

# In-Spired!

Bringing Out the Best in Your In-House Design Team



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# Introduction

Managing an in-house design team can feel like herding cats — and not just shepherding them from Point A to Point B but through a maze of cubicles, corporate boardrooms and the C-suite, all of which may be filled with more traditional “species” of office workers who don’t know what to make of the cat parade. It’s no wonder, then, that managers of in-house teams often have to work extra hard to help their teams earn respect and stay inspired. The challenge of letting the creativity flow while simultaneously adhering to corporate design edicts, balancing budgets and managing tight deadlines isn’t for the faint of heart.

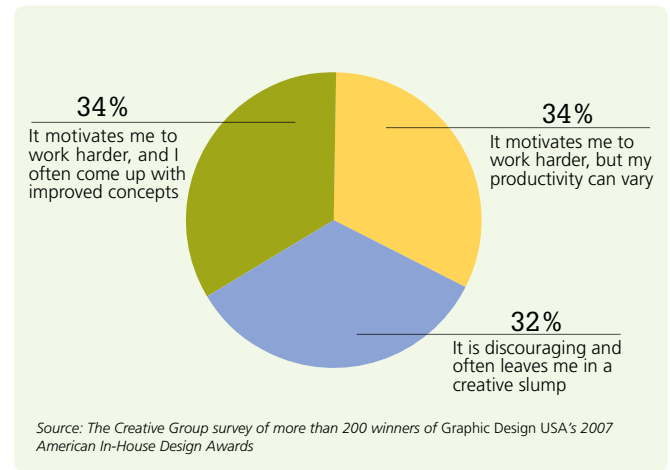
To assist you with this endeavor, we’ve packed this booklet with tips for better brainstorming, suggestions on tactfully breaking through bureaucracy, and best practices for building staff cohesion and fostering interdepartmental understanding. Much of the information is based on the results of our poll of more than 200 winners of *Graphic Design USA’s* 2007 American In-House Design Awards. We would like to thank the honorees and experts who shared their in-house career concerns and success strategies with us. We are pleased to share with you these insights, along with some additional research. For more management tips or help with any of your staffing needs, please contact The Creative Group office nearest you by calling **1.888.846.1668** or visiting **[www.creativegroup.com](http://www.creativegroup.com)**.

# Breaking Barriers and Enhancing Creative Freedom

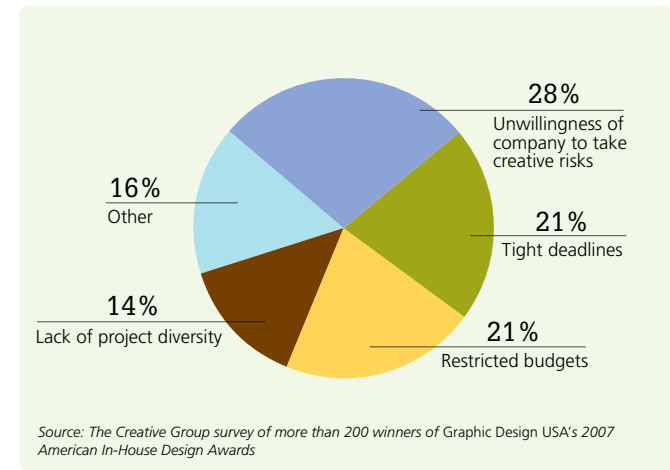
First, the good news: Our survey of more than 200 winners of Graphic Design USA's 2007 American In-House Design Awards revealed that many in-house designers continue to make strides in obtaining creative freedom. Three out of five survey respondents believe in-house design departments are able to exercise more creativity than they did five years ago.

That said, breaking new ground remains a challenging proposition. Eight out of 10 designers said it's difficult to convince senior management to accept concepts that deviate from the prevailing corporate style. For two-third of respondents, this resistance inspires them to work harder; however, another one-third find it discouraging. When asked about the most frequent creativity obstacles they encounter, more than a quarter (28 percent) of respondents cited their company's unwillingness to take creative risks. Restricted budgets and tight deadlines were the second most frequent answers.

