

# A conversation about strategy, ad agencies and the role of strategists inside ad agencies

 By [Bogosi Motshegwa](#)

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It all started with a post on LinkedIn where I was sharing my opinion on the role of strategy in ad agencies, and a conversation between myself and Gidon Orelowitz ensued.



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My initial post on LinkedIn:

*“ Strategic planning or strategy or planning in advertising agencies is hugely undervalued. Strategists and their role are underplayed. Which is unfortunate. Strategy is reduced to a strategic platform, which is meant to give life to a creative platform. This is no longer sustainable nor viable for business and brand solutions. If an ad agency is still obsessed with a strategic platform, then they are doing strategy all wrong. #planning #strategicplanning #advertisingagency ”*

Then the conversation took shape as follows:

**Gidon Orelowitz:** *What does a strategic platform mean?*

**Bogosi Motshegwa:** It's a summed-up articulation of where a brand is going strategically, or how it is positioned. It is used to give birth to a creative platform which in turn gives birth to ideas that will be used as adverts to convey a message.

**GO:** *Why is it a bad thing that strategy is reduced to a strategic platform? How else can it be positioned/utilised?*

**BM:** The problem with strategic platforms is that they, by default, can be reduced to just that, and people or creatives only focus on that platform. One could present a 30-slide presentation where each slide, in which in of itself could spring an idea, but people will only focus on the platform. The platform can never encapsulate what a brand needs to do long-term. The problem with platforms is that they serve only one purpose, which is to produce communication ideas, and in today's world, ads alone are not enough to solve business problems. Ad agencies just want to make adverts for every business problem. Therefore platforms limit the possibilities for much more impactful strategically led solutions.

**GO:** *Aha okay brilliant. So, let's say I'm the company and you're the ad agency, how would you make me successful besides for just making an ad? (I'm just trying to understand how strategy can be utilised beyond simply creating a platform for the creative ads).*

**BM:** You'd have to have a problem to solve. The problem should form the basis for the solution required. The problem with agencies is that they are not structured or organised in a way to bring solutions beyond communication and ATL. For almost every problem brought to an agency, the default solution is almost always a TV commercial or a print ad or a social media post or whatever it is that will require services of a production house. I understand because that's how agencies make their money. Agencies are always thinking short-term. Let's play a hypothetical game and you give me a problem to solve, and depending on the type of problem, I may need more time to think about it. Cool?

**GO:** *Okay Let's pretend that I'm African Bank. I want to become the bank with the most branches in South Africa (even rural places). I've identified places that need a bank branch. I've already started building the new branches. I want to now let South Africa know about this new development. What would an ad agency do for me?*

**BM:** An agency would want to create a strategy (by the way, creative will simultaneously start working on a big idea or creative concept already - which defeats the purpose and role of strategy - but that's a story for another day.) First, come up with a communication approach and establish what the key message is. Blah blah blah. That would come from having a very watered-down understanding of consumers or desired target segments, in this case, rural areas.



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The agency will not have time to really understand these consumers and will therefore not immerse themselves with the target group. Problem number one. Secondly, the research may be supplied by the client, detailed or not, and the agency will be required to just come up with a campaign. African Bank has already been repositioned, I think the current pay-off line is "We are you" or something like that. And the campaign effort will need to somehow bring that to life as well. But... my first question as a zero-based strategic planner or brand consulted would be to ask pertinent questions like; do we really need to build branches? I don't know. My first instinct would be to not agree to the idea of branches.



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The problem or challenge that I find with clients is that they don't think about the future. Whilst building a bricks and mortar structure sounds like a long-term game, I'm not quite sure if that thinking is aligned with the future of banking. I'd push African Bank to think about the future of banking and help design the future customer. Brick and mortar in 2018 doesn't sound like a sound investment. Do people really need branches? What's the purpose of building a branch? To acquire new clients or service existing clients? I'm not privy to the company's numbers but I'd be surprised if African Bank has a

substantial number of customers.



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With that said, it sounds like branches will be built and African Bank is just looking for a communication campaign to make noise about the new branches. But my solution would make AB think about reconfiguring their business to meet actual consumer needs. I'm not sure on the list of top 5 consumer needs a branch would feature. As a strategist existing outside of an agency, I'm interested in a solution that actually adds value to people and the bottom line. With the way technology is progressing, regardless of whether you are in rural or urban areas, not sure if physical branches are a thing? We'd have a healthy debate around this.

**GO:** *Wow. What a fantastic answer! As a copywriter (and by extension a 'creative'), it's SO valuable to hear what you just shared. It's actually sad that agencies don't challenge the client to think beyond making just another advert. Is it perhaps just the desire to make money, so the agencies just convince the client to make an ad, knowing full well that there are better solutions to make them successful? So how do you envision the future of strategy and creative teams in agencies (bearing in mind the criticism of the current model)?*

*What I envision, is somewhat similar to your approach to African Bank: A client will come to an agency. Strategy will look at the clients' needs. They will be given time to properly research the best approach forward for the client. Then, should that approach include advertising, then the creative teams will get involved in creating ads. The interesting thing is that the above model starts looking more like a business consulting firm. Perhaps business consultancies and ad agencies should consider merging? Take that a step further - Isn't the job of a strategist essentially the same as a business consultant, like Hollard or PWC?*

**BM:** Absolutely!!! I couldn't have said better, Gidon. In fact, my strategic consultancy partner put it aptly, he said; "Instead of creating a campaign, rather create a solution, and only then can you create a campaign or messaging around that solution". Indeed, the role of a strategist is exactly that - to bring business solutions. I am busy writing an article on this very topic. I should share with you once it's published. The premise of the article is that strategy and strategists inside advertising agencies are undervalued and underplayed. As you have also rightly so mentioned, unfortunately, that's how agencies make money, and they will need to make money to stay in business. In the meantime, here's an [article](#) I wrote in January 2017, I hope you enjoy it.

**GO:** *Wow, that article is incredible. What's most interesting for me, is that I'm in final-year copywriting at AAA. Even from the beginning of my studies, I noticed something wrong with the ad agency process. And I think chatting to you these past 24 hours has summed up the issue that I couldn't find the words to verbalise. After I finish my studies, I want to go work in a big agency and gain experience in the 'traditional' and current way that agencies are working. But I seriously relate to the points you make about the current ad agency structure, and I'd actually love to be part of the solution (i.e.: - changing the way agencies work), once I've gained a year or two experience in the current model.*

*Hopefully, I can find you in a year or two and join the revolution. Another great point - that ad agencies don't like to collaborate. It's such a silly way of operating! As you say, every issue that the client has should become the issue of the agency! When someone needs an operation, and then post-surgery physiotherapy, you never see the medical professionals saying, "No, we won't co-operate."*

*Additionally, for an agency to admit that they don't have all the manpower necessary to achieve the solution (such as needing an engineer/psychologist to help) won't*

***DEFINITELY lose them the client. On the contrary, I feel the client will be happy that the agency can recognise their shortcomings, and their confidence in the agency will increase.***

**BM:** I'm sure we will meet again. Yes, go get the experience, it will be invaluable. You can't change what you don't know or don't understand, therefore it'll be critical getting experience inside traditional agencies. More so, it is important for you to form and have an opinion. Have a viewpoint. Good luck!

**GO:** *Thank you! This conversation has proven to be super valuable. Wishing