

Strategy - The holy grail of marketing communications

By  Thamsanqa Malinga

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Hands up if you have come across the phrase 'develop a marketing or communications strategy for the company' as one, if not the first, output in a job description or client brief.

If my intuition is correct then every IMC (Integrated Marketing Communications) specialist reading this is now going '*Aha, this sounds familiar, let's see where he's going with this*'.



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Strategy campaign

I personally have never come across a job advert, description or even a brief that talks about the need for a marketing and communications strategy. I believe that we should rather ask if the company or client actually knows what it is that it wants.

I had the pleasure (or not) of being asked for a strategy at every turn in my career. When I started in this field my *modus operandi* would be to just sit and observe things and then lock myself into a room and type page after page of what I think needed to be done. I would embark on the proverbial SWOT analysis and dream up ideas. I was young and I saw possibility in everything. I just needed the budget and I would put the plan into action.

After submitting a nicely bound, thick document that I thought was my best work ever I would be told:

'This and that cannot happen.'

'We do not want this.'

'We are not ready to venture into that.'

At the end of the presentation, the dreaded: *'Last year we did this and that, kindly look into doing that again.'* Aaaaaaargh! Then what did you get me in here for?

Development of strategy

More than a decade in this fraternity I thought I have seen and heard it all. The same things I experienced when my career was in its infancy are still here even now. The monster under the bed, the revered strategy - MarComms' Holy Grail, is just not going away!

Now you sit with the client, employer or the department that wants the evasive strategy, and you talk to them, and get to journey with them on the 'development of the strategy', complete with flip chart stands, coloured board markers and post-it notes parked all over the place (not forgetting catering in-between breaks and the chit-chat about what we can do).

This is high level, just what is 'needed'. The outcome you ask?

'Well last year we did this and that....'

At times in these strategy sessions you can't help it but stand there observing the debate raging across all sides of the table and silently think '*gosh, they don't even know what they want*'.

After all the boardroom debates and ideas, a resolution would be '*let's find an external provider to come in and help us do the strategy*'. Now this I have come to love, it saves me the internal meetings, the long coffee-induced nights drafting plans and drawing up budgets.

By show of hands, let's see all the consultants reading this who've been called at the last minute to help save the day. I love

you guys. I honestly do.

External consultants

All we've been saying as internal specialists and all the budgets we've been requesting and were declined or halved, you guys just get it for us without pulling a muscle. You see, in this line of work, for some weird reason, external consultants are the ones regarded as 'experts' (the reason being that in-house we have lots of specialists). Even those who used to do comms for their uncle's corner shop and they love the word...wait for it...'strategy'.

So, for all the sleepless nights I have endured and the throngs of paper I have churned out. For all the brainstorm sessions, the debates, and all the presentations, I have come to one conclusion:

All those who seek that elusive marketing and communications strategy wouldn't recognise it even if it came jumping out of the flipchart and did a moonwalk on the table.

ABOUT THAMSANQA MALINGA

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