

# JUDGING CREATIVE IDEAS

A best practice guide to assessing agency creativity

Joint industry guidelines for marketing professionals in working effectively with agencies



**JUDGING IDEAS IS BOTH AN INNATE TALENT AND A SKILL.  
IT'S BOTH RATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL.  
IT'S WHERE PERSONAL TASTES AND PREFERENCES CAN  
COLLIDE WITH PROCESS AND CONSENSUS.**

**IT REQUIRES IMAGINATION,  
LEADERSHIP AND TRUST.  
INEVITABLY IT LEADS TO CONFLICT.**

So much of the relationship between the client and the agency depends on their shared understanding of what constitutes a 'good' idea.

After all, this is what agencies all exist to do: to have ideas. And their remuneration depends on having those ideas valued by the people for whom they are created.

Similarly, most advertisers know that engaging and memorable communications ideas will be more effective and more profitable to them than messages that are muddled or irrelevant.

But, for people who spend most of their working days dealing with numbers, dealing effectively with ideas – with abstracts – can be daunting.

All too often an idea cannot be measured or weighed until after it has had large sums of money invested in it.

All too easily it can be destroyed as the nervous

marketer sets out to eradicate all uncertainties.

- But how do you know when you have a good idea on your hands?
- How can you help turn a good idea into a great one?
- At what point in the process do you need to be most involved? Or to back off?

This booklet has been put together to help provide some answers to these and related questions.

So important do we think this issue is, we jointly commissioned and funded a research programme into the attitudes of marketers towards reviewing creative ideas, which has informed much of this booklet.

We hope it will help both agencies and clients understand each other better. We hope it will provide some sort of framework for shared criteria. Most of all, we hope it will result in the creation of more outstanding business-building ideas.



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# ASSESSING AND RESPONDING TO THE IDEAS THEIR AGENCIES PUT FORWARD IS ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT THINGS CLIENTS HAVE TO DO.



DEBBIE MORRISON

ISBA - Director of Membership Services

Whether it be a PR campaign or a TV commercial, a poster or a viral, a brand name or identity, a mail-pack or a half-page ad for the regional press, or a brave media idea - judging whether it is likely to achieve all its objectives takes both imagination and skill.

As with so many aspects of marketing communications today, this skill is a combination of art and science, subjectivity and objectivity.

Those who become good at it often rise rapidly through the ranks. It provides a practice ground for motivating the team and for decision making.

A handful of companies, Unilever, Procter & Gamble, Masterfoods and Diageo to the fore, provide training. Others merely hope that on-the-job experience will provide the necessary tutorials.

This guide is intended to help fill the gap between those extremes. Of course, it cannot be comprehensive in its analysis of how ideas emerge and develop. The best it can do is offer some simple procedures and techniques, backed up by the experience of some of the industry's more seasoned practitioners, which can be used to spot both 'crackers' and 'turkeys'.

We started out titling this guide 'Judging Creative Work', but as it's developed, the word 'work' seemed too focused on execution. Hence it is now 'Judging Creative Ideas'.

'Judging' can also be a tough word. Yes, decisions have to be made in the end, but as an idea develops let's think more in terms of 'assessment', or even 'appraisal', both more encouraging, nurturing processes. When you contribute to a colleague's appraisal, your criticisms are intended to improve performance, to help and guide.

Today we no longer talk about spend, but about investment. For every penny to provide a substantial return, client and agency need to share the business problems as well as collaborate on finding the solutions. This is where a client's creative judgement can make such a difference.

We hope this guide helps to create closer working relationships, encourage smarter collaboration with agencies and inspire more noticeable, more successful media and marketing communications.

## WHY DO WE NEED IDEAS ANYWAY?

Creativity is an innate human characteristic. It comes out of the compulsion to compete. And in a world of oversupply, marketers need to be creative in order for their brands to survive, let alone thrive.

A typical supermarket now carries as many as 40,000 different products. You have a choice of half-a-dozen brands of sweet corn, 10 different pickles, 20 different kinds of frozen fish and 30 different toothpastes.

Only those who innovate with constant improvements to their products – better designed, promisingly packaged and effectively advertised – will prosper.

Even then, that may not be enough. *The Economist* suggests we are bombarded with 1,600 selling messages a day. About 1,595 of these are filtered out almost immediately.

