

A Good Brief Means No Grief

We suggest below some important elements of a good interpretive design brief.

Procedural information

- A realistic tendering timetable of at least 4 weeks.
- A client contact who can answer any questions or meet the prospective designers.
- Instructions on the tender process including how many copies are required, short-listing procedures, interview or presentation dates, and how many consultants have been invited to tender.
- Tendering fees available to pay for design concepts.
- An outline project timetable – but preferably not ending with the financial year as this is always a very pressured time.
- Any consultations needed to implement the scheme (e.g. with the client team, stakeholder organisations or local community).
- How the project will be steered and managed by the client.
- Other consultants the designer will need to work with (architect, landscape architect, conservator, etc).
- Installation responsibilities and requirements.
- Copyright ownership.

Background and context

- The background to the project, its rationale and what specific objectives the client hopes to achieve.
- The key messages to be communicated to users, plus general background information about the interpretive significance of the site, subject or facility.
- Details of any current and future plans or developments affecting the site or facility.
- Any constraints arising from SSSI, listed building or Scheduled Ancient Monument status, or from Health & Safety requirements.
- Details about the audience profile and characteristics, including any special interest groups.
- Any access, visitor management and vandalism issues.
- Whether the designer will need to secure planning permission.
- Whether there are any links to be made with formal education or with any other sites or facilities.
- Details of previous or existing interpretation and what has or hasn't worked.

Content and design instructions

- Any specific design criteria, for example relating to the choice of media and the client's corporate identity.
- Any finds or artefacts to be on display, and the environmental controls they require.
- What content (e.g. text and images) will be supplied to the designer, and whether any copyright fees will apply.
- Any storyline and picture research to be undertaken by the designer.
- New illustrations to be created by the designer.
- Whether any related facilities such as lighting and interior design are required from the designer.
- Any multiple language requirements.

Budget information

- A fixed or guideline budget.
- Funders requirements (e.g. on project reporting and evaluation)
- Information about invoicing arrangements (e.g. staged payments).
- Financial reporting or sub-contracting requirements.

Supporting information

- Site plans and photos.
- Examples of existing interpretation.
- Draft text or images (if available).
- A copy of the interpretive plan.
- Architects drawings including floor plans and elevations.

If some of these aspects have not yet been resolved, the brief should require the successful designer to work with the client to develop agreed proposals to take the project forward.

To select the best tender, the brief may also ask for information about the designers' track record, staff CVs, design philosophy, project management procedures, references, insurance and, potentially, financial profile.

Thanks to Charlie Curnow of Iamagemakers and Griff Boyle of GBDM Ltd for their help with this article. Griff Boyle's new book 'Design Project Management' is reviewed on page 11.

Where to find consultants and designers

The following information sources are a useful starting point in identifying potential interpretive consultants and designers:

- Museums Association on-line suppliers directory.
www.museumsassociation.org.uk
- Association of Heritage Interpretation on-line consultants' directory
www.heritageinterpretation.org.uk
- Museums & Galleries Yearbook: Guide to Suppliers & Consultants (ISBN 09802102842), an annual directory published by the Museums Association
- Trade shows such as the Museums and Heritage Show
www.museumsandheritage.com

"Everyone knows there ain't no Sanity Clause"
Groucho Marx, on negotiating a contract