Strategy the problem, creative the solution

By Brad Dessington   23 Mar 2011

Let's take a look at the paradigm of generating strategy through a new breed of strategist and the way they approach ideas.

Let me step back some four years or so ago. I'm sitting in a chair in SAfm's studio on the receiving end of the mic with Jeremy Maggs. An interview which turned out to be an entirely different topic to what I thought I was there for. Prep notes? Dustbin. After the couple of jitters in my voice pass in the first minute, I cotton on to the fact that we're talking about a particular topic of decision-making by marketers and how strategy affects decision-making in the boardroom.

Towards the end of the interview, Maggs hits me with a generic but very well-timed question: "Customers don't know what they want, do they?"

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Now the simple way out of the tricky explanation is to say, "No they don't, I'm here to sell them what they WILL want," but I oppose with, "They do know what they want." [Enter Michael Flatley, radio tap dancer]

I didn't disagree for the sake of it; I did it because I believe in something, that customers innately do know what they want. Our job as strategists is to explore that and articulate that deep-seated want. Unfortunately, it'll take the next couple of years to articulate that feeling.

Solutions require a problem

Defining, sculpting and crafting creative solutions require one key thing: a problem. Not an obvious challenge, not a regurgitation of "reasons to believe" nor proof points but a real problem waiting for a new solution. That part of advertising strategy is coming to a close - well, if you believe in giving creative the best chance to truly break the so-called humdrum communication we face every day.

So, to get to a breakthrough solution you need to unleash *creative*. To do this you need a new breed of *strategist* who generates momentous ideas, not just defines quantitatively generated insight.

There seems to be a particular breed of strategists these days, individuals who get the minute analytical detail 110% correct, so that creative has the most comprehensive rules of engagement to an idea - which becomes the oxymoron for creative thinking. Here's your precisely defined limitations; now think out of the box.

My opinion is that a strategist worth his or her salt needs to take on the responsibility of being a key ingredient in the resulting solution. He or she need to be the identifier of the meta issues, the problems that exist - outside of the brief or demographic data, before creative (and I use that term broadly outside of defined agency roles) can develop the solution.

Over and above the brief

Strategists need to generate ideas, to define the inherent problem, over and above the brief - it's only up there where real change gets made or instigated.

All great inventions and ideas come from the definition of a problem first, whether it's distance and time between communication (telephone), closing the digital and social divide (Facebook), or moving out of brand canvassing in sponsorship to truly tangible brand experiences (Vodacom - Player 23). Problems exist in the smallest brief to mass brand campaigns, even in the ad agency reality of selling "product".

So, if strategy can truly find that problem, not available on a quantitative report, then creative has a universe of possibilities for an inherent problem.

But back to my interview with Maggs: "Customers do know what they want." They do; the problem simply has not been defined for them, and the creative solution, solved.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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