"Which of the following statements most closely resembles your reaction to resistance to new ideas that you encounter on the job?"



"Which of the following do you perceive as the greatest creativity obstacle in an in-house environment?"



While it's nearly impossible to eliminate these perennial challenges, following are some strategies for overcoming them based on input from survey respondents and in-house leaders:

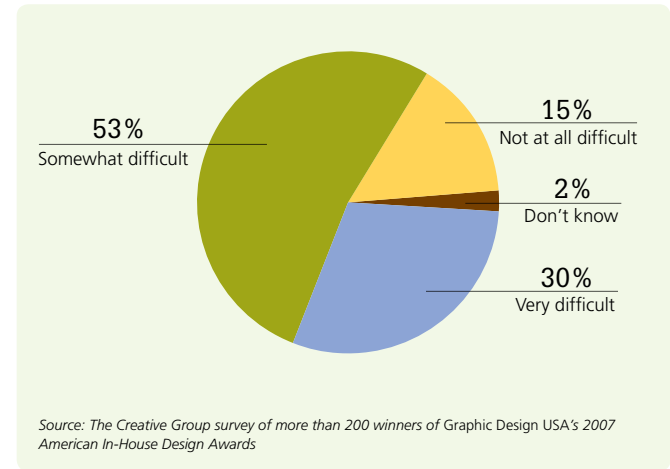
### Escape the 'window-dressing' mindset

Glenn Arnowitz, director of corporate graphics at Wyeth, a global pharmaceutical company, says it's imperative to talk about design as a core business competency, not just window dressing. "You have to recognize and communicate the value you offer and understand the role of design in your company," Arnowitz says. "Position yourself as a key player by becoming involved with business strategies that your company is pursuing." Arnowitz, who also co-founded InSource, an association for in-house creatives devoted to enhancing the value of design within corporate environments, notes that soft skills, such as versatility and the ability to communicate effectively, are critical, too. "You have to be flexible enough to interact with everyone from the loading dock to the executive tower," he says.

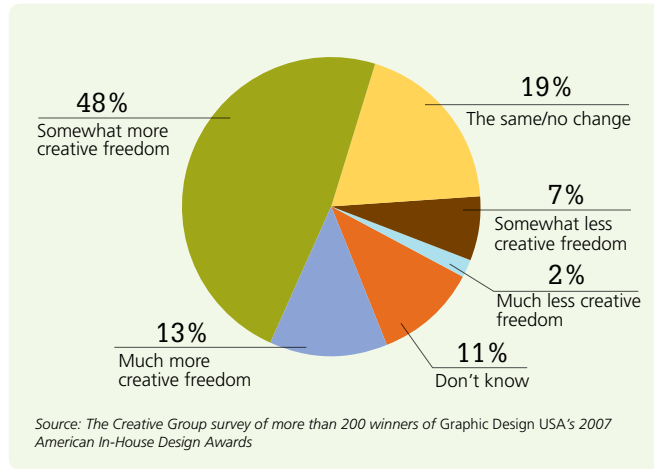
### Educate and enlighten

Part of the reason for tight project budgets and warp-speed turnaround times is a lack of knowledge about the creative process. Informing others of your team's role as it relates to the "big picture" is crucial in your quest for increased clout. Many non-creatives simply don't appreciate the rigid brand style guidelines with which you must comply. They might not be aware of the cost of typefaces and original photographs, or realize how much time it takes to produce a 50-page brochure, for example. As one survey respondent said, "Our internal clients have virtually no concept of what actual creativity is. I continuously remind our clients that the computer and the software are merely tools. The creativity resides in the person."

"How difficult is it to 'break creative ground' within an in-house environment (i.e., convince senior management to accept a concept that deviates from the prevailing corporate style)?"



"In your opinion, how much creative freedom do in-house design departments have now compared to five years ago?"



