



Measure Twice, Cut Once: The Anatomy of a Creative Brief

Here's a proven way to ensure fundraising success.

BY BILL SPINK

What does the expression “measure twice, cut once” have to do with fundraising, marketing, and creativity? Everything! A powerful product—for instance, a direct-response letter that really works—depends on clearly communicating and getting agreement on many variables. And it’s vital that this important stuff be accomplished up front—before one word is written or graphic developed.

Now this may sound like common sense, but how often does it really happen? When was the last time you had a real breakthrough with your direct-mail or donor-acquisition program? Most likely it’s been awhile. Why? Because you’re probably too close to your own product and not focused on an overall creative strategy.

Creating a successful fundraising piece is a collaborative process between your staff and the person who will write the final product. The writer may be a freelancer, someone from an ad agency, or an employee of your organization. In any case, this writer will do a better job if you clarify what you want to accomplish. The best way to do so is to provide the writer with a document called a strategic creative brief.

A strategic creative brief is a living, breathing document that requires input from all involved parties, including development, marketing, communications,

and other areas from within your organization as well as the creative, media, and production teams. Here are the steps to take in putting together your strategic creative brief:

Provide at-a-glance details about roles, responsibilities, and other important project details. This lead-in section should include such specifics as your organization’s name, type of media to be

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used, budget guidelines, and targeted launch date.

Describe the product or service you want to promote. For example: “The Adopt a Pet Program matches animal lovers with a pet, which they support with monthly donations.”

Analyze the marketplace. Drawing from research, interviews, conferences, and past experiences, provide facts and figures that describe the overall market environment. What is the competition doing? What sets you apart from them? What are the primary challenges in marketing your product or service?

Specify your objective. What’s the main thing you want to accomplish? Example: “Increase average annual gifts.” “Boost donor retention rates.” “Double our donor base of those between the ages of 30-55.”

Explain how you will measure success. For instance, will you gauge success by acquisition cost per donor or the cost to retain a donor? Is it more important to acquire the largest possible number of new donors or those who give above a certain threshold?

Pinpoint your target audience. Be as specific as possible. “Typical donors are females over 55” isn’t enough. Your writer wants to get into the donor’s head and craft a one-to-one message. Give the writer a real sense of what your donors “look like” so the message will touch them personally and move them to action.

Describe your target audience’s perceptions of your organization. What do they know—or suspect—about you? Do they have beliefs that can help or hurt as you strive to reach your objective?

Clarify your target audience’s behaviors and motivations. Cast attitudes in the first person to make the “voice of the target” come through loud and clear. For example, rather than stating, “Our donors care about animals,” you might capture the attitudes of an animal-rights donor as follows: “I love all

animals, have a pet or two myself, and feel people need to act to change the world. But it’s hard to see how one person makes a difference. Too often I feel the world is just going downhill. I want to make the world a better place, I just don’t know how.” That’ll give your writer the tools to make a real connection.

Summarize your marketing strategy. How will you bring your objective and your target audience together? What do you propose to do, given the marketplace, your objective, and the background of your target audience? For example: “Create a new ‘circle’ of giving to acknowledge our loyal donor base and encourage them to give more often.” “Test a three-part renewal series to donors in their first year to increase retention.”

Tell how you will accomplish your marketing strategy. Do you see this as a single mailing or a series? A postcard or letter package? This is a good place to put some parameters on the work in terms of budget or mail quantities if there are givens you want taken into account.

Explain how you’ll position your offer. Define the one simple idea you want to get across to your target audience: “We have a challenge grant: For every \$1 given, we’ll receive \$100 from the grantor.” “New research makes supporting our work more important than ever.” Or maybe you have no real offer. Then make the point that “as the only organization with 50 years of experience in this arena, we make your donation dollar work harder for inner-city children.” That key point may be the golden nugget of direction that your writer needs.

Identify your key message. What will make the target take the desired action? Develop a “headline” of what you want to communicate: “Invitation to join our Director’s Circle as one of our valued donors...and contribute in a more meaningful way.” “Emergency Alert—urgent action of all members is required now!” Concentrate on conveying what you feel is the real crux of the message.

Provide support for your key message. Why should your target

audience react as you’d like? What benefits and advantages can you offer? Brainstorm pertinent points that may help support the promise you’re making.

Give a feel for the style and tone you’d like the writer to use. Strive to convey your organization’s personality and the way you carry out your mission. Are you quietly efficient? Does a high-energy activist tone work best for you? If you have always taken the high road, with an educated tone, but think it’s time for a heart-to-heart appeal, say so.

State the single most important thing your target audience should “get” from this communication, both rationally and emotionally. Here are some possibilities: “If I care at all about the environment, I need to act now to support this initiative.” “As little as \$25 will help bring world-class arts to my family and my town.”

Itemize requirements and restrictions. Provide printing and mailing guidelines, such as quantity to be printed, postage costs, and data processing specifications. Establish expectations for quality control. Determine logistics such as reply-by vehicles (toll-free number, Web address) and reply-by date. Furnish information on any legal mandates, budget limitations, and important do’s and don’ts that you haven’t covered earlier in the document.

If you follow these steps, you’ll find that the time and effort required on the front end more than pays off in the final creative product. Remember, always measure twice, cut once to increase your chances of success. ■

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