Analysis of PIMS (Profit Impact of Marketing Strategy) data shows that brands that spend above their ‘par’ share of voice tend to succeed, whereas those that under-invest in relation to their market share lose business, all other things being equal.

One of the key variables that can make ‘all other things’ unequal is a great idea. That is why advertising is often referred to as the last remaining unfair competitive advantage.

Simon Thompson, former Marketing Director of Honda UK, observed proudly that his brand gained share even though he was spending £20million a year less than his major competitors.

He attributes this unequivocally to the power of advertising made manifest in Honda’s ‘Power of Dreams’ campaign, a recent winner at the IPA Effectiveness Awards.

So, while it may seem a tall order to persuade a consumer to notice your communication, consider it and then act upon it, great ideas can, and do, reach those three important parts of the modern human being: the heart, the head and the wallet.

Creativity though, needs careful nurturing and the client’s role is vital in (a) recognising a great idea and (b) encouraging its development.

Says Bruce Haines, Group Chief Executive of Leo Burnett: **“Every time you assess a new idea, what you’re really doing is trying to manage change. You can either cope with change or force the pace of it.”**

# CLIENTS GET THE ADVERTISING THEY DESERVE

It is an ancient saying that 'clients get the advertising they deserve'. If this is true, then what must clients do to get the most effective work possible?

The secret of success lies in sharing the agenda. In the perfect relationship, clients will trust the key people at their agencies and will be honest when involving them in the business problems they face.

They will expect difficulties but will also expect them to be sorted out jointly. However:

- While 97% of clients think the most important criterion against which to evaluate an idea is "Will it achieve its objectives?" they believe only 55% of agencies share the same view.

- While 72% of agencies believe creative work should be 'true to the brand', only 36% of clients believe their agencies really mean it.
- While 13% of agencies want the work to be radical, 0% of clients say 'breaking the mould' is an objective.

Clearly, these are major gaps that need bridging if a trusting relationship is to be created.

But trust cuts both ways. While clients are unlikely to value any agency that puts its interests before theirs (its awards cabinet, its bottom line), agencies won't do their best for clients who are unconstructive, unhelpful or paralysed by indecision.

## Things a client can do to inspire trust and create a shared agenda:

- Have lunch or a drink with the key people on your agency brand team. Talk about communications in general. Get alignment on models of how communications work.
- Take a half-day with the agency to review ideas. Take 10 ideas you think are great, ask them to bring 10 ideas they think are great. Discuss.
- Organise team-building events. Sean Gogarty of Unilever, took the Comfort brand group off for two days sailing in the Solent – five from Lever, five from the agency. "You feel an odd sort of loyalty towards people you've seen being sick," he says. The result of his inspired initiative was the 'Cloth People' campaign now running around the world.
- Inspire the team. Before briefing their new agency, Berghaus sent a box of their outdoor clothing and a map reference. The briefing took place up a mountain.
- Give information when asked for it. "You don't need to know that" is demoralising.
- Ensure that the originators of the ideas, whether you get to meet them or not, are fully briefed on your business situation rather than just your communication needs. This way you may get a creative business idea rather than just a new campaign.
- Negotiate the brief with your agency, don't just deliver it as a fait accompli. Use their market knowledge and insight to add value to your own ideas and work with them to build a platform for creative thinking and originality.
- Apply the normal rules of courtesy. Regularly keeping your agency waiting in reception for an hour will not make them want to go the hard yards for you.

# MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Sometimes clients have different expectations of the creative process to their agencies'. Failing to recognise what these are can be a source of some friction.

The three biggest bones of contention are:

1. The number of ideas presented.
2. Who presents them.
3. What the purpose of the meeting is.

There is no right or wrong way for an agency to present its work. What is important is that both sides understand each other's approach and are comfortable with it.

For example, some agencies believe in interim or 'tissue' meetings. These are less formal get-togethers midway through the development process, when the agency shows a range of rough concepts on layout paper ('tissues') of its thinking.

Many clients enjoy this approach because they are encouraged to contribute to the creative process. Perhaps there is also a sense of getting good value. Rather than being shown just one concept – this is it, the answer – they get to see how busy the agency has been producing lots of ideas on their brand.