### Make a bulletproof case

Your power to persuade is crucial to breaking new creative ground. To help sway others to your line of thinking, focus on relevance and return on investment when pitching design solutions. Says Shelley Armstrong, design manager of the in-house group for Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Zune: "Don't waste a CEO's time talking about how cool it would be to create a special interactive Flash piece if you can't tie it back to how it will impact your customer, increase brand awareness and meet business objectives."

### Give examples

Take a cue from Ann Brenner, art director for Healthy Advice Networks. "I use examples of good design from high-profile companies to show non-creatives concepts that may work well for our audience," she says. "And when presenting color palettes, I bring articles about what the colors represent and how they are being successfully used in print, interior design and fashion design."

### Speak in layman's terms

Every profession has its own unique lexicon. Whether it's "Web 2.0" or "CMYK," the corporate world is full of buzzwords and acronyms that perplex the uninitiated. Buck the trend by slashing design-specific jargon from your vocabulary when presenting to non-creatives. Direct, concrete statements are typically the most powerful and persuasive.

### Show you're a winner

Arnowitz advises entering your team's work in design and business competitions. "Awards go a long way in bumping up the credibility of your team," he says. "And recognition from outside organizations can help you earn the respect of upper management."

Winning industry competitions can help you garner the attention of company leaders, reinforce your expertise to clients, and boost team morale and motivation. Here are just a few organizations that administer competitions throughout the year:

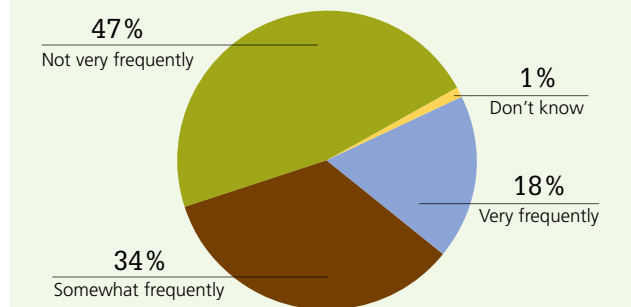
- Adobe Design Achievement Awards ([www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com))
- AIGA ([www.aiga.org](http://www.aiga.org))
- *Communication Arts* ([www.commart.com](http://www.commart.com))
- *Graphic Design USA* ([www.gdusa.com](http://www.gdusa.com))
- Graphis ([www.graphis.com](http://www.graphis.com))
- *HOW* ([www.howdesign.com](http://www.howdesign.com))
- *ID* ([www.idonline.com](http://www.idonline.com))
- *Print* ([www.printmag.com](http://www.printmag.com))
- *Step Inside Design* ([www.stepinsidedesign.com](http://www.stepinsidedesign.com))
- The Art Directors Club ([www.adcglobal.org](http://www.adcglobal.org))
- The Davey Awards ([www.daveyawards.com](http://www.daveyawards.com))
- The Society of Publication Designers ([www.spd.org](http://www.spd.org))
- The Type Directors Club ([www.tdc.org](http://www.tdc.org))
- The Webby Awards ([www.webbyawards.com](http://www.webbyawards.com))
- University & College Designers Association ([www.ucda.com](http://www.ucda.com))

### Get in the Game!

Following are some tips to help your team earn design accolades:

