WRITING YOUR WEBSITE BRIEF.....the journey begins

A good website brief is essential to the development of a successful website for both parties – the client and the designer. It will help you, the client, focus and think through what you need and what you want. It needn't be too formal or tied up in legalese, but it serves to identify the structure, size, look and feel of your site. The designer can then quote more accurately the price to deliver what you want, and it minimises the risk of conflict further down the line... ("I thought we were going to have...."). If it's not in the brief, your designer won't put it in your site. Having a good brief covers both of you.   If possible, your brief should cover all of the following:

Overview
The Overview should lay out your existing situation. Are you planning a brand new website, an overhaul of an old site or just a cosmetic makeover?

Aims and Objectives
Here you need to explain what you hope to achieve by building a website. Is the site to act as a 'shop window' for your business (brochure site), are you trading online (e-commerce). Will you be collecting money, if so do you accept credit cards, etc?

Use this section to provide an insight into the type of website you need.

Audience
The intended audience for your website directly affects the way it looks, feels and works, and particularly the copy. It is essential to take the time to identify your audiences clearly in the design brief. Pay attention also to the locations of your audience – eg. Global, European, UK, Regional or local town. It may be that you have one audience already (regional) and are trying to reach a more national audience. All of these details are really valuable to a prospective designer.

Design Specification
Some clients know *exactly* what design they want and they just need someone to build it, others have no idea except they want it blue! In this section of the brief, you should outline your desired layout and colours:

Layout - For example, you may have a preference for a navigation menu to be on the left or horizontally across the top, you may love or hate drop down or animated menus, you may want it fixed width or fluid (so it fills the width of the screen no matter the size of screen). There is always the third option – leave it to the designer. It is equally acceptable to give instruction as it is *not* to, as long as it is clear in the brief. Different clients need differing amounts of 'creative input' from the designer.

Colours – it is usual for a website to reflect or at least blend with the colours of an existing logo. The style of the logo can also go some way to dictating the look and feel of the site. After all, this is your 'brand' and your identity should follow through all your

communications with synergy. Here you can identify if you have any particular colours that you want used or not used, any preferences for the colour of the main text, the rollover colours for links, the button colours or styles, etc. You may have strict branding guidelines that must be reflected in the site (fonts, colours) and if you have a 'design guide' for your business, it is a useful aide to the designer. Again, if you have no preference and want to leave it up to the designer, most designers welcome this as it gives them the chance to do what they do best – get creative!

Look and Feel – Beyond the colours and fonts, it's important to also mention any messages, feelings or attributes that you want your site to convey. These could include friendliness, warmth, integrity, reliability, excitement, youthfulness, sympathy, professionalism, intelligence or otherwise assuring people that you are an authority on the product or service you provide.

Sample Sites

It is always a good idea for the client to provide some links to some sites that they like, and equally to some that they **don't** like, at the same time saying what it is about the site that they do and don't like. For example, you may like the menu in one site but not the colours, the colours in another site but not the navigation, etc. These sites do not have to be in your own industry as you are demonstrating look/feel, however, it is also useful to the designer to provide some competitor sites to learn from how others might be selling similar products and services, and how you can emulate or differentiate. This is not to suggest the copying or cloning of another site, but to learn from layouts, look and feel – it is the quickest and easiest way to convey your vision. Often, a client will describe the look/feel they want and create a vision in the designer's mind, but then a link to a site that they consider to be of similar look/feel is not what the designer was visualising at all!

Functionality Specification

The Functionality Specification covers how your website will work. This includes the way people will navigate through your pages and the actions performed by any buttons or effects you want to include on the site. This might include drop-down menus, animated gifs, scrolling images, contact forms, image galleries.

Always ensure that your Functionality Specification includes the following:

- A list of pages, clearly identifying if they are top-line pages or sub-pages
- Navigation
- Media requirements (pictures or animation, embedded videos, etc)
- Interactive elements (e.g. 'Print this Page' or 'Email this Page to a Friend')

Most designers, including Charlie Apple, will host a 'live' version to which you have access over the Internet so that you can provide feedback along the way and make decisions at strategic points in the design process.

Deliverables

The Deliverable is usually the completion, sign off and uploading of the site to the client's domain. Occasionally documentation may also be part of the deliverable.

Budget
The Budget for your website will be a key factor in the website you receive. You can approach your design from the budget as your start point – "this is how much we want to spend, what can we get for the money?" – or from the site as the start point – "this is the site that we want, how much will it cost?" – and then work backwards. Often a client will have a wish list for the future design of the site, but it is always good to identify this at the start so the designer can ensure that your future plans are possible without you having to start from scratch again when budget allows further development.

Your designer will give you your quotation based on the brief that you agree at the start, therefore it is important to stick to the brief otherwise you may incur additional costs along the way if there is significant deviation from the original brief. At the same time, be sure that you are delivered with the site that is in the brief, that you've accepted the quote for and that no corners have been cut.

