

Taking the design brief

This article is aimed at helping anybody who has the direct responsibility of extracting a design brief from clients. It is used as part of our own internal training programme at Access Displays Ltd. We also hope that it will help clients in preparing and issuing their design briefs.

If you would like us to assist you in taking the design brief from your client we would be happy to do so. We work with total discretion and professionalism and are often introduced to Agency clients as their own exhibition specialist.

This information is subject to copy write.

We have all heard the story about the Chinese whisper “take three and four pence we are going to a dance” when it should have been “take reinforcements were going to advance”.

Taking or issuing a stand brief is one of the most important aspects of being an **Exhibition specialist**. Yet few of us regularly go prepared with either a written list of questions to ask or worse still choose not to take a designer to meetings to discuss the bigger stands.

When we lose the order its “because of design”.

This implies that some how the designer has “messed up”.

This simply is not true.

What has happened more often than not is that we have failed to meet the design brief.

So what should we ask for?

More often than not we are not given a written brief from the client instead we need to extract a brief. This can be painful and pointless if we are not asking the correct questions and more importantly the correct person.

Before you get into asking the usual questions of how big, how much and where, try starting at the beginning.

It helps to find out about your customer. This can be done before the appointment via the web where you might find out what they do, how big they are, how many people work for the company and how many offices they have. If they are a foreign owned company it is quite possible that the decision will be made abroad. You can pick up product ranges, departments and divisions. You might even be able to see a picture of a previous stand. It's information like this that the smart **Exhibition specialist** gathers without thinking. If they don't have a web site ask them to send you a brochure before your meeting.

Exercise - Why do companies attend exhibitions?

There are lots of reasons why people exhibit your job is to find out why.

- To sell products from the stand.
- To find new customers
- To demonstrate new products
- To meet existing clients
- They don't know!
- Flag waving
- Because their competitors are going.
- Have just changed a name or have been bought out.
- To collect business cards
- To make appointments for the future.
- To give out samples

Asking these types of probing questions will assist you with the final design. The stand size, shape, design and budget will depend on the reason why they are attending. The corporate image and style of the company will also effect the design.

For example is you went to a solicitors that had oak panelled board rooms, green leather furniture, a brochure with a picture of a wig, a wax seal and the strap line. " Family Solicitors since 1643". The final design and "feel" for the stand would be very different to a Solicitors owned by the Richard Branson Group.

Once you are clear with the "feel and style" of the company and you have a mental picture of the "corporate look" you can start to ask questions which will help you build up a rough layout of the stand and its requirements.

Exercise

What words would you use to describe the following types of companies?

A leading Airline in your country

A Government Department

A religious organisation

A leading IT company

These are quite clearly very different organisations that have a different feel and style to each other. They will all want to portray a different image. Unless you understand your client's perception of their company you will not meet the design brief.

The definitive design brief?

It would be impossible to produce the definitive design brief, as there are far too many questions to list. But this list will give you an idea of some of the sorts of things you should ask.

Questions that might be included.

Where is the show?

When is the show?

What is the show called?

What is the size and orientation of the stand?

How many staff will be on the stand?

Are you looking to hire or purchase?

Are you thinking of a modular or custom stand?

Are you looking to reuse the stand or any components?

Is there a copy of the floor plan and exhibitors manual?

What is the colour scheme?

What equipment will you have on the stand and have you dimensions and weights?

What did you like or dislike about last year's stand?

How many people are you going out to?

What sort of flooring do you require?

Have you any rough plans of the layout you have in mind?

How high do you want the stand?

What furniture would you like?

Do you want a store and if so how big?

Do you want a meeting room and if so how big?

There are many more questions to ask but that depends on what the client is trying to achieve at the show. The trick is to think of the consequences of what they are asking for. E.g.

Exhibition specialist

“ So this 60 foot boat you want on the stand. How is that being delivered?”

“ The bar you want has got two people working behind it and you want to serve 500 people a day with cold drinks. “ We will need to sort out a commercial size fridge, have water and waste and think of how we are going to manage the rubbish”.

