Episode 4 - The Brief Is Not the Work

Regina Lewis Welcome to the inside straight in card lingo an inside straight is a hand with only four of the five cards needed to win. The missing card is what we're calling the gap. But we're not here to talk about poker. Instead, this site Inside Straight deals with all things branding and communications and the gaps that foil even the best laid plans. For example, a gap in brand alignment can cost ten percent of annual revenue. A poor reputation sixty percent, a crisis triggered by a failed implementation, fifty percent of stock value over two years. Miscommunications leading to corporate inefficiencies up to eight figures. So who's minding the gap and who are we? We're a group of seasoned pros from various sectors who've banded together for this series of critical conversations on the hands that we've all been dealt. We're here to say the quiet parts out loud. In each game, we'll ask three critical questions to help close the gap. One. What's really going on here? Two. What assumptions were made? Three. What solutions would we recommend? Let the games begin. The brief is not the work. A communication manager sends out a tender. Six agencies receive it. The document asks for a brand refresh, a new website, a campaign concept, messaging frameworks. There's no budget range, no timeline, no clearly defined business problem. The instruction. Be bold. So here's the question. If this brief is delivered perfectly, do we know what business problem it solves? No. Here's the hand. What's that?

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel I think. I think everyone around the room is going to say no. That is, they want the whole enchilada for nothing.

Russell Holley So I'm going to throw. I'm going to throw my my my card in. I'm gonna throw my diamonds in because I think it's inherently system based, not necessarily resources. I think that can come into it, but it's definitely system. The system's not fit for purpose.

Regina Lewis Right.

Russell Holley Any other cards?

Mark Evans Not not execution. But you know, we see this all the time. And I think that you get one of two scenarios. It's a bit like Regina just said, you get someone wanting the whole enchilada. You have no idea why they're doing it, you know, but.

Russell Holley It's got to be bold.

Mark Evans It's got to be bold. Oh, yeah. We got to be bold. We're always bold.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Card in my card in tentatively. Not as much as you guys. I'm a gently throw in.

Russell Holley Maybe I shouldn't have thrown it in so boldly.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel But yeah, maybe not so boldly. But I'm going to say that how it impacts teams is later, because after all of that work is done, someone brilliantly in leadership will say, we can take this in-house and comms team, take it over.

Regina Lewis Oh yeah, that's the ugly scenario. Well, I'm definitely throwing in a spade because there's definitely decisions here and there's definitely a structure. So does anybody have.

Russell Holley As I threw in.

Regina Lewis A faraway example of this. What's that Russ?

Russell Holley Well, no, go on. You carry on.

Regina Lewis I was just saying, just asking for if anybody has a an analogy, an example, a metaphor.

Russell Holley I can see Carolyn oozing with enthusiasm over her.

Regina Lewis Please go.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Carolyn always has a story. Oh. I'm old. I have a lot of stories. Um, all I know is, is that I have walked in more times than I can count. Where, uh, both internally working on the team and also in agency and the client or internal wants the whole enchilada. And they figure if you're going to give me a

website, why can't you also give me new branding? And if you're going to give me new branding, why can't you give me a whole lot of things? I need a whole new campaign, I need social, I need this, I need that. And the biggest issue with that is they haven't thought about any of those things. I think that there's a lot of things that are going on. A lot of, as I said before, it's about psychology. A lot of times there are things that are happening above those teams, above the comms team and above the external team that's coming in agency that's coming in, um, for which they're not privy to and they need to deliver on.

