

The Suit: What's your problem?

By [Jason Harrison](#), issued by [M&C Saatchi Abel](#)

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When I worked in London, my boss was a genius of a man who didn't quite fit the mould. He had a restless mind and was constantly doodling and chatting about potential client problems and possible solutions after meetings and conversations with them. His most powerful problem-solving tools were post-it notes and A3 sketch pads - and the pub.



Tradition

He used to have a tradition that, on a Friday at one o'clock, we'd take said post-it notes and sketch pads and walk across the road to a pub, which was affectionately called the Prince of Darkness. His only rule was that we weren't allowed to order our first delicious pint before we'd sketched out the complete backbone of a radical solution to a client's present problem. Then he would order the saltiest peanuts known to humankind and encourage us to get cracking.

Unsurprisingly, this radical form of intellectual torture focused the mind with alarming alacrity. We never went beyond three o'clock before the notes and pads were packed away and the pints started arriving.

We did some of our very best thinking on a client's business unencumbered by a brief (why is it called a brief when it's always so long?) and when liberated to think about what the actual problems really were. He used to say in a posh English accent, "A brief is the surest way to predetermine the solution, and probably the wrong one at that."

Three fundamental shifts

That was over 10 years ago but "the brief" has somehow remained as the starting point for any formal communication with an agency, and internally. If we're to pitch "the brief" as the starting point for leaps of genius instead, I believe there are three fundamental shifts required:

1. Leverage diversity of thought

The best briefs are the ones that start with a diverse group of people sitting down and unpacking the actual problem together. The more diverse the thinking at the beginning, the more diverse the solution at the end. Any brief that is written alone stands a disproportionate chance of being one dimensional and instructive.

So, whether it's from the client to the suit or the suit to the creatives, the surest way to a great brief is to actually hardwire the open spaces for the solution into it, based on these rich conversations. Surely, if we spend months making work, we

could at least spend a day succinctly articulating the right problem to solve?

- *As a suit, make sure you create that time and invite some interesting people into the room.*

2. Ask the right questions

In this collaborative process, how do you dig deeper to uncover the real issues? In an age obsessed with expediency, agility and execution, we need to focus on asking just one word: “why?”. Repeatedly, it seems.

[Sakichi Toyoda](#) (1867–1930) was a Japanese inventor, industrialist and the founder of Toyota Industries. He pioneered a scientific approach to actually ask “why” five times whenever a problem was found in the company. By repeating “why” five times, the nature of the problem, as well as its best possible solution, became clear.

I’m going to be honest here. Unless you’re in a kimono, surrounded by incense and drinking green tea, you’ll have to tell people you are going to ‘play this game’ from the outset. Otherwise things get #awks pretty quickly.

- *As a suit, announce your intent, grab a whiteboard marker and lead people through the process. It always gets you to a more interesting space.*

3. Articulate the problem better

I’m not a great fan of headings in a briefing template. They’re roadblocks to clearly articulating the problem statement. I much prefer a crafted paragraph that frames the issue clearly and in an intriguing way for all concerned.

- *As a suit, start to have more fun with your briefs; after all, your first job is to get people excited about the possibility of solving the Rubik’s cube, not reading the Magna Carta.*

Favourite brief

Here is one of my favourite briefs for a challenger brand financial service client:

South Africa, home to about 60 million people, is ranked 10th in the world for its number of murders, assaults and other violent crimes. Statistics published by local police suggest that in South Africa, around 50 people are murdered every day. There is an equally alarming (and unseen) criminal act that happens to average South Africans. The financial services industry ensures millions of South Africans are effectively robbed of a staggering 40% of their retirement savings by paying 2% more in fees. This costs average South Africans billions of rand a year and it means that a mere 6% of people can retire comfortably. No one understands this. No one even cares. Except investments. They charge less than 1% (vs an industry average of 3%) for their index funds, which means you get 60% more money at retirement. **Your job is to shock a country (that truly cannot be shocked anymore) into re-evaluating their retirement decisions, today.** You will be successful if you create a massive groundswell amongst everyday South Africans that makes this topic headline news on every newsfeed in the country. You have R. Now, more than ever, your country needs you.

So, before you send in that new brief that just arrived on your desk, ask yourself if you have applied these three shifts. If not, grab some post-it notes, an A3 sketch pad and head down to the pub with your client and core team. Just remember, the pints only get delivered when you’re holding genius in your hands.

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