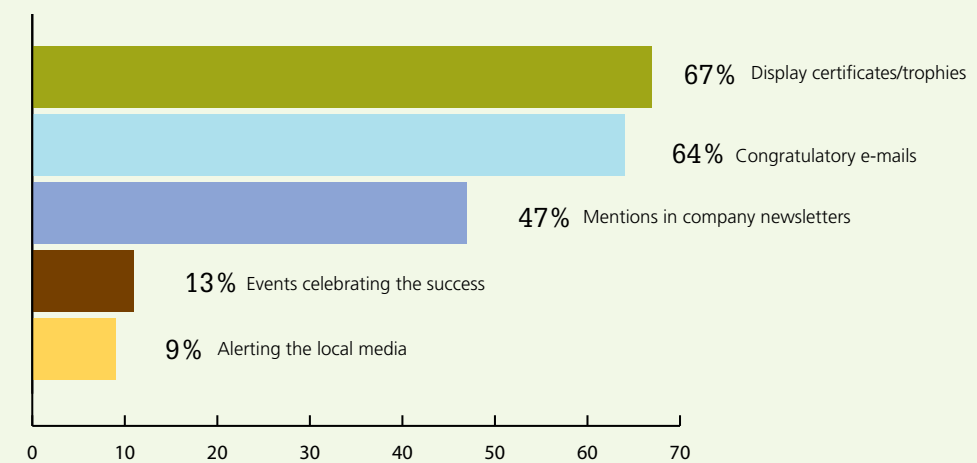
- Keep a calendar listing deadlines for competitions of interest so you have plenty of time to enter.
- Research competitions to find out which ones make the most sense for your company. Some, for example, may be more geared to small businesses versus large.
- Appoint a committee of design staff who will be responsible for entering work in key competitions.
- Consider giving staff members a "competition allowance" that they can use to enter their work in contests.
- Heavily publicize winning work, both internally and externally. This type of publicity not only inspires team members but also helps your staff earn recognition from other departments.

"How frequently does your department enter its projects in design competitions?"



Source: The Creative Group survey of more than 200 winners of Graphic Design USA's 2007 American In-House Design Awards

"When projects win competitions, how do you publicize it within your company?"



Source: The Creative Group survey of more than 200 winners of Graphic Design USA's 2007 American In-House Design Awards. Multiple responses were permitted.

And the Award Goes To ...

# From Bogged Down to Fired Up: Creativity Inside and Out

While breaking creative barriers can be tough in corporate environments, that doesn't mean your team has to forego fun. Laughter and camaraderie encourage creative expression. Most people know that a serious brainstorming session is less likely to yield great results than one that's a rollicking good time. Here are some exercises survey respondents said they partake in to spark the imagination:

- "I worked for an in-house design group where we did Mad Libs at 4 p.m. every day. No excuses. The suits thought we were crazy at first, but when we started winning awards, they had no problem."
- "Hide everyone's keyboard and make designers work on paper."
- "Provide positive feedback on jobs well done."
- "Look at good versus bad design at a dollar store."
- "Provide lots of whiteboard space."
- "Assign a project that is unrelated to your target demographic. For example, if your company makes educational toys, have designers create a wine bottle label. Give designers three to five working hours to complete the task, then present them during an off-site outing."
- "Give designers an allowance for design magazines and books."
- "Help designers get out of their comfort zones by assigning them each a variety of projects and making sure everyone does a little bit of everything."

## Take Your Show on the Road

Team-building activities provide great opportunities to bond with coworkers and inject a much-needed dose of excitement and energy into your group's work. There are plenty of alternatives to the tried-and-true, many of which can result in significant benefits like new ideas, stronger work relationships and improved team camaraderie.

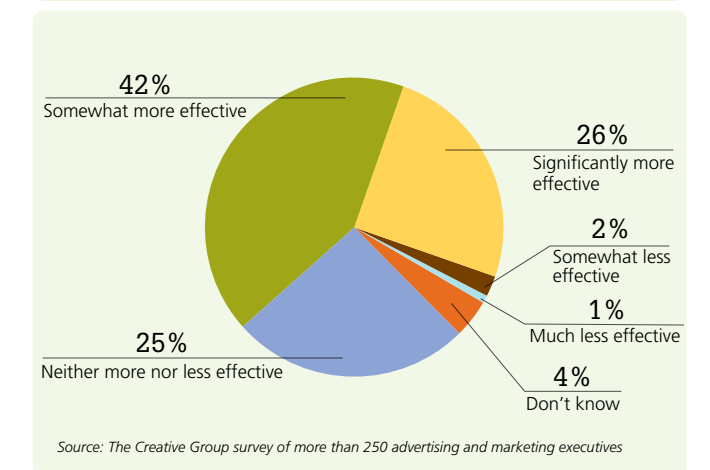
The Creative Group recently asked advertising and marketing executives to describe the wackiest or most unusual team-building activities they have heard of or taken part in. Their responses included:

- "Taking an improvisational class together."
- "Constructing boats out of cardboard and racing them in a pool."
- "Making sand sculptures."
- "Going on a group Segway tour."
- "Navigating a maze through a cornfield."
- "Going to a garden store and building a creative project out of \$9 worth of materials."
- "Treating everyone to a glorious day of massages and chocolates."