Russell Holley I'm just going to go through, I'm going to go straight for the jugular with this. It's it's a bit of a pet hate maybe. Um, it's the system that's wrong. You know, it's, it's, it's screaming out for that diamond card. Um, it's we are, you know, the, the environments that we work in life, everything is changing so rapidly and the way that, um, tenders, procurement briefs haven't changed at all in the last sort of thirty, probably forty odd years in, in all, you know, our combined sort of experiences. Why not? Why haven't they changed everything else around. It's changed just so that they put down and we need a website. We need this. We need that just because it's a social media, because that's the way things go. It's they're, they're not using an agency for me anywhere near, uh, the resources and the capacity and the expertise that that agency has. Don't give them a brief. Tell them what the issue is, tell them what the problem is, and then get them to write the brief. You need X, y, and z. You need this. You need you. You don't need to be bold. You need to be honest. You need to be dynamic. Whatever that is, it's, it's the agency that then comes back with the creative solution and the, the tools, the platforms that you need to communicate in, and also what skills potentially it will need to use from the resources the organization has. So you do an audit actually of what you have in the organization, staff members. So you actually build up, you can build up a really holistic view of what that potential solution is going to be. Not please give us a website, please give us this, that it's just the wrong way of working.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel But can I say this really quick? Most of the time, the reasons why they can give you the entire phone book of all of these things is because they don't even know why they want it. That's the real answer. And I like to say, you know, I'm about to be a little facetious and talk about what's your why, you know? But the real answer is, is that they can't answer their own why.

Russell Holley But then it's so easy to interrogate.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Exactly.

Russell Holley And to define that.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And they're therefore the agency is left with interrogating. And you know, what's even sadder is when the agency is interrogating, they still don't get a proper answer back.

Regina Lewis Because they don't know. I mean, I think that's, that's the thing you have to face is people don't know what problem they're solving. Because in all rights, any kind of communication or branding problem should track back to the business problem that you're solving and align with the objectives. But nine times out of ten, it doesn't. Um, but I was listening.

Russell Holley Sorry, sorry, Eugene. My, my, as you can probably tell, I've got, uh, probably too much to say on this topic is that rather than turning around and saying, we need a. We put this tender out and we want to get ten agencies or whatever it is to respond. Um, and we're going to spend an enormous amount of time filtering through all of those. It won't.

Regina Lewis Be ten. It'll be probably three times as many.

Russell Holley Uh, and looking at. Yeah, exactly. Uh, rather than saying, let's, let's, let's do a pitch for an agency with, um, the ability to solve our solutions.

Mark Evans That sort of, that you're presupposing that the people that are choosing the agency understand communications or even the intricacies of the job specifications. That is the problem with procurement. You end up with someone asking you five hundred questions. Four hundred of them are process based or do you have a sustainability mandate? Do you have efficiencies? Are you this? Are you that? It's a box ticking exercise most of the time. And unfortunately, that is the way that we're being led down because someone, somewhere, decided that spending millions of pounds on procurement a year and wasting hundreds and hundreds of hours of people's time a year putting proposals together is much more efficient than employing a communications professional internally that knows what they want and knows how to preselect a few

agencies that then they get to put a brief or a proposal forward that then they select from is much better, is a much better way of doing things. In the old days, you would never presume that someone who didn't understand communications could choose an agency for a communication. It doesn't make any sense that it comes back to, you know, why people buy branded goods? Because they don't know how to judge quality or value.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And do you know how many times I've had someone tell me, walk into an organization, say, we need a new website? And you ask why? And they said, because we've had it for three years and that's it. And that's and that's the only reason why there's. So it doesn't function the way that it's supposed to. I mean, I guess it does.

Russell Holley I've even yeah, I.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Just, I just I just don't think it's pretty anymore.

Mark Evans We've just also a few years ago, we had an agency that we come up against very regularly and it sort of used to be like a, we'll get this one and they'll get the next one, you know, one of those. And they had this strategy of going around to organizations saying, you need a new brand, your brand isn't good. It's da da, da da. And then it was like, oh, well, while you're doing your brand, you need a website as well. So it's like the hook was the brand, but the, the means to the end was, oh, we've got a website to build.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel It's almost like telling someone, does my breath stink, you know?

Mark Evans Yeah, exactly.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And you're like, oh, just a minute. I need a new toothbrush. I need a this. And I needed that. You need a dental appointment.

Mark Evans Yeah, exactly. So people have just been led down.

