

COLUMNS

How I blended strategy with creative

May 12, 2023



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I have been a creative leader for national brands for most of my career, but it was not until my time at Ulta that creative was combined with strategy and I could really thrive.

Before Ulta, I was a bit of an "ugly duckling." I had design training, but I also had a natural curiosity for marketing strategy and a knack for analytics.

Despite my eagerness to grow, I often had to fight to get a seat at the table with strategy and execution, and was usually stuck on an island off to the side. I built marketing skills, but was not empowered to contribute to creative and strategy.

Broader skillset

Leadership at Ulta changed all that, supporting me and honing my marketing skills so that I could use insights and measurement to ensure that my output was aligned with company goals.

Because of my crossover skills, our marketing results improved, and I was more invested in my job and the company's success.

My experience at Ulta is unfortunately pretty rare.

Creative and marketers who could be working more closely together and learning how to combine forces are usually kept at a distance.

While marketing is starting to embrace data in new ways, creative is often last to the party. And even those visionary marketing leaders who are looking for data-driven creative talent are unlikely to find it.

Not a lot of creatives learn about marketing, and not a lot of marketers learn about design. What is worse, those who do know, do not always find a place to use their broader skillset.

The good news is that it is possible for both sides to learn on the job, if the right elements are in place.

It is also possible to reconfigure roles and responsibilities to empower cross-over people such as me.

Marketers need to start by hiring people who want to learn things outside of their current area of expertise. Then teams need to be empowered to ask smart and stupid questions, and everyone needs to be invested in the broader outcome.

Hiring and managing with vision

I am seeing more marketing teams post jobs for creative analytics and other new hybrids of design and strategy.

Faced with very few professionals that check all the boxes, I encourage managers to open their search up to people like me.

On paper, going into my Ulta interview, I was a creative leader. But I am a curious person and not only had marketing experience, I also had marketing aptitude and experience from previous jobs that many hiring managers dismissed.

In the hiring and interview process, managers should challenge people to stretch outside of their area of expertise.

The creative people who lean in are going to be more flexible and more likely to gel in an environment where they need to use data and measurement to inform their work.

On the flip side, marketers who are willing to gain insight from a designer will be better at building a successful campaign.

In addition to hiring more flexible people there are also ways to improve daily processes. It is generally a best practice to involve all team members in planning sessions, but often in our complex reality, people are under-informed and do not know which questions to ask. Managers need to spend the time educating teams.

At Ulta, I was lucky to have a manager who let me stretch across traditional boundaries and build upon more of the skills I had picked up in previous roles.

It would be surprising to many marketers how little people know about other parts of the same business.

I recommend giving "101" training to get creatives up to speed on everything, from the company's products and services, to marketing strategies and tactics.

A creative might not even know what a "KPI" is, let alone understand that companies have a number of different ones. FYI: it is key performance indicators, but you would already know that being in this business.

Similarly, marketers may think they know what looks good, or what they want in a design, but could benefit from learning design and copywriting principles.

Understanding why creatives do what they do can help with collaboration.

Create a new way to communicate

There are a few key places where communication could be improved between creatives and the rest of the marketing team.

It starts with the briefing process. Assuming managers get their creatives trained on "marketing speak," the next step is to involve creatives early and often, and encourage them to ask questions to get the brief in shape for success.

I am not a big fan of briefs that list a target audience as "current and future clients" this is way too general, and really common.

I want to know their personas, motivations, what they like about the product or what their hesitation might be.

I also want to know more about the goals. If a brief has a goal of "driving sales," I realize that I probably need a call to action, but it is not helping me set the right tone.

If there is context like "get fashion-forward people excited to purchase products from our new spring line while it is still cold outside" I can make something much more relevant.

If success starts with a good brief, it definitely ends with measurement and insights.

So often, creatives think their work is done once a marketer accepts their design.

For the marketer, this is still the very beginning of a campaign. They still need to run the campaign, optimize and test. Few creatives get to know how the creative performed.

Now that there is creative data available, not just campaign performance data, creatives can be part of the data

feedback loop, and iterate throughout the campaign, and learn what to do differently next time.

Managers should make creatives accountable, but also train them on reporting so they can become empowered. This was possibly the best part of my experience at Ulta.

I worked on Ulta's social media channel, which moved extremely quickly. I would design something, test it and see how I could change it using creative performance data and campaign performance data.

Empowering me to create, test and iterate made Ulta's social media super responsive, and really successful.

This same process could be just as valuable in other channels such as email or even print.

There was a print circular that marketers designed at one brand for which I worked, with little creative input because they needed to crank it out every week and did not have time to write up a big brief and wait for a mock-up.

It was a shame the brand's department did not have a manager like mine. With an empowered creative on their team, they could have still moved quickly, but boosted their performance with design and copy expertise.

I AM CONFIDENT that we are getting closer to a reality where creatives come to an interview with business skills, and marketers have design expertise.

In the meantime, my experience shows that there are a lot of ways to improve things before that happens.

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