From time to time, someone will call asking if I have any designs lying around that might fit whatever project they have going. This always shows a curious and entirely misguided notion that designers spend all day doodling for no particular reason, and carry a stockpile of sketches ready to fit any occasion. It also shows a reluctance to pay for any of the development work.

There may indeed, be the odd recluse who develops his ideas in isolation, and then peddles them to the first receptive manufacturer, but for most of us, nothing could be further from the truth. Whether producing designs for manufacture, or simply magazine illustrations, creativity is usually performed to order.

The extent and clarity of the instructions given differs wildly from one situation to the next, and the amount of freedom a designer has varies accordingly. Too detailed a brief can restrict a designer’s creativity, and cut off any alternative ways of thinking not previously considered. On the other hand, if the brief is too brief, as it were, then there’s a danger the project might head off in the wrong direction.

At one time I had an ongoing contract with a Taiwanese scooter manufacturer, whose brief would consist of just two words, the second invariably being “-scooter.” Usually, no further clarification was given. Neither was any feedback, unfortunately, which meant it became impossible to judge whether the material submitted was successful or not. The subtle nuances that differentiated one project from the next were difficult to decipher too, so it was left to me to figure out how the latest “Sports-scooter” should differ from the “Sporty-scooter” and “Sporting-scooter” projects completed earlier.

In many such cases, the lack of clear information covers an absence of product strategy, which in some countries can seem redundant anyway. In Taiwan, it appears that any new scooter sells well for a while, almost irrespective of what it is or how well it’s executed, so companies have been at a loss to give a precise direction for future projects.

Of course, if a company doesn’t really know what it wants, it’s best to keep the requirements as concise as possible to allow the designer to propose the widest possible range of solutions. But even when the direction has been accurately defined, the Japanese prefer to use a key word or phrase to reflect the spirit of the product, and leave the maximum possible freedom for interpretation. This works well, providing the key word is clear and accurate. With Japanese manufacturers, it usually is, and the expression “King of the mountain road” was clear enough as a brief for the TDM850. The Chinese haven’t quite got the hang of it though, and “Clear as a mountain stream, fresh as the morning dew” doesn’t have the same level of conciseness. Nor does it summarize a smoky, urban two-stroke particularly well.

Western managers have a tendency to do exactly the opposite, by handing out epic documents with precise instructions, all backed up with lengthy research data before a project is started. Unfortunately, this can sometimes hide the fact that they don’t really know what they want either, but feel it compromises their position to admit it. In many cases, they simply want what their competitors already have, and may work backwards from that answer to come up with the question, suitably padded out to appear original. However, the danger in following any model that already exists is that the product may be out of date by the time it reaches production. Once again, honesty is the best policy, and to be handed a photo of a rival product, and asked to produce “something along those lines” can say more than a thousand words of text. More importantly, it leaves the designer sufficient flexibility to approach the brief in a wider context, and come up with something original.

And this is the crux of the matter. A solution can only be as good as the brief, although the ability to write one varies wildly. Good managers will allow for creativity by leaving the initial brief as open as possible, while ensuring the aims are clearly defined and expressed. Larger design studios often allocate time for self-generated projects, allowing designers to come up with their own. That’s perhaps where designers have the most to offer—after all, if imagination is restricted right at the beginning, it will have little chance to flourish later on.