Regina Lewis The point I was going to make, um, a few rounds back is the fact that these organizations really don't know what they're looking for. And a lot of cases they are looking for that, that magic pill or that magic bullet. And I was listening to a podcast and I heard the host say about a scenario that he found himself in, that he felt like he was blue pilled. And I'm not that up on the matrix, but so I went back and looked and looked it up. And the definition of being blue pilled is when you have a choice to remain blissfully ignorant or accept a comfortable illusion rather than the painful truth. And I think that is exactly what happens in these scenarios, because anytime somebody is doing a, a rebrand, I found in my experience from the cons perspective, is that what they're saying is the people are not buying what they're selling. So rather than, you know, check the engine light in your car and see that it needs to be, you know, repaired or maintenance, they go buy a new car. So it's not dealing with the truth of the matter or getting down doing enough investigation. A lot of times it's a knee jerk or an ad hoc response to something, oh, I know we need a brand and you get through it and you go, you didn't need a brand, you just needed messaging, or you needed a vision that actually matched the work that you're doing.

Mark Evans Or.

Regina Lewis You're off.

Mark Evans Mission or yeah.

Regina Lewis Yeah, you need better products or better customer service or something else. There's another business problem that they're not solving, and that comes through in the tender. And it's not the fault of the agency receiving the tender, because part of this question is even if you executed perfectly, what have you got in the end?

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel That's right. Did you solve the business case?

Regina Lewis You're going to get blamed.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Mhm.

Regina Lewis You become the scapegoat.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel That's right.

Russell Holley Because a lot of what we currently are sort of processes are is to sort of reverse engineer is to actually sort of interrogate again is what is it that you actually want to achieve? What do you need to solve? And so often you're not necessarily given a cohesive response because.

Regina Lewis Because they don't.

Russell Holley Know, they don't know. And again, it's not, it's, it's, you can understand it actually from the previous podcast, you can understand it if they're not necessarily told the full picture or, or what the actual, um, reasons for it are. It's just that, um, you know, this website now, uh, it doesn't fit. It's not fit for purpose because our strategy has changed, but that's a direct response. And you just think, okay, and then it's, I'd like to know why, why, why is the strategy changed? Because if it's because the, the audience has moved, um, the, whatever that might be, it's for us then to say, right. okay, well, if that's changed or that's changed, we. A website might need to change with it. It might need to not just deliver new content, but it might need to deliver different ways of communicating or pushing that content to those audiences. So there's a lot more underneath that we would want to know, because it just empowers us as an agency to deliver far greater return on investment.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Yeah. Tell me the pain.

Regina Lewis Question number two, which is what assumptions? What assumptions are being made, if you can include that in your response you're about to make?

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Sure, sure, sure. The assumption is very much what Russ is saying, that if I can put this, you know, put this brief out and tell you, okay, I'll solve this. A lot of times we say, tell me your pain and we'll solve it. Well, tell me you know what you'd like to solve. And, and you know, we'll solve it. But actually it's really about tell me your pain. And I think that that's literally what Russ is getting at when he's talking about, for example, the strategy has moved. Your strategy has moved because you've experienced pain, right? You don't move just because you want to move, right? Something has happened. Something has changed. Something is causing you pain. Something is taking money out of your pocket. Something is making audience go away. Something is happening that is causing you pain. So what? You're what you're really asking, you know, on the outside to to that client is tell me your pain. Honestly. Tell me what the pain is.

Russell Holley You've hit a word there which isn't very often used honesty, honesty, honesty and.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Transparency.

Regina Lewis Vulnerability, truthfulness.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And.

Regina Lewis Truth does not necessarily true. Those are not the same thing.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And they do come, but rarely. But they do come. But it's about tell me your pain, because that is what you guys are coming in to solve. And then that leads right into what Russ was saying about there may be a different way.

Mark Evans And I think I'll.

Regina Lewis Take a different perspective on that, because if you take a step back and say, what are you communicating? Because your message may not be clear. What you're saying may not be clear. Your who may not be clear who you are talking to or to whom you are speaking, depending on how grammatically correct you want to be. And you know, it's like your targets are not like their fundamental business problems that no amount of branding, no new website is going to solve. You're going to get to the end of that tunnel and find out that the light at that end of the tunnel is a train heading your way.

