

Creative strategy - a contradiction in terms?

By [Nick Warren](#), issued by [Mann Made](#)

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Creative strategy is like conceptual architecture; it underpins the direction of a campaign, provides form, shape and function to an idea, and offers a blueprint for execution.

When I worked as a copywriter in advertising, the strategist was an important - if sometimes frustrating - member of the team.

My art director and I would listen to a brief and allow that accidental collision of conceptual collateral spin around in our brains like so many diamonds and pearls in a mixer. All the while waiting impatiently for the suits to leave so we could 'crack' the concept.

But more often than not, the strategist would then pipe up and - with a flick of his tie or her cravat - share a series of market insights and brand associations and research findings and competitor landscapes and then even - horror of horrors - a couple of potential creative avenues that might be worth exploring.

The point I learned about strategy - good strategy - is that it can be very creative. Good strategy can open up whole new vistas of possibilities, each bolstered by the cautious probabilities of target market and media insights.

That's all good PR for strategy, but can creative be strategic? I think it can. In fact, increasingly I think it has to be.

If you spend enough time listening to rubbish radio ads, suffering bad billboards, poor print ads, and terrible TV commercials then you will soon recognise the empty ring of hollow creative.

There used to be a saying in radio advertising, "If you have nothing to say, sing it." A lot of empty creative communications today seem to be saying, "If you've got nothing to say, spell it out."

These hollow howlings can be an insult to intelligence, a bewildering barrage of visual baloney, or the sledgehammer slaughter of creative integrity. But either way, when you see it, you will know it. There is something not quite right. Something is missing.

A concept without a creative strategy is like a Canadian action movie - it can sometimes be quite good, but it can never be quite satisfying.

The same applies - even more so perhaps because the time we demand of our audiences - to events and productions in the experiential space.

Here - where we have an audience in a place where we can lock the doors and kill the lights - a strategically sound creative concept becomes even more critical.

Experiential is where we can promise an audience 'a delightful journey of discovery', only to deliver 'a torturous stumble through a conceptual vacuum' if there is no creative strategy guiding the way.

A creative's first impulse is to discover brand new territory. A strategist seeks to know the terrain and plan the route. Without each discipline a great communication can get lost, or get nowhere.

For example, when we recently launched the BMW sponsorship of Springbok Rugby team our creative strategy was to put

our audience in the boots of a Springbok player and parallel the thrill of running into a packed stadium with the thrill of driving a BMW. The creative concept for this event, "Tar to Turf" contained the strategy but projected the promise with much more emotional force.

When Telkom Business invited us to launch their Mobile offering our creative strategy was to focus on the unique strengths of their fixed line infrastructure as a powerful and reliable anchoring point for the newly converged mobile services. The experiential elements that we built around this strategy only really started to fly when we came up with the concept of "Fixed Line, Infinite Mobility".

And when we produced a conference for 1500 managers at Standard Bank our creative strategy centred on the fact that they have been in operation for 150 years. Once again the creative theme, "from Steam Train to Gautrain", did a better job of turning that potentially dry historical milestone into a compelling experiential event.

So, if you don't have a creative strategy guiding your next campaign or experiential communication, then you might have something missing in your thinking. You might find yourself locked inside a darkened room, with an audience that feels somehow... empty.

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Nick Warren is creative director at Mann Made Media, Experiential Brand Agency.

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