to do? Have you provided them with the correct contact details for any Call to Action?

<b>The Offer</b> (what)	
<b>Target Audience</b> (who)	
<b>The Medium</b> (where)	
<b>Key Message</b> (why)	
<b>Urgency/Embedded Timing</b> (when)	
<b>The Call to Action</b> (how)	
<b>Project Context</b> (what prompted this project)	
<b>Market Context</b> (the competition)	
<b>Product / Service Context</b> (background to the offer)	
<b>Brand Context</b> (brand imperatives)	
<b>Production Context</b> (time, budget, content)	
<b>Reference Context</b> (further resources, details for Call to Action)	



### Congratulations!

That's it. Easy eh? Follow this template and you'll soon be a briefing master! But it's not about the theory, it's about the doing.

Despite the Psychology degree, we don't certify people (we'd have to diagnose you first); we just show you how to do things and if you need any more help, get in touch. If you want a quick quote for our professional services, you'll find an easy to use form on our [contact page](#) or you can always email me directly at [cara@copycarats.co.nz](mailto:cara@copycarats.co.nz).

If you want more tips on writing or marketing, sign up to our free newsletter 'the fifth C' on our website [here](#). It's monthly and packed with marketing and advertising insights and inspirations - designed to give you all the education you need.

Happy writing!

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