Many agencies also like this approach because it can help pre-sell a challenging campaign. The client is invited to debate the possibilities and collude in the selection, and in the process is given time to reflect on the idea and support it.

Other agencies, however, believe in developing and discarding ideas themselves, until they arrive at what they believe to be the one definitive solution and recommendation.

This approach puts the full onus on them as 'brand guardians', who understand the brand

and its communication needs.

From the client perspective, this can simplify their responsibilities and free them up to concentrate on other parts of the marketing mix.

Just as different agencies have different views about the number of ideas they should share with their clients, so they have different views about who should present them.

Some believe this is the role of the main account person or client service manager, who has been involved in every step of the creative process, though is rarely responsible for the creative leap itself.

The creatives, they say, are paid to create – not to sit in meetings where, often being poor presenters, they can be either too argumentative or too eager to please.

The downside to this is that clients sometimes feel frustrated that their questions have to be filtered through an intermediary, who is rarely empowered to agree to suggestions or changes there and then.

The fact is, great ideas can emerge from either end of this agency spectrum – and, indeed, from all points in between. The important thing is that you should understand what sort of agency you are working with and that you feel comfortable with their approach.

Finally, nothing causes more grief to their agencies than when a client uses ideas presented in a creative meeting as a stalking horse to decide or redefine strategy.

Creative people exist to make ads, websites, campaigns. Not to make meetings. When they set to work on a brief, they trust you to know what it is you are asking them to do and why.

## READY, STEADY, LEAP

Appraising an idea asks that you be both a manager and a leader. You have to manage what can be a lengthy process yet be unafraid of making decisions, which can have far-reaching consequences.

It requires a deep knowledge of what communications does and how it does it.

And it presumes a profound understanding of the brand itself, its myriad strengths and weaknesses.

It is a creative act in itself, demanding considerable powers of imagination to envisage the finished work and how it will be received by its target audience.

Those who are skilled at it make their budgets go further than those who fudge it.

This is not because they are natural risk takers but because they are able to make informed decisions in which their agency's advice and their own gut-feelings are combined. In effect, they become co-editors or even co-authors of the idea.

Bill Bernbach wrote:

**“However much we would like advertising to be a science – because life would be simpler that way – the fact is it is not. It is a subtle, ever-changing art, defying formularisation, flowering on freshness and withering on imitation; what was effective one day, for that very reason, will not be effective the next, because it has lost the maximum impact of its originality.”**

Some clients can follow the train of thought that leads from communications plan to

strategy and from strategy to brief, but where they can get left behind is in the leap that occurs between proposition and the execution of an idea.

How does a brief to promote a cleaner diesel engine become a song about “Hate is Good”?

How does a simple proposition for Sony TV’s “Delivers colour like no other”, lead to half-a-million rubber balls being let loose on the hills of San Francisco?

Many creative people don’t know how they have their ideas, but if they want their clients to buy them, it behoves agencies to try to explain them.

Being more left-brained than right-brained, many clients feel they will better understand an idea by breaking it down into all its constituent parts. Because they cannot understand the process by which creative people have ideas, they often find it hard to follow an idea to see where it goes, they can only react to it. As Alan Bishop, CEO of COI claims: **“There is plenty of great work which is engaging and entertaining, but not risky. I don’t believe in risk. Behind the idea there should be a brilliantly logical exposition as to why it is the best thing to do.”**

Perhaps agencies make life more difficult for themselves by appearing to be obsessed with originality. Clients, by contrast, are obsessed with what works, ie the familiar.

**“Leaders tend to look for big, new ideas, whereas managers tend to want to replicate what’s considered best practice”,** says Bruce Haines.

The great luminary of JWT, James Webb Young, wrote *A Technique for Producing Ideas* in 1939. It is still probably the best book you can buy on the subject. (Also the most concise.)

He identified the five stages by which an idea happens as being:

1. Gather information. Find out as much as you can about the product.
2. Begin to look for connections.
3. Walk away from it. Your brain will keep working at the problem even if you don't. How many times have you woken in the morning and had that 'Eureka!' moment?
4. Start putting your thoughts down on paper. As Gore Vidal said, "Write something, anything, even if it's a suicide note."
5. Test the idea. Subject it to the scrutiny of others. Try to see if it works.

