

Semiotics and the shift to 'strategic design': A sign of the times

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In an increasingly interconnected and integrated world, the disciplines of strategic planning and brand design are simultaneously shifting and converging in ways that we, as an industry, have never seen before. At the same time, as brands dig deeper and deeper to define their role or purpose in the marketplace, consumers are also seeking greater meaning amidst the commercial clutter that characterises today's media landscape.



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To this end, we are rapidly moving towards a new paradigm that I like to call 'strategic design'; in other words, design rooted in a semiotic approach. Using this approach ensures that a brand's purpose is always 'strategically designed' to inform all elements of its identity and creative expression, thereby building greater meaning (through relevant and carefully considered signs, symbols and other brand cues) at every consumer interface. In many respects, this shift – from purely aesthetic design to strategic design – has become a true sign of the times we live in.

Today, a brand's strategy is no longer simply its internal blueprint, and design is no longer solely limited to a brand's external, visual manifestation. The time has come for strategists and designers to stop thinking (and acting) in silos. The lines between the two disciplines are blurring. In many respects, they have become both reciprocal and ubiquitously connected in order to address the many challenges facing our industry right now.

Creativity with true strategic purpose

This is why I advocate the philosophy of 'strategic design'; not only does it allow one to determine the short-term imperatives and direction of a brand, but it also helps to cement the brand's core purpose and long-term equities. At every step of this journey of discovery, both strategists and designers should challenge themselves with a series of strategic and creative decisions, where each choice is considered and deliberate. In addition, as brand custodians, we need to ensure that collaboration between strategy and design is infused into our ways of working. This should be done because strategically-led design has been shown to play a substantial role in a brand's journey towards growth.

Gone are the days of pursuing creativity for creativity's sake alone. Taking our cue from the field of semiotics, we need to recognise the importance of building meaning into everything we develop, both strategically and creatively. It is evident that today's consumers are resonating with brands that go beyond the superficial, while clients are pushing for creativity with greater depth – creativity with true strategic purpose. As evidence of this, strategists are now also expected to think more laterally and creatively in designing their strategic plans, while designers are expected to think and act more strategically in response to clients who are more sensitive to their creative return on investment.

I believe that strategy and design are, essentially, two sides of the same coin; each being vital to a brand's success. It has been said that design without a strategic basis is purely art, while strategy without design is simply theoretical. However, when a solid strategy meets outstanding design, the outcome is exponential brand leverage and growth.

ABOUT MIKE DOS SANTOS

Michael graduated with B.A. Honours in Marketing Communication (cum laude) and started his career as a marketing and research assistant before moving into Strategic Planning at Grey Johannesburg. With a keen attention to detail and experience across the marketing communication spectrum, Michael continues to be inspired by the dynamic world of brands and branding. Mike now works as a Strategic Director at Shift Joe Public.

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