Remember that creativity is a lifestyle, not just a quality turned on for the job. As one survey respondent said, "Creativity should be part of who you are, not something you tap into 9-to-5, Monday through Friday. Encourage your team to be creative outside of the office. Sing, dance, cook, paint, sculpt, knit, do origami."

Finally, keep in mind that supporting outside creative interests isn't just a nice gesture; it's good for business. Research by The Creative Group indicates that employees who are passionate about interests outside the office typically are more effective on the job.

"In your opinion, are creative professionals who are passionate about interests outside of work (for example, music, sports, theater) generally more or less effective on the job?"



## Keep Cool

Shelley Armstrong of Microsoft shares two best practices within her design department ...

### Create a 'random wall of cool'

"We pin things up in a common area that inspire us along with a Post-it describing why," Armstrong says. "It makes us share our inspirations and gives us something interesting and ever-changing to look at. The wall features illustrations, examples of innovative packaging, favorite fonts, cool lighting options, products we lust after, color combinations that feel fresh, paper samples, fun advertising campaigns and more."

### Sponsor 'cool and cheesy' show-and-tell sessions

"Each week a different designer is expected to bring one example of a cool, inspiring design and one example of a 'cheesy' design that must be shared," Armstrong says. "It's so much fun; I get to see what my designers are into, from fun Flash websites to print campaigns. There is always a great deal of laughter and we all walk away having been exposed to something new."

# Building a Better Brainstorm

Team meetings aren't just beneficial for building camaraderie and keeping those in your creative department personally inspired; they also help in-house teams come up with the next big idea. In fact, nine out of 10 survey respondents said brainstorming sessions are effective for generating quality concepts. But brainstorming is more of an art than a science. As most creatives can attest, not all brainstorming sessions lead to an influx of ideas; sometimes you're lucky to get a mere trickle. Sam Harrison, creativity coach and author of *Zing! Five Steps and 101 Tips for Creativity on Command* and *IdeaSpotting: How To Find Your Next Great Idea*, provided the following suggestions for brainstorming sessions that yield a generous flow of creative thought:

## Start on the right foot

"It's helpful to get people's minds off of what they were just doing at their desks or computers by engaging in something lighthearted, such as a trivia game or an improv exercise. I sometimes kick things off with an activity called 'Last-Letter Sentences,' where one person says a sentence, and then the next person starts the next sentence with the last letter of the last word. Other times, I'll distribute Post-it notes and have participants spend a few minutes silently filling their pad with ideas, words and sketches related to the topic. We then post these on a wall and loosely organize them, but we don't edit or judge. The wall of Post-its simply serves as a platform for launching additional ideas. This heads us toward vigorous brainstorming."

## Create the right environment

"It needs to be one where people are free to express ideas without fear of judgment, where everybody jams and connects ideas. But the session also needs to focus on a particular objective or problem to be solved. These rules enhance, not restrict, freedom."

## Embrace the impromptu meeting

"Brainstorming needs to be part of your daily work life. It's great to get out of the office now and then, but teams shouldn't have to depend on escapes for their brainstorming. It's ideal if the team can have a dedicated room filled with treats, brainstorming guidelines, fidget toys, easel pads and other creative paraphernalia. But if that's not possible, push for a designated grouping of furniture in a corner or even a basic worktable that everybody can gather around. Make brainstorming more accessible and you'll have more brainstorms."