Good clients know that ideas can pop into the creative mind at any time of day or night. 'Heineken refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach' was penned at 3am.

## HOW DO IDEAS HAPPEN?

An inspiring brief will buy a client the 'shower time' of his creative teams. They will be thinking about the problem almost continuously until they feel they have cracked it.

The creative mind works in two different, even contradictory ways.

It starts out open and questing. It makes random connections. It relies on intuition and luck to find answers, but the moment it thinks it has something, it swings into reverse. It becomes rational and seeks validation. It closes down new possibilities.

Your mind may work in much the same way when it is shown a new idea. Your first reaction is emotional: I like it/I don't like it. The second is rational as you set out to be objective about your subjective response.

Warning! Sometimes clients can become so focused on their own reactions to an idea they forget to ask how the intended target audience might view it.

# IN REAL LIFE

WITH JOHN HEGARTY

*Advertising traditionally looked to a point of difference and then articulated it in a memorable, lasting way. Repetition was at the heart of the process. The media department's task was to ensure as many 'opportunities to see' as possible. This was a formula devised for a landscape dominated by media brands that delivered mass audiences.*



*Today, however, as brands and media fragment, reaching your audience has to rely less on 'push' and more on 'pull'. The consumer is in control and the advertiser has to seek permission to engage. But as brands proliferate, their reason to appeal can be based on not just functional performance, but how they look and feel. More and more brands are in the 'fashion' business. Understanding how to operate in this market involves judgements of taste. And the problem is, taste can't be taught.*

JOHN HEGARTY

Bartle Bogle Hegarty – Chairman and Worldwide Creative Director

# THERE ARE TEN PIECES TO THE JIGSAW

When you put together a jigsaw, you have an idea of what the whole picture is going to look like, though it may take you time to assemble it.

It's the same with creative ideas – be they from your advertising, DM, PR, media, interactive or integrated marcoms agency. So, here are 10 parts to the whole to help you look at ideas, think about them, discuss them and come to decisions about them with a minimum of conflict and a maximum of expectation.

## 1 BE KNOWLEDGEABLE IN ADVANCE

Before you read any further, pause for a moment. Try writing a list of your Top 10 ideas.

Can you write as many as 10?

The point is, to assess ideas you need to be able to place them in a broader context and compare them against ideas you have seen elsewhere and considered 'good' or 'bad'.

The more creative ideas you look at, the more informed you become. What's more, you will also begin to understand what motivates your agency team. (Freud said creative people are driven by the desire for fame, fortune and beautiful lovers.)

Do you know who the IPA Effectiveness Awards winners were last year?

Do you know what won the creative, DM, digital and media gongs at Cannes and D&AD?

Do you know which campaigns were garlanded at the Campaign Awards, PRCA FrontLine Awards and MCCA Best Awards?

It would pay you to find out. It might inspire your agency to know that you know who has been winning what.

Do you know what your competitors are doing in media and creative terms?

Do you know how brands similar to yours are being marketed and advertised in other countries?

Do you know your own brand's advertising and promotional history inside out?

Get your agency to put together tear-sheets and reels. Review as many ideas that are relevant to your sector as possible so you can avoid imitation and be distinctive.

Also, don't put the kettle on in the ad breaks. Do read *The Sun*. Open the mail-packs that land on your doormat. Check the promotions in-store when you go shopping. Click on the ads on the Internet. It will help remind you of the people you want to talk to.

## 2 COME TO THE MEETING WITH A SMILE

For sound business reasons, join the creative presentation hoping to enjoy yourself and ready to be inspired.

When people are having fun, as well as laughing and smiling, they listen and contribute. Ideas flow and the campaign on the table may change – for the better.

Who should come to the presentation on the client side?

Ideally, the person who wrote and signed off the brief. This is the person who should have the authority to approve the idea and move it on to the next stage of the process.

Tellingly, only 42% of brief writers do come to the creative review. This may explain why 75% of all ideas have to go through three stages of approval and 22% go through four.

In the perfect presentation, responses to the idea are orchestrated by the senior client. Expressing their own opinions first or last, they will give their juniors the freedom to speak honestly, allowing them to influence the outcome of the meeting, but without being responsible for it.