Mark Evans Yeah. And I really concur with that. You often see it with people saying a new brand will solve everything, or a new website will solve everything without really understanding, you know, what, what the underlying problems are. And actually what you need to do to develop an effective brand. Mhm. And the processes you need to become involved in the interrogative processes and how you look at what you do. What do other people think you do? You know, all of that sort of third party perspective stuff that people just

miss out most of the time, and they're just looking at it from, well, this is what we want to achieve, or this is what our competitors do. Let's, let's be like them. Let's have a me too brand. You know, that's, that's, that's an anti brand isn't it? Trying to look like someone else. That's that's completely against the against the objective of creating a new vibrant distinctive brand for someone. But that's, you know, time and time again, we hear that we want to be like this, we want to align with this people.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel And I'm glad you brought that up because it's astounding sometimes when agencies come to you and say, you know, what are you looking at? And what do you admire and why they don't break that down in our. Well, I'll ask you, are they able to tell you why they they admire this particular brand or whatever? It's more like they'll just come in and say, make us like this.

Mark Evans Yeah, exactly.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel You know, because it's make your website exactly like.

Mark Evans We aspire to be like this organization without understanding. How do you do that?

Regina Lewis It's a superficial fix for a very deep, fundamental problem. It's it goes down to the foundation of the organization. Unless you shore up that foundation, anything that you build on top of that is going to come crumbling down.

Regina Lewis And how do you get business? But it's really not your, your, your job to get organizations to fix their business problem. They're looking at this very surfacey response to an in depth issue. And no matter what you do and you can do it perfectly, it doesn't solve the problem because that's a fix and not a solve.

Mark Evans And I remember when we were working with a client in Geneva quite a number of years ago, and their particular problem was that they were a relatively small Swiss based organization, and they weren't perceived as major actors on the world stage. So the first thing we did was to understand, well, why aren't you, you know, how do we build up your profile? How do we then add to the credentials that you've got, or none of the credentials you've got on your website at the moment? How do we build credentials for you to prove to people that you are who you say you are, so that you can then go out and get funding from them, or you can gain credibility or leverage. And it's looking at it from the business perspective. And that's I don't think a lot of people, not a communications agencies don't do that. It's just like designing a brand. Here's a brand. It's like, well, what is the fundamental way you want a new brand? What are you hoping a new brand will achieve for you? And sometimes it's, yeah, you need the brand to go this way or that way. But sometimes it's, yeah, you need all these other things as well. And that's, you know, that's often the case and something we didn't really touch on at the beginning of this episode was also someone's come to you and they want a brand, they want a web, they want social media, they want this. But nobody's told you the budget.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Exactly.

Mark Evans And they just expecting that if they get it all done.

Regina Lewis Between B2B and other sectors.

Mark Evans They get it all done at the same time. They think it's going to be fifty percent of the price.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Exactly. Exactly. No thought about complexity.

Mark Evans Oh, you were giving you all this work? Can you have fifty percent off, please.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel For the next one? No thought about complexity or time or quality or any of those things.

Mark Evans Or even internal capacity. How are they going to manage to, you know, go through the brand process, right? All the content for the website, work on the strategy. They haven't got the manpower to do that. And then that comes back to who do you trust?

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel Exactly?

Mark Evans Who do you get on board? You need someone, a good place to start.

Regina Lewis Talking about solutions. And what do we think?

Mark Evans That's my bit. Yeah, that's my that's my soup.

Regina Lewis Continue with the club. Tell us your solution for the club.

Mark Evans Sorry you had to throw that in there.

Russell Holley Well, I think the solution or one of the solutions is. Reclassifying or re-establishing a system that's fit for purpose. I don't believe, uh, you know, often you hear if it's not broken, why fix it? I think the process has been broken for many years.

Mark Evans Beyond.