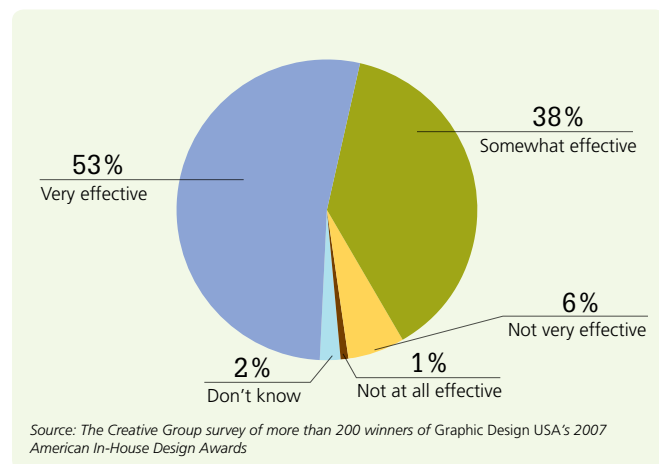
## Go for the numbers

"One of the biggest and most frequent problems I see is teams fixated on coming up with one big idea rather than lots of ideas. This is a formula for failure. Brainstorming is about quantity, not quality. If participants understand there'll be a follow-up session to edit ideas, they'll be more likely to express pie-in-the-sky ideas and less likely to shoot down anything that sounds the least bit wild and dangerous."

Survey respondents also weighed in with their favorite brainstorming techniques. Following are some of their suggestions:

- "I think any brainstorming session must have a good director to make sure everyone feels comfortable providing their ideas, as well as to ensure everyone is contributing."
- "Don't short-circuit any idea. Let the energy flow without judgment."
- "Invite a diverse group of people to participate, including non-designers."
- "Get all participants to think outside their sphere of influence. While it is a great asset to have a sales point of view represented, it's beneficial to get that same person to wear a different hat and think more globally."
- "Identify one person to record and capture all of the ideas."
- "Believe that you'll come up with something that's worth the time you spend brainstorming."
- "Do not judge any idea until you have a HUGE pile of them."
- "Get people to think in terms of possibilities, not realities."
- "Obtain as much information about the project as possible, from all different sources. The more you know, the more angles you can take to a creative level."
- "Be silly and serious. The best ideas are always the ones that are unexpected; if they were expected, people would not have to brainstorm."

"In your opinion, how valuable do you find team brainstorming sessions for generating quality concepts/ideas?"



- "The key is having people come to the brainstorming meeting with ideas and research. When people attend a brainstorming meeting with no prior thought, it can take longer to pull out great ideas."
- "Don't be an idea assassin; be open to all ideas."
- "Keep an open mind, and keep things lighthearted."



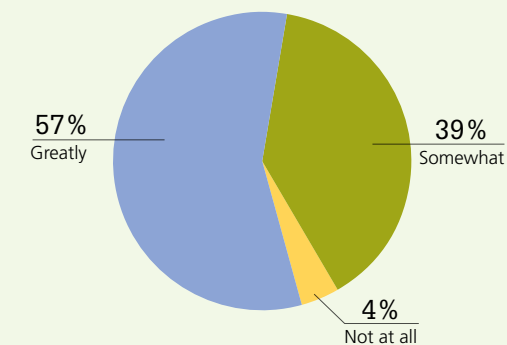
# The Power of Process

While brainstorming may come naturally to those who depend on the right side of their brains to make a living, developing processes and protocols may be more challenging. But the research on this issue was clear: Better processes equal better design. More than half (57 percent) of respondents said internal project management processes “greatly” affect the final creative product; 51 percent noted that their organizations have made project management changes within the last two years.