They will be at the meeting in person. They will not send juniors along with the authority to do nothing other than tinker. “Swimming in the shallows – that’s what it is when clients tinker with the detail of a press release”, says Deborah Lewis, Managing Director of Republic. If all a junior person is allowed to do is make alterations to an idea, then that’s what he or she will want to do.

This is what Rory Sutherland, Vice-Chairman and Creative Director of OgilvyOne worldwide and Chairman of the IPA Creative Forum, calls ‘the Halal method of creative approval’. The idea bleeds to death slowly.

It is also the usual method of creative approval, if the statistics are anything to go by. 73% of creative agencies fear they do not get to the decision maker. 63% of PR, online and SP agencies feel the same. Beware the people who only have the power of ‘no’. Beware the committees who can only create camels.

## 3 BACK TO THE BRIEF

The Sydney Opera House is one of the most photographed buildings on the planet, but inside it is a huge disappointment if you’re a soprano. Its acoustics are dreadful.

It’s the same with communications ideas. You can be seduced by what they look like and forget what they are supposed to do.

So, reminding yourself of the brief is essential. It provides you with a framework against which to evaluate the idea. Make sure the agency does this too before they present.

If the brief was flaky, a cut-and-paste affair, the idea will almost certainly be unsound too. One of the first principles of creative assessment is that you can distinguish between a good brief and a bad one.

An inappropriate idea in response to a poor brief will lead to a rebrief. It has wasted time and money. Energy levels drop. The chances of getting good work out plummet.

The smart client sees the briefing meeting and the creative presentation as umbilically connected and insists on the same people being present at both. Indeed, Unilever's Advanced Brand Communications process makes it mandatory in order to reduce the room for misunderstanding.

For help with better briefing, there is another booklet in this series, *The Client Brief*, available as a download from the signatories' websites (see back cover).

## 4 EMPATHISE

Try to empathise with the people bringing the ideas to you. What will they be expecting/hoping for/dreading?

Creative people are different. Right-brained, they are qualitatively driven. It matters less that a job is done on time and within budget than that it is done really well.

Account executives will have ambitions for the idea too. If they can sell it at the first presentation, their agency is more likely to operate the account at profit, rather than a loss, because of the time/cost over-runs involved in re-working.

Because you hold the budgets, you have power. Be careful how you wield it. Have empathy for your consumer too.

When the Chairman of Lever Fabergé was presented with the new Lynx/Axe campaign, he said:  
*"I hate it. I'm sure it will be very successful."*

# IN REAL LIFE

WITH MICHAEL BROCKBANK

*Funny phrase, 'creative judgement' – as if there's such a thing as 'uncreative judgement'! In my experience, people who demonstrate good creative judgement have an intuitive understanding of other people, and an ability to step into their shoes; they get under their customer's skin, into their thoughts and emotions, and see ideas through their eyes.*

*If you can do that, you're on the way to appreciating which ideas will work for them, and which will not. This ability is worth a great deal to companies like ours which are in the business of building brands – a task largely dependent on consumers' reactions to our communication ideas.*



MICHAEL BROCKBANK

Unilever - former Vice-President,  
Brand Communication

## 5 CLARIFY

You came to the meeting informed and upbeat. You have looked at the brief again and been reminded of the task in hand. Finally you have been shown the work. The key questions to ask now are:

### Is it on brief?

The strategy is the idea before the idea: the platform on which you build your communications. It's a lot easier to explain exactly what you think is wrong with an idea when it is off brief than when it is at fault executionally.

### What exactly *is* the idea?

Note that the idea and the execution are not one and the same thing. The idea in every Tango ad is the quest for the full hit of the fruit. But every ad is a different expression of the idea.

If the idea is not simple and single-minded, then perhaps the brief was not simple and single-minded either.

### What sort of an idea is it?

There are many different sorts of communications ideas and it can be helpful if the agency explains which idea they are presenting and why they believe it will work well.

### Here are just a few examples:

- The product demo – when you show what the product actually does in an engaging and powerful way.
- The side-by-side comparison – when you are able to make a competitive claim about your brand's performance.
- The celebrity endorsement – when the values of your brand can be enhanced by those of a famous personality.
- The testimonial of a loyal user – when the target audience can see that people like them use and benefit from the product.
- The problem solved – a problem/solution scenario in which the brand is the hero.
- The slice of life – when you show the brand in the lives of its core consumers.
- Borrowed interest – when the idea springs from and refers back to a film or a TV series.

