

Five skills you need to be a strategist

 By [Mike dos Santos](#)

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We keep a low profile at The Strategy Department, preferring to help our clients shine. But there are some trade secrets we can share. Here are some insights from our team about what unexpected skills it takes to be a strategist.



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People in the industry often view the strategist and the creative as different animals. However, spend enough time with both of these individuals and you will come to realise that there are actually more traits that they have in common than there are things that divide them. For one, being a good strategist requires a strong dose of creative thinking and ability; it is not only a game of numbers, graphs and death by PowerPoint!

You need to be capable of thinking in terms of new and inspiring ideas. You need to have an inquiring mind, almost childlike in nature. You need to be able to hone in on specific parts of the picture. You need the proficiency to see the world through the eyes of a diverse range of target groups and understand their varying frames of reference. And above all, you need to be ardent and fearless in selling your work - bearing in mind that regardless of how seamless and logical a particular approach might seem, strategy (as with creativity) is still, essentially, a subjective science. And there is never only one route that can be followed in answering the client's brief.

Let's examine each of these strategic skills in turn.

1: Analytical and conceptual

The best strategists tend to be both analytical and conceptual. On the one hand, it is the strategist's job to examine and understand the client's business scenario and marketing objectives, the competitive landscape, relevant consumer insights and key challenges - investigating and analysing evidence from multiple sources to help build a coherent argument for the strategic way forward. This is the systematic side to strategy, which postulates a reasoned solution to the task at hand. So because Consumer X thinks Y and not Z, the best way to reach Objective A is to communicate B and C about the brand.

However, to be purely analytical as a strategist is to miss out on the "magic" of strategy: its ability to captivate the client and inspire outstanding creative work. So as much as the best creative output is usually underpinned by a strong strategic

foundation, it is also true to say that the most compelling strategic plans tend to be creative in their approach. This ability to wear two hats and be "strative" (i.e. both strategic and creative), to "see" things that logic alone might miss and to tell a good story that appeals to both reason and emotion, is what separates a good strategist from a great one.

2: Be curious

The basis of strategy is understanding. And understanding is the result of inquisition. For this reason, strategists seek out not only to understand the WHO, to determine the WHAT and ultimately the WHERE, WHEN and HOW - but always to explore and probe the WHY: the motivations, the reasons, the conundrums. Why do consumers think or behave in a certain way? Why is the competition faring better in the marketplace? Why has the brand failed to reach its full potential? Why is the communication not resonating? And so on.

It is this incessant (bordering on obsessive) curiosity that captures the essence of effective strategic planning. Without proper insight, we run the risk of oversight and there can be no foresight. This is also one of the reasons why a strategist's job is never truly complete (even after the strategy has been signed off), as circumstances change, brands and consumers evolve and there is always room to interrogate even the most well thought out plan. As strategists, we need to keep asking the difficult questions. So while curiosity may have killed the cat, a lack of curiosity is bound to kill the strategist! When we stop interrogating, we stop learning, we stop comprehending and we stop growing.

3: Detail-orientated yet discerning

As the cliché states, the devil is in the details. This is especially true for strategists, since a fair chunk of our time on any project is spent addressing the intricacies and finer points - whether in terms of conducting research, analysing the facts, evidence and insights or compiling the actual proposal. However, it is very easy to get bogged down in "analysis paralysis" as a strategist, or to cross the fine line between writing a strategy that is solid and watertight as opposed to one that is too exhaustive, too executional or too tactical.

Against this backdrop, the true value of strategy lies in its ability to capture the so-called "bigger picture" for the client and the creative team - to provide pertinent and concise direction that inspires, while still leaving something to the imagination. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the "right" details when compiling a strategy. Ironically, less detail often makes for a stronger, more workable plan. This ability to be selective and brutal when choosing the most salient points around which to build a particular story is something that many strategists take years to develop. It is thus that strategy may be thought of as the art of sifting through the clutter, picking the gems and using these to create a mosaic - a picture that is detailed, yet clear and commanding in its simplicity.

4. Adaptable

This is an important one: adaptability. Our clients could be anyone from any industry and therefore we need to know their business almost as well as they do - and sometimes even better! We need to be able to demonstrate to the client that we are not only a supplier, but a valuable part of their business or marketing team as well. In effect, strategists need to be able to live in the world of the agency as well as the world of the corporate. Coupled with this, we also need to show an understanding of our clients' customers. This requires not only research, but also the imagination and empathy to be able to put oneself in the shoes of a consumer who is often very far removed from one's own personal reality.

Incidentally, the most innovative strategies are often the result of being challenged to step out of one's comfort zone, for this is where the aforementioned value of creative thinking - specifically in terms of being able to see things from a fresh perspective - comes into play. It is for this very reason, for instance, that male strategists are frequently assigned to female-oriented brands and vice versa. The mark of a true strategist is the ability to switch seamlessly from one brand or product category to another, learning to become not only a "jack of all trades" but a veritable master of all of them as well.

5: Courageous

Talented strategists all have one thing in common: the courage of their convictions. This includes being able to sell one's work in the most engaging and successful way possible. Even the most seasoned strategists agree that it can be scary to present a new idea and convince a client that it is "right" for their brand. As noted, strategy is largely subjective and there is always more than one path that can be taken. And very often, the "big idea" is a product of the strategist's intuition. Thus, it is vital to be able to present with passion and belief in the merits of the particular strategic direction that has been pursued. While this undoubtedly comes easier to certain people and personality types than others, it is nonetheless a skill that any strategist can refine and perfect through experience.

In closing, Cynthia Montgomery (author of the acclaimed 2012 book aptly titled *The Strategist*) accurately sums up the various core aptitudes required of a strategist, as well as the idea that strategic thinking, in itself, is an ability cultivated over time: *"It takes time to develop the skills and sensibilities of a strategist. Part of it is 'science' - straight-up analytical ability, but a lot of it is judgment, a lot of it is 'feel'. Being a strategist is a way of seeing, a way of thinking, a way of acting. One learns to do it well through practice."*

ABOUT MIKE DOS SANTOS

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