Russell Holley Broken. Um, and it's looking at how changing the system completely really, um, I think a brave organization is the one that will look at an agency's and interview the agencies for their, their ways of working being radically different. What can they bring to the table that's different? To choose a selection of agencies that might be specific for those, those, uh, you know, PR or whatever it might be. And then saying, right, we've chosen you as an agency. Here is a brief that we want you to work with us on to define, uh, tweak, adjust, and then you provide us with a solution. But you've already got the project. You're not, you're not trying to put a tender in with only understanding the organization peripherally. that you just put a few ideas down on a piece of paper and send it in and think, well, hopefully that will that that is the route that they want to go down because you're not doing it in the right way. You're making, you're making, you know, some summary solutions, surmising what this might be. I don't ever think the result is anywhere near what it could possibly be. They're only just tapping in very, uh, a small amount of the potential of, of, of an agency's skill sets. So it's fundamental, fundamentally changing the way not individually, um, choosing an agency because it's, it can provide a different way of thinking, a different way of providing solutions.

Carolyn Davenport-Moncel If you are the comms person sitting in that spot and you are charged with bringing an agency like you guys, I think the biggest solution and contribution you can make is to rigorously interrogate your business case inside of your organization, and you're going to have to sit with leadership. And it's going to, at times be uncomfortable. But you really do have to uncover that and understand what's the real pain there business wise. Coms can can work around that, Regina says. It's so beautifully about, you know, fix and solve. They can solve that. Once they understand that, and then they're able to better communicate to a team externally what the pain is. And then we get to the pain. Then that external team is able to figure out how to solve it.

Regina Lewis Yeah, yeah, that's, that's, that's a really great point. Um, speaking from personal experience, um, one of the best tenders that I've participated in was hiring a third party to, to manage that process, but it didn't mean that I was absent from it. And they did everything. Um, it was a very rigorous process where I had to answer hundreds of very in-depth questions at the front, do very in-depth videos on what we were looking for, and do a presentation that each of the agencies that wanted to bid was part of. And then when we narrowed it down to, I think we narrowed it down to five or six. And those five or six, we said to them, based on everything you told us, based on everything we've told you, rather you tell us what what the problem is.

Russell Holley Yes, exactly.

Regina Lewis And part of that process, too, is we offered them the chance to tell us who they were and for them to interrogate us so that by the time we got narrowed it down to the three or four that we really wanted to investigate more deeply, they knew more about us and we knew more about them. And I will tell you the presentations we got back. Louis blew us away, and the margin of error between the top two was very, very minimal. The one that we did choose was took a very radical approach because that's what we needed to shake up the marketplace. And so that's how we did that. The other Tinder that I was involved in, it was a kitchen sink. It was, as I say, a hot mess. And it was a hot mess, in my opinion, because it was done by committee, which I don't think is a rightful way of doing it. And the Tinder was trying to solve too many problems. But one of the things that that tender process did that I would recommend is to give those bidders a chance to interrogate the company before they put pen to paper or, you know, I know that's a antiquated example, but before they commit their thoughts to a presentation or something else. Give them that space and then give them enough time to really consider what you're saying. So in that case, we ended up getting a very good agency. Um, well, they ended up hiring two and we had to eliminate one because it was just too much conflict. And they were trying to get one to do something that was just outside of their wheelhouse. But in the

end, we ended up with the right team. And that was that interim process and making it iterative and not just sending out a, you know, something via email that you then respond to. It has to be interactive and iterative to get to what you really want and need and really take advantage of that external voice, and not just have people tell you what they told, tell you what you told them you want to clean pure response.

Russell Holley one of the biggest issues I think though, um, is obviously time. Yeah. And money. Yeah. To participate in and to do it properly. The, the days of paid pitches seems to have disappeared. Mhm, mhm. But yeah, but it's again, it's something that actually encouraged greater understanding and greater, greater participation from an agent, right? Because your, your, your, your costs are being covered in a way and you.

Regina Lewis Can execute it.