Following are some of the process-improving tactics survey respondents have seen implemented at their firms:

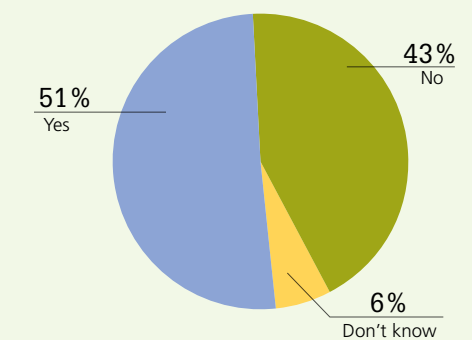
- “We restructured our file-management system, which allows for much greater organization and easier access to archived work.”
- “We had our information technology department build an online ordering, tracking and processing system, which makes the whole process go quicker and gets projects into the designers’ hands sooner.”
- “We hired a traffic coordinator to manage workflow and deadlines. This helps the designers and copywriters focus on their work and not the coordination or administration of the jobs.”
- “We use a more sophisticated scheduling system and built a list of top freelance graphic designers to call on in a pinch.”
- “Our company started engaging the creative team earlier in the product development phase. This keeps everyone informed and invested from the beginning, resulting in lively discussions that lead to a stronger end product.”
- “Better, firmer adherence to scheduling requirements has taken some of the urgency and juggling out of the workload.”
- “We’ve added new project request forms for the client to fill out, a log book for all projects, assigning each a number, and project folders with time sheets to track hours worked on a project and any notes.”
- “We now use an online system to track all progress on projects.”
- “We added a project manager, which reduces the time designers have to spend on the phone getting quotes and updating the production schedule.”
- “We ensure that all projects are based on clear creative briefs with clearly stated objectives.”

“To what extent do you think internal project management processes affect the final creative output?”



Source: The Creative Group survey of more than 200 winners of Graphic Design USA’s 2007 American In-House Design Awards

“Has your firm made any changes to your internal management processes in the last two years?”



Source: The Creative Group survey of more than 200 winners of Graphic Design USA’s 2007 American In-House Design Awards

## Inside Peek at a Process Playbook

Process really becomes imperative when managing interdepartmental initiatives. Shelley Armstrong knows a thing or two about this topic. Armstrong and her staff must work efficiently with teams from marketing, retail, hardware, software and other areas. She offers her time-tested tips for leading cross-function groups:

### Identify the players

“Define who gets to intervene before you get too far down the road. Identify who the approvers and stakeholders are, and who you will merely keep informed as a courtesy.”

### Establish design principles and metrics for success at the outset

“Set clear goals and design attributes that everyone understands and believes in so that people are marching to the same beat. If something goes offtrack, you simply refer back to those principles.”

### Make project files easy to find

“Keep assets and documents in a central location so everyone can locate the latest and greatest logo at all times.”

### Explain roles and responsibilities

“Make sure everyone understands their role in the process. For major projects, it helps to create a chart with team members’ names and responsibilities, and then send it out, asking people to nominate a substitute if they aren’t willing to accept their roles.”

### Provide status updates

“Communication is most important. When things change, make sure all appropriate persons are notified. Also, put a master schedule together so you can see the relationship between your deadlines and everyone else’s.”

# Brief Benefits

The design brief is a key resource in your process tool kit, reducing client indecisiveness, “scope creep” and an endless parade of revisions. Perhaps more important, it allows you to be a strategic partner and substantiate your solutions once a project is complete. But according to our survey, there is a disconnect between the perceived value and actual use of creative briefs among in-house design teams. Roughly seven out of 10 respondents said creative briefs help produce the best results, yet four out of 10 said creative briefs aren’t used at their companies. And therein lies the problem.

Brian Edlefson, lead graphic designer at Whirlpool, says creative briefs are absolutely essential. “In every instance that I have tried to skip the brief to save time or hassle, it has resulted in ambiguity and design-by-committee,” says Edlefson, who also has worked at Target, Herman Miller and The Museum of Modern Art. “Briefs are critical in evaluating your results and clarifying the initial problem and project scope. The most critical part of any brief is a simple list of business objectives followed by design strategies that meet those objectives.”

