



Nick Prescott of Style Within Ltd

Straighten your briefs and prepare for action

Nick Prescott of Style Within Limited considers a key factor for successful home improvement

The kids have grown up. Your décor is dated. You have had a really *good* look at your mix of furniture, fabrics, and fittings acquired over the past twenty years; adorned with treasured souvenirs from Aunt Bessie's coach trips to Margate.

Sound reasons to make a change, we'd say, but where do you start? Whatever you do, don't jump straight in. Spend time on the one thing for which you are totally responsible: your brief. Afford yourself time to think when there's no pressure; no plaster-covered builder bearing sharp tools and seeking an instant decision. Your brief is your requirement – brief well, plan well, and chill... for a while.

You see: proceeding too far on an immature brief sets you on a path of obscurity and risk. Cost and time overruns abound. Several of our clients openly admit to not having the time to ask themselves basic questions like:

"What do we want to do in this room?"; "Where do we really want the lights?"; "Must we have crinkly, white radiators?" They know the budget available, but are unsure of their priorities. They use our briefing questionnaires to stop, think and question what it is they really want, prompting practical thoughts over a cup of tea, and afterwards if need be. A complete re-think within 30 minutes is not uncommon as, for the first time, focussed discussion identifies shortcomings with initial aspirations, and advantages with attractive alternatives. Better to discover that now than when the builders are hacking through walls (which happens!)

Good so far; your brief is sufficiently mature; you engage contractors. Assuming you've chosen well, they interpret your

brief clearly and you validate their detailed specification. Check beyond the obvious to details like light switches and socket finishes. Have they made sufficient provision for power points? What colour is the new kitchen work surface, and have they provided a sample? There is a lot to think about, and attention to detail can mean the difference between a good job and an amazing job. Re-tune your brief accordingly; it continues to evolve...

Ask yourself whether you have been offered the right level of choice: sometimes, too much choice is a distraction, but there is a hidden market of spectacular products of which, I suspect, many of you are not aware. Being busy folks without time to visit exhibitions, read the glossies and consult with the trade, you may not get to experience this

other world; but if you're making a change, this really is a chance to treat your home and yourself to something truly special ("because you're worth it", to coin a phrase). Sure, the high street offers choice; but amazing, ceiling-hung fireplaces and quality loudspeakers sporting your favourite images, suggest what you might be missing. Professionals are keen to share this intelligence with you. We have certainly been glad to introduce clients to products that otherwise would have passed them by. They are indeed more exclusive but, curiously, not necessarily more expensive. Do you want yourselves and your friends to really notice the difference at the end of this job? 'Course you do! So look around; there's some amazing stuff out there. Re-tune your brief again; sounds like it's still not finished...

Have you been advised of other

opportunities? Not the contractor 'trying it on', no, no; we mean the identification of sensible, additional tasks that save you time, money and further upheaval: for instance, while the carpet is up, could you afford to change the lights in the ceiling below? When re-plastering the wall, would you want to future-proof the design for a new home media system? Some good ideas here perhaps? Re-tune your brief again...

Of course, the beauty of all this is that you continue to make these choices and alter your brief without pressure, before any specification is finalised or work started. Perhaps with a little assistance, you have retained complete control with time to think. You have made conscious decisions to do, or not to do something, and not missed any golden opportunities. It would cost a lot more, with higher risk of error, if such judgements were being made on the hoof.

So ladies, gentlemen, and little folk – get your briefs straight, and take a longer-term, complete view of what you're trying to achieve. Some clients prefer to keep the briefing, specification and project management channelled through, say, a professional interior designer; others like to do it largely themselves. Either way, with a sound brief, you're well-placed for a successful project. You'll have wonderful results to show off to envious friends, and live happily ever after, like a princess in a fully-briefed interior design fairy tale.

Merry Christmas. □

Nick Prescott is chief designer at Style Within Limited, creating stylish, practical interiors to delight, enjoy and add value to your home.

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