### What sort of an execution is it?

- Is it clever and original? Does it stand out from the competition and say what has to be said in a way that's never been said before?
- Is it distinctive? Will it stand out in a cluttered media environment and make more of the media spend?
- Is it relevant? Does it connect on an emotional level with the brand and inspire positive feelings about it versus the competition?
- Is it credible?
- Is it campaignable? Can it be iterated through other media channels?
- Is it durable? Will it bear repeated viewing and continue to engage?
- Is the idea deliverable in terms of practicality and the budget?

Says Rory Sutherland: “**The secret of good creative assessment is in knowing when to be original. At 33,000 ft. what you do not want is the pilot of your plane getting creative.**”

### How is the idea going to work?

There are many different models of how advertising and marcoms work, including:

- Sheer impact or 'salience' that creates fame and 'talkability' for the brand.
- Deep involvement that engages customers in the brand at an emotional and psychological level.
- Persuasion – which imparts new and valuable information about the brand and builds up its functional and rational benefits.
- Price – which can have a significant influence on brand choice.

The agency needs to be able to explain how their idea is going to change perceptions and behaviours in order to achieve the objectives you established in your brief to them. What is their model for this idea and how will it work?

## 6 QUESTION YOURSELF

Your first reaction to the work will almost certainly be subjective. Establish what influences may be at work on your opinion before you start to concentrate on it objectively.

You may be amazed or startled by the creative leap. **“A lot of the work I’ve been presented has surprised me,”** says Michael Brockbank, **“but the agency has a responsibility to anticipate and deal with that surprise.”**

- Do try to identify and own up to your emotional response, even if it’s only to yourself.
- Do try to establish what influences may be at work on your opinion. If you don’t care for the agency people, you may not care for their ideas. If you are worried it will be hard to get buy-in from Head Office, that will be a factor too.
- Do ask yourself what influence the other people in the room may have on you.

In *Better at Creativity*, Geoffrey Petty refers to experiments conducted by the psychologist Asch. In one test, he drew three lines on a page. One line was obviously longer than the other two. Four people were asked to identify the longest line. Three of the four were in cahoots with the psychologist. When the three all pointed to a short line and identified it as the longest, the fourth person did the same in 70% of instances, despite the fact it was obviously longer.

- Don’t use research to avoid having an opinion or making a decision.

When you assess an idea, you will also be weighing up the risks. Not just to the brand and the budget, but to your career prospects.

The risk of looking an idiot. The risk of your boss disagreeing with you. The risk of a mistake.

Simon Thompson is blunt about it. **“I’ve never met anyone who was fired for being mediocre but I have met people fired for taking a risk. By dint of that, if your object in life is to remain employed rather than to make a difference, then mediocre is a good decision.”**

## 7 QUESTION THE IDEA

If creative appraisal is a test of leadership qualities, it is also a test of communication skills.

The clients who know how to use open questions are those who end up with great work, because they encourage ideas to develop.

Open questions start with Who? What? Why? Where? How? When? They involve and stimulate. They tease out explanations.

What inspired you to have this idea? How would it work in other media? Why do you think it will work? How could we improve it? What would you do with more time?

Closed questions (Are you serious? You think it's funny, do you?) will kill the idea before you have even begun to explore it. This is like shouting out to a firing squad: "Fire ... Ready ... Aim."

Bear in mind how the idea will change in production and do be open to the contribution specialists such as typographers, photographers and directors can make to the finished article.

The stories are legion of relatively ordinary scripts becoming commercials of great power and effectiveness in the hands of an inspired director.

One approach to appraising and then reacting to an idea is to structure your response to the agency in the following manner:

1. "What inspires me about this idea is..."
2. "What works for me about this idea is..."
3. "What's missing from this idea for me is..."
4. "What could make this idea bigger for me is..."

# IN REAL LIFE

WITH ANTHONY SIMONDS-GOODING

*I think that a client's relationship with an agency is an intensely personal one, built on mutual trust and honesty. I can't be doing with people who pussyfoot around the issues or tell you what they think you want to hear. In the creative arena this leads to second-guessing, time wasting, and mediocre work that will achieve nothing for the brand. If you hate an idea, tell the agency why you loathe it. But tell them you will buy it if they can assure you it's the best they can do. It's amazing how often they come back with something new.*



ANTHONY SIMONDS-GOODING

Whitbread - former CEO  
D&AD - Chairman

## 8 REFLECTION

Your agency will want immediate feedback. By all means tell them what you feel, but resist pronouncement. Remember, High Court judges can take days summing up a case.