“ So you are looking for a 250m squared double Decker stand in Munich and your budget is £10,000.

“ Ok so the stand is 250sm and we have four hours to build it”

“ So you want the stand to be 6m high and you want to be able to build it yourself”.

The most important question

One of the most important questions, but for some reason avoided by some people is ***How much do you want to spend?***

Without the answer to this ***you*** are wasting ***your*** time and the designers time.

Do not leave that meeting unless you have a clear understanding of what they want to spend.

Sometimes a client will be unwilling or unable to give a budget. This could confirm that you are speaking to the wrong person.

The ***Exhibition specialist*** would approach it like this.

“***Exhibition specialist*** Obviously we can come up with a design that meets your brief but without a budget we are wasting both of our time”. It’s going to be very disappointing for you and me when we come back with a design you love and then find out you can’t afford it like wise if we assume it’s a low budget and under design”.

“Is there somebody else in the organisation I can speak too about the budget?”

Or “ I am sure you understand how long these designs take and cost I just want to make sure we don’t miss your deadline. “Unless you are saying that the cheapest quote gets the order regardless” it’s very difficult for us.

Or “ As you are unable to give us a budget would it be possible for you to give me a guide? If I said the stand was going to cost between £30k and £40k would that seem about what you want to spend.

Tip of the day

This figure can be roughly based on multiplying the stand size by between £250 and £350 per square metre if it is for custom or modular purchase in the UK but this will depend on where and when it is being built and the final specification. We have built stands at £1500 per sqm. Remember all exhibition companies work on a similar rate the only thing that changes is the design. Tell your client that. Of course we can be the cheapest but what will they get for it?

“There is a difference between what a stand costs and what a customer wants to spend”

This may seem harsh or extreme but if every person came back without a budget we could get into a great deal of difficulty. Our industry is the only one we can think of where stand design time is not charged.

It may be that you use a mixture of the options above or can develop your own.

Don't forget to ask when the proposals are required for. This could have a bearing on whether we can do the design in the first place. This will help prioritise the design work. We will always design stands where we have a budget in preference to those designs where we can only guess regardless of what you Think they are worth.

After the meeting the *exhibition specialist* would type this brief out to confirm the customers comments and what was agreed including the time scales involved. And then send it back to the client to thank them for their time. They would then follow it up to make sure that they are still happy with the brief and to see if anything has changed since their meeting. The brief would then be included in any presentation document.

During your meeting with the client you will have been showing them your portfolio of stand builds. This is an ideal opportunity to find out what your client does and does not like. Make notes and if possible sketches of certain elements so you can brief you're designer on your return.

Material and carpet samples could be discussed and agreed with the client.

Passing the design brief to the designer

You should now have a detailed design brief that has been agreed by the client. This then needs to be explained to your designer. It is no use just throwing it in their in tray and hoping for the best. The information pack should include any company literature, photos of previous stands, colour charts, material samples, sketches and most importantly the budget, when the design is required and in what format.

Some simple modular stands can be sold by just faxing or emailing a black and white drawing while other more complicated stands might need to be in colour with a possible animation. On occasions there might be more than one option. All this takes time and money so make sure you have all the detail for the designer.

Keep your designer informed of any changes in time scale budget or requirement.

Always give your designer feed back after your presentation if they are not going with you. Feedback positive or negative will allow your designer to understand how you work.

Do not even think of presenting the design if you are not happy even if you are going to miss an agreed deadline. What is the point of presenting a stand that has missed a vital requirement from the brief – This includes budget.

Knowing the features and benefits of your competitors

At Access Displays we are not limited to what we can sell we are not box shifters we are only interested in our clients having a good show. So to choose what modular system we should offer or if we should use custom we must have established who else the client has gone out to for pricing. This may also determine whether we offer hire as an option.

Competitor Information may help you win the order by capitalising on a particular feature that could not be achieved by a competitor. For example if the client wants a custom stand and you know the others only supply modular etc.

Dare to be different

There is a saying “observe the masses and do the opposite”.

On some occasions you will be given a brief where the client is quite clear and strong about what they want. They tell you several times that they definitely

want custom not modular and definitely purchased not hire, and definitely no more than £10,000.