Remember too that it is the creation of bespoke graphics and interactive elements that are the expensive aspect of site building as they are the most time consuming, so unless money is no object, keep these to a minimum to help keep yourself within budget.

Timetable
Always ensure that the timetable for developing your site includes ample time for checking and evaluation prior to launch. Part of your agreement with your designer at the outset should be a target 'go live' date, however, if the client holds things up by delayed responses to critical decisions without which the design cannot progress, then delays may be incurred.

Content
Copy for the website is always provided by the client, unless otherwise agreed. The client will often engage a professional copywriter for this purpose. Again, in order not to delay the timetable, content must be ready and provided to the designer in good time for targets to be met. It is vital to establish who will be responsible for providing the **images** to be used on the website. This is usually the role of the client (it is normal that they would have a library of product images, for example, staff pictures, etc). However, if the client wants the designer to acquire any pictures this should also be stated in the brief and, most importantly, the costs for images need to be determined and budgeted for.

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)
All good web designers will design your site with standard search engine optimisation and will advise on other techniques that may be available. It is worth listening to your designer if what you are asking for will be detrimental to your rankings on search engines.

Concepts
Creating concepts takes a lot of time and this will be reflected in your quote. Low cost designers will only offer one concept sometimes two, but if you have been detailed in your brief with regard to the look and feel of the site, and a good designer has got a good grasp of your visualisation, then the initial concept shouldn't need more than some tweaking.

Content Management
Make sure you are clear on what you expect to be able to do in your content management system. This can be crucial to the design so needs to be agreed upon at the outset, before the build. Consider whether you want to be able to change content on all of your site or part of your site, do you just want access to specific sections of specific pages. A full content management system significantly increases the cost of website design.

Social Networking
If you are active, or intend to be active, with Twitter, Facebook, etc., establish how these will be reflected in your website. You may just want links from your home page to each of the networking sites, or you may want a feed coming into your web pages.

Maintenance and Support
Although this won't be needed until after the build and upload of your new site, it is important that you price this up before choosing your designer as there are enormous cost differences between designers for the after-service. A new page request can cost anything from £30-£100. As all websites are works in progress, it is important to have a good relationship with your designer as you will continue to have contact long after the site goes live. When writing your brief, it is advisable to include what level of service you'll need in your support or maintenance agreement. Alternatively, you can go back to your designer on an ad hoc basis.

The Proposal
The proposal and quote that your designer gives to you should be based on the brief you have provided to them. This is the cleanest and fairest way to avoid any conflicts over costs or design, as both parties can point back to the brief. If it isn't in the brief, it won't be in the website.

Know what you want, or leave it to the designer
We have worked with clients who have left the entire site design to us, including logo, colours, layout, etc., and have provided nothing more than the number and titles of pages. Other clients have had a very clear vision of what they want their site to look like, down to the last pixel on the page. In either scenario, our job is to realise the vision of the client (we won't always agree on what looks best) – and ensure that the end result is exactly what the client wants.

And finally…
You don't have to do it alone - you can work *with* the designer to develop the brief before work starts on the site.

A Case Study of what *not* to do

The client had no logo, just a name and a domain. The 'brief' was for the main colour to be black, with red as the secondary colour. A logo was designed with symbol and specific font which was loved by all 8 people on the client side. So far so good.

A concept was created using the symbol and the colours. The initial reaction was positive and so work commenced on providing different options for the rollovers on the navigation. On next viewing, the client decided it was too dark and was projecting the wrong image and they now wanted more natural and earthy colours and to omit the black altogether.

A new concept was created using greens and golds. Half of the group loved it and half hated it. It was decided to scrap the 'natural' look and go back to dark but not black and to now introduce "neon" colours. (So we have by now gone from black to 'earthy, natural' to neon).

A new concept was created using a dark blue background and creating the symbol from the logo in bright neon colours. The client wanted the symbol erratically placed all around the background. Each symbol was recreated in a different colour, at different angles and in different sizes, and scattered around the background, as described. On first viewing, this concept was loved by all, but with a day or two it was decided that it was all "too busy" but the colours were right and the neon was right.

The last and final version included the dark blue background but with one mutely-coloured neon symbol placed centrally on a fixed background. Everyone was happy!!

The lesson in the tale.... when the client doesn't actually *know* what they want, the designer is providing the designs according to the brief but the brief keeps changing. This is the type of scenario that will usually have two outcomes:

1. The client will run up additional costs because the quote is based on time, but the client keeps adding more time to the quote by changing the brief. Result: over budget
2. The client will accept a site that they are less than happy with because they've used up the hours in design time and don't have the budget to add more. Result: client has stuck to budget but isn't happy with the site

Hence, if you get the brief right you will be able to stick to your budget **and** be delivered a site that you love!

NB: This particular client – the worst I have had for indecision – did not run up any additional costs despite the constant changing of the design. Why? Because it was my son's site!