Alan Bishop argues for 'The Huddle', the P&G way of receiving ideas. **"It's a good way of handling feedback. Ask the agency to leave the room and then, with your team, come to a consensus about what you feel. You call the agency back and one person debriefs them. You make it clear there will be a formal and written response later."**

Listen to the agency, make notes, then go away and think. Reflection is when you ask the HOW questions. How can we take the idea on? How can we adapt it? How can we make it better?

When you have thought about it, give your considered assessment - in writing.

The research study commissioned to provide ballast to this booklet makes it plain both clients and agencies agree on this.

The feedback should be:

- Honest.
- Objective.
- Detailed – against each of the objectives.
- Constructive – so everyone knows what to do next and why.
- Marshalled by one decision maker.

If your feedback is supportive of the process, even if not of the idea itself, the outcome can still be positive.

For instance, if you think the idea is good but the execution weak, most agencies will be excited at being asked to do more. You are challenging them to do their best. If you are rejecting the idea, be clear as to why. Is it off brief? Is it unoriginal? Is it unaffordable? Will your legal department have problems with it? Is it dislikeable?

In rejecting the idea are you also rejecting the strategy? If this is the case, then you may well have to go back and write a new brief.

Says Marilyn Baxter, non executive Director of the COI and former Chairman of Hall + Partners:

**"Agencies are obsessed with originality in a way most clients aren't. Agencies tend to present their ideas in terms of them being mould-breaking concepts which are high risk and high reward. But most clients would rather settle for a lower risk and lower reward idea, just so long as it works. The rise of research in evaluating creative ideas has been huge and is a function of agencies' failure to engage clients properly and to use the appropriate language to explain their great idea.**

**"The common belief that research can't help the creative process is frustrating, because research can do so much to lessen risk by elucidating the nature of the idea, elaborating how customers will relate to it, and measuring its impact in the market."**

## 9 REFINEMENT AND THE ROLE OF RESEARCH

These are the WHY questions. The first is, Why change anything? And if you really do want to make changes, will your small changes actually make a big difference? If not, don't make them.

The less you do to a new and challenging idea, the more you might learn about it in research. If your changes are reasonable, good creative people will see them as an opportunity to improve the work.

When it comes to pre-testing, creative people often quote David Ogilvy, who observed how some clients use research "As a drunk uses a lamp-post. For support rather than for illumination".

Many marketers find this naïve. After all, if James Dyson made over 1500 prototypes for his cyclone cleaner, then it does not seem unreasonable, in the interests of enhanced effectiveness, to ask for a couple of copy changes.

Research may not provide you with a list of specific adjustments you should make, but it will suggest whether refinement is needed.

That being said, Michael Brockbank comments: "Time and again scripts have actually been sharpened in groups. A famous Oxo commercial had the line "Remember Paris?" until a housewife suggested "Remember Bolton?", which was funnier, more appropriate and more memorable."

Research enables clients to satisfy their other stakeholders, who can make the process uncomfortable, the CEO or the FD, for instance.

This is precisely why PR agencies would welcome more research, believing it would help reassure clients unnerved by the particular unpredictability of the channel.

Research allows an idea to start acquiring a life of its own. Now, rather than being the property of the agency, everyone can get to own it.

## 10 RELAX

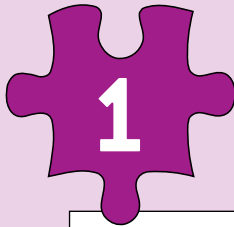
You've done everything you can to help the idea survive and flourish. Changes have been made - through consensus. Each member of the team feels a part of the process, though the responsibility now rests with the senior client.

There is every reason to believe the idea will be a success. If it does turn out to meet all its objectives, both hard and soft, celebrate.

Get together with the agency and trawl through the results. You'll learn more studying what you did right than you will from looking at what you did wrong, and to appreciate the value of trust.