Russell Holley Again, I'm Mark sort of brought it up about sort of like the procurement process. It's, it's like, well, you're, we're buying widgets, you know, so therefore every widgets the same and the processes that you were describing there is really understanding the differentiation between agencies and how they approach and how they. So it's, it's about how they do it, not the cost and what they're going to suggest. Right. And it really does sort of underpins where I think it should be coming from. Um, but I do think that a lot of organizations don't value the time and effort. So if you turn around to them and said you spend three, four weeks of your time invested in doing something and you're not going to get any, any payment for that or reimbursement or whatever that might be. Um, would they do it? I think a lot of the time. Good God. God, no, I'm not going to spend my time doing that. And then but then they said, well, yes, but you could potentially get a big contract with us. But the word potentially is one of the things that creeps into it. And you just think, well, where what sorts of agencies are they blocking a lot of potential coming through? Because we look at things now and we go, no, yes, no. And I know that we could bring an enormous amount to the table, but it's just not financially viable to take the risk.

Regina Lewis Yeah. You're right.

Mark Evans I think the people also are expecting you to spend time putting concepts and ideas and designs together when the budgets aren't even actually that high. You've probably spent the budget, not the project, doing the pitch.

Russell Holley But again, coming back to that same principle is that you're doing, you know you're doing. Which direction do you think we should go in without knowing enough information? So you're just you're just doing superfluous graphics. And then and then you've, you've basically provided them a solution. And then they say, if you win it, we loved your solution. You just think we haven't finished. We haven't even started. It was just an idea. No no no no no. You know, because they don't want to spend any more money. Well, just you've done the design, but.

Regina Lewis They're still going to have to spend the time no matter what the time is the time because they're either going to spend it on the freebie side that they think is free, or they're going to spend it in an engagement. The time is the time. It takes the same amount of time. So you're better off paying for it and being that much further ahead and completing the process.

Russell Holley Yeah. Okay.

Regina Lewis All right. Where have we landed, folks? Any closing thoughts? Any aha moments? Takeaways.

Russell Holley Well, I'd love to think that the irony of it is, is that you open the window every morning and things have radically changed. Things are changing in such a feels as such an accelerated rate, just not just politically, socially, uh, economically. Uh, and I think if people think that the system can remain the same, I think they're going to, you know, organizations, I think That we are looking at and we're presenting to are realizing that change is needed. They need to look at things in a different way because not only from their own individual careers, they're looking tired, they're looking, um, unsatisfied because they're churning out the same thing over and over again. Um, and if they don't want to look for excitement and different ways of achieving their goals, then what's in it for them? But then what's, what's in it for the organization? They really need to change their, their understanding of the world and where they fit in. And communications, in my opinion, has never been, never been greater. Because if you don't communicate your, your, your it's suicide in a way from, from a, from a business perspective. And if, if you don't do it correctly, it's suicide. So from, from, from, from

an agency to make sure that they deliver the best, the very best of their experiences and their skill sets. It's to allow the agency to be the agency and to integrate with the organizations, and to actually pitch to be an agency, not pitch to do a scribble on a piece of paper that is something that you think they might want, because you've only done a very small fraction of, of the interrogation that you'd need to do to understand them. So that's, that's how I'd love to see the, um, the landscape change.

Mark Evans Yeah. It goes back to what Carolyn was saying as well, isn't it? You need to be able to ask questions. They need to, you need you need honest responses and you need to understand the problem. Um, and they need to trust you. But I think more than anything, it's got to be at a strategic level now and it's got to be coordinated. It's got to be integrated. And historically, people haven't wanted to pay for that because they've either decided that their internal team can do it, or someone's going to do a bit of it, and then.

Russell Holley It's because communications is undervalued. I think fundamentally.

Mark Evans People now are realising how technically difficult integrated communications are. So I think now the the landscape is changing and I think the people that win will be the people that want to engage with organizations and agencies that want a discussion.

Russell Holley Listeners, thanks for listening in to the inside straight. You know, we don't promise perfect, perfect outcomes. You know, we just promised it promises better ones. Subscribe to the inside straight. Send us your stories for analysis. Follow us on social channels for clips, reflections, and conversations beyond the episode.