So working strictly to the brief you present what is in your mind the perfect design. The following day you telephone to see if the final decision has been made only to find that you have been unsuccessful.

Confused and frustrated you ask “why”?

Customer

“ Well we decided to go for another option. We have gone for a design using pop-ups”.

Exhibition specialist Pop ups - there not custom you think to yourself. “Why was that”.

Customer

“They said that we could hire them for a fraction of the cost and easily reconfigure the stand for other events and the shipping costs will be cheaper”.

Exhibition specialist “You said you wanted to purchase. How much is it going to cost?” “You didn’t mention the other events.”

Customer They came in at £20,000 but we should make savings on the other shows. By the way you didn’t ask us about the other events”!
“ I think their design was closer to our brief and that is why we have gone with them”.

Unless you ask all the correct questions how can you supply them with the correct solution?

Sometimes regardless of what the client tells you it might be obvious that there is a better way of doing it. For example you might decide that you need two or more alternatives. You might ask the client at the initial meeting. “ I know you are quite clear about what you want but if we can come up with an alternative or a more cost effective way of doing things would you like to see our ideas”?

I would be very surprised if a client said no.

Preparing to present

Before you present the final visual to your client make sure you go through the stand design to make sure you have included all that was required from the brief. (This should have been done at a line drawing stage if you are presenting a rendered version.) If there are elements you are not happy with discuss them with your designer and if necessary change them until they are

correct. At this stage you should have been given a quotation. This should have highlighted any manufacturing or cost issues.

Apart from constructing the quotation as part of the overall presentation package you need to have prepared for the presentation so that you are familiar with the layout and construction of the stand. There is nothing worse than being asked a simple question by the customer that you can't answer.

Walking the stand – You should be able to describe the stand in detail to the client without the visual being in front of you. This may take two or three days to do. Close your eyes and “talk the walk” through the stand.

Apart from describing the obvious physical characteristics of the stand you will need to give reason and confirmation of suggested layout and material.

For example – “ We have used wood in this area to reflect the strength of the company and stainless steel here to reflect its modern approach”.

“ As you can see, the spacing around the workstation will allow two sales people to demonstrate to two separate clients simultaneously as requested in your brief”.

“We thought that by changing the floor surface from carpet in this area to vinyl in this area would distinguish the hospitality area from the demonstration area”.

As an exercise try to describe your own kitchen to a colleague so that they can draw it. You will soon appreciate just how difficult this is!

Tip of the day

One of the most important areas on any stand is the reception area. This is often not thought about by the client because they are focussed on where they are going to put product A or B or whether they will all get into the meeting room. The reception area is how the client can control the stand traffic. It acts as a natural point for customers to go to and find out more information or ask questions. It is not always obvious who is an exhibitor and who is an attendee unless they are wearing uniforms. A reception desk will filter out brochure collectors or students and allow sales people to sell without interruptions. Explain this to your customer. Don't just say “and here we have put the reception.

The six seconds rule Your clients have six seconds to attract the attention of their visitors. All stands should clearly show: - Who they are and what they do. If that can be done with pictures and not words then all the better.

Remember “ We are only as successful as our customers” If they have a good show we stand a chance of getting more business. Think of the stand as though you were working it.

Practice makes perfect

The art of adlib is a difficult one and can backfire if you get the facts wrong. Take the time to rehearse your presentation to a work colleague. Ask for advise or support from any of our staff. What happens if they ask about this or about that? Have you the answer or an alternative?

There is nothing more rewarding than to see a client smiling when they appreciate your knowledge of the layout of the stand and more importantly your correct interpretation of the brief. This is where the ***exhibition specialist*** wins the day.

There is nothing more sole destroying than to see a client's reaction when you know you have totally misread the brief. **Think of all that wasted time and effort! Think of that lost opportunity!**

Thank you for taking the time to read this document we hope you find it useful. If you have any further questions or would like to talk to us about a particular project then please contact our sales department who will handle your enquiry with in complete confidence. Sales@accessdisplays.co.uk