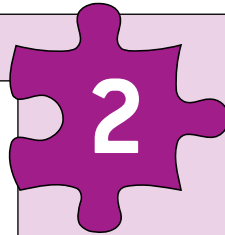
Says Bruce Haines: "Whenever you see a truly great idea, you can bet that behind it was a trusting relationship between client and agency."

# TEN-PIECE JIGSAW



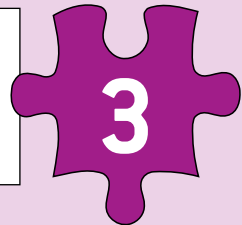
## **Be knowledgeable in advance -**

to assess ideas you need to be able to place them in a broader context and compare them against ideas you have seen elsewhere and considered 'good' or 'bad'.



## **Come to the meeting with a smile -**

join the creative presentation hoping to enjoy yourself and ready to be inspired. When people are having fun, they listen and contribute.



## **Back to the brief -**

reminding yourself of your brief is essential. It provides you with a framework against which to evaluate the idea. Make sure the agency does this too before they present.



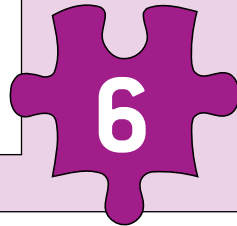
## **Empathise -**

try to empathise with the people bringing the ideas to you. Creative people are different. It matters less to them that a job is done on time and within budget than that it is done really well.



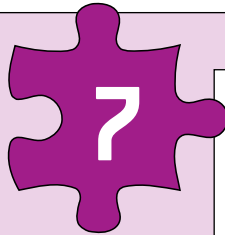
**Clarify -**

if the idea is not simple and single-minded, then perhaps the brief was not simple and single-minded either. Is it on brief? What exactly is the idea? What sort of an idea is it? What sort of an execution is it? How is the idea going to work?



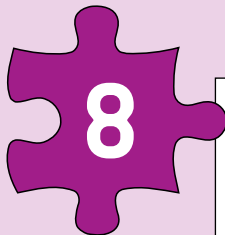
**Question yourself -**

your first reaction to the work will almost certainly be subjective. Establish what influences may be at work on your opinion before you start to concentrate on it objectively.



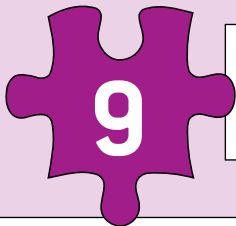
**Question the idea -**

the clients who know how to use open questions are those who end up with great work, because they encourage ideas to develop. Start with Who? What? Why? Where? How? When? They involve and stimulate.



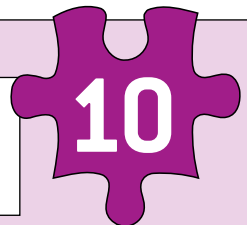
**Reflection -**

listen to the agency, make notes, then go away and think. Reflection is when you ask the HOW questions. How can we take the idea on? How can we adapt it? How can we make it better?



**Refinement and the role of research -**

These are the WHY questions. The first is, Why change anything? The less you do to a new and challenging idea, the more you might learn about it in research.



**Relax -**

You've done everything you can to help the idea survive and flourish. There is every reason to believe the idea will be a success.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Patrick Collister of Creative Matters and a creative trainer ([www.creative-matters.com](http://www.creative-matters.com)), was our consultant on these guidelines and we are most grateful to him for his input.

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# NEED TO KNOW MORE?

These guidelines should be a helpful tool for any company wishing to incorporate the principles of assessing creative work into in-house training modules, and have been developed by the four signatories: the IPA, ISBA, MCCA and PRCA. All parties have given it their agreement and support, and urge its full adoption by both clients and agencies.

This guide is available as a downloadable PDF from the websites of the signatories:

[www.ipa.co.uk](http://www.ipa.co.uk)

[www.isba.org.uk](http://www.isba.org.uk)

[www.mcca.org.uk](http://www.mcca.org.uk)

[www.prca.org.uk](http://www.prca.org.uk)

## GUIDES IN DEVELOPMENT



Published July 2003



Published March 2004



Published August 2005



Published February 2006

There is one more joint industry guide 'under construction', all designed to help you get more from your communications agencies.

Please contact the IPA, ISBA, MCCA or PRCA if you want to get more details.



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