

Strategy: The debate rages on

 By Jessica Barrett

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To call this a rebuttal may be overly dramatic, and perhaps rather one should see it simply as a call for a friendly debate. Just over a week ago an article was published: ["The secrets no advertising strategist will tell you"](#), which caused a flurry of conversation amongst the strategy team at VML SA.



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The title itself, like any good click-bait listicle, made us all pause whatever it was we were doing at the time. It had done its job. It had our attention and eagerly we rushed through the introduction to get to secret number one.

Speaking for the team here, the expectation was to read nine astute, relatable and true points. An expose', a magician revealing the secrets of his art. Rather, what we read was a subjective opinion based very much on the author's own experience.

There were those of us who agreed with this opinion and those of us who did not. While it surfaced a few fence-sitters, the majority of us were polarised. It had done its job. It had got us talking and introspecting on what it truly means to be a strategist. It had also got us thinking about who else would be keenly clicking through; perhaps not with as much vigour, but surely those in other disciplines within agency, and worryingly, clients.

What would they make of it? And would they take this opinion as gospel and representative of each individual strategist within the industry? Would it cause them to think less of strategy or shrink strategy budgets?

What value do strategists bring to the table?

With diminishing marketing budgets, the author has certainly written a timely and topical article. With clients evaluating inputs and outputs, strategy may seem very much like a luxury and not a prerequisite to a valuable execution.

When creative is ultimately the thing that sees the light of day, a marketer grappling with budget constraints might be tempted to sacrifice the seemingly less glamorous inputs to the final product. Because of this, I believe it is so important to understand what strategists do and the value they bring to the agency they work in and the clients they service.

When I was studying, a professor asked the class, 'What is the most important job that a strategist does?' We threw out ideas and suggestions, all valid, but not the answer he was looking for. His answer:

“ They need to make decisions. ”

This puts a lot of pressure on one person, and it was a weight I carried all through my junior years, concerned that the only value I could bring to the table was the ability to make decisions; something I was certainly not able to do during the onset of my career.

Luckily over the years that weight fell away as I began to understand that decisions are only as powerful as the input and insight that guides them. So today if someone were to ask me, 'What is the most important job that a strategist does?', I would confidently reply, 'They give perspective'.

We need perspective to disrupt

They give perspective on clients' objectives and they give perspective on human needs; creating the launchpad for powerful ideas that solve real client problems.

And now more than ever we need perspective to disrupt and break through the clutter and offer something to consumers that mean something to them.

Consumers will not act purely because they have seen an ad one hundred times; frequency may lead to recall and annoyance, but not resonance.

Underestimating a consumer's intelligence is a trap that all strategists have a responsibility to guide their teams away from.

If we understand that the core role of a strategist is to offer up perspective, then the idea that experience breeds good strategy comes under question. Experience may help us dot our i's and cross our t's, but perspective is something that someone can come into an agency with from day one.

Diversity and diverse thinking

And more than state that this could be true, I absolutely urge agencies to live by this as diversity and diverse thinking is what will ultimately lead to good and powerful ideas.

Strategy bridges the gap between marketing and creative, a vital role when you understand that a brief needs clarity and an idea needs a launchpad.

Strategy is not something that can or should be done quickly and then passed on to creative. It is ongoing and it is collaborative. We would be doing ourselves a disservice if we were to think of strategists and creatives as points along an assembly line.

Finally, a good strategist will know the difference between brand purpose and purpose-led emotive ideas. Every brand needs a purpose and sometimes this purpose operates on a cultural wavelength and looks to right the wrongs in the society it lives within.

But sometimes this purpose is less grandiose and operates purely within the confines of a simple mission to 'sell more'. But if a brand does not have a reason to exist beyond its output, it's not really a brand.

While I urge all strategists to remain humble, there is no reason to be self-deprecating or minimise the value that we bring to the agency collective.

ABOUT JESSICA BARRETT

Jessica is an experienced digital strategist having worked across multiple brands within FMCG, Banking and Parastatal sectors. Jessica has a keen interest in technology and human behaviour and more notably, understanding how the two things influence each other.

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