Glenn Arnowitz concurs. “Develop a design brief and be sure to outline project goals and objectives, the target audience, budget considerations and a schedule for completing each phase of the project,” he says. “This serves as a contract between designer and client, as well as an essential point of reference. The time you spend upfront will save you unnecessary revisions in the end.”

Emily Cohen, a consultant to creative professionals with more than 20 years of experience under her belt, shared some additional tips to ease the process:

## Make it a collaborative effort

“Most designers either are given creative briefs by their clients or write them on their own, but they have to be developed collaboratively. If you’re given a creative brief, you’re not going to digest and absorb the information; and if you try to create it on your own, there’s a good chance you’re not going to deliver what the client wants. Without both parties involved in this process, miscommunication and misunderstandings are likely to arise.”

## Sell the creative brief as part of your process

“If your client knows about the brief in advance, he or she will allow time in his or her schedule for it. Include a description of what the creative brief is and its purpose as a deliverable during the planning phase.”

## Avoid templates

“If the content or categories in a design brief are formulaic or redundant, it’s a good sign that it wasn’t carefully considered or researched. You never want to use a template to create a design brief; it should be customized to the client and written in your own voice.”

## Watch for red flags

“Unreasonable expectations, schedules or budgets should raise concern. No creative brief should try to solve 50 business objectives. In fact, overpromising and underdelivering is a huge mistake designers often make. It’s far better to underpromise and overdeliver.”

## Always record return on investment (ROI)

“A creative brief is a great opportunity to determine ROI, a term clients love but designers hate because it’s hard to measure. But if designers ask clients the right questions, they can gather great information, testimonials and case studies to add to their resumes. Clients also can use this information as proof of the project’s success and, thus, better define the value of their contributions and defend themselves to management.”

# Conclusion

There are many gratifying aspects of working in-house. In fact, more than half of those surveyed felt in-house jobs were more attractive than agency jobs. As one respondent put it: “In-house positions can be a great way to learn and grow.” Another respondent said, “The parameters of the corporate world are not limits — they’re just boundaries. Within those boundaries, you’re free to re-create the wheel.”

Whatever “wheels” you and your team revamp and retool, we hope the tactics in this guide help you do so effectively while having fun in the process. Without question, in-house teams produce outstanding work. *Graphic Design USA’s* in-house award winners are a testament to the fact. Although it’s never easy to get a team of “cats” moving in the same direction, when they are in synch, excellent creative work is born, benefiting the team that created it, the business it was designed for and the creative profession as a whole.

## List of Experts

The Creative Group would like to thank the following people for contributing to *In-Spired!*:

- Shelley Armstrong, Interaction Design Manager, Microsoft
- Glenn John Arnowitz, Director of Corporate Graphics, Wyeth, and Co-founder of InSource ([www.in-source.org](http://www.in-source.org))
- Ann Brenner, Art Director, Healthy Advice Networks
- Emily Cohen, Consultant to Creative Professionals, [www.emilycohen.com](http://www.emilycohen.com)
- Brian J. Edlefson, Lead Graphic Designer, Whirlpool Corp.
- Sam Harrison, Creativity Speaker, Coach and Author, [www.zingzone.com](http://www.zingzone.com)
- Gordon Kaye, Publisher, *Graphic Design USA*, [www.gdusa.com](http://www.gdusa.com)

## About The Creative Group

The Creative Group specializes in placing highly skilled creative, advertising, marketing and web professionals with a variety of firms. We represent Flash and InDesign experts, brand managers, multimedia strategists, communications specialists and more. Firms that work with us know they will be matched with professionals who have been evaluated using TalentMatch™, our proprietary evaluation process that includes a personal interview and skills testing. Businesses also appreciate that our staffing team members typically have marketing and creative backgrounds. In fact, many of our account managers have won design competitions and marketing awards. This experience helps our teams recognize creative talent and place these professionals on suitable assignments. For more information or help addressing your staffing needs, please call **1.888.846.1668** for the office nearest you or visit us at [www.creativegroup.com](http://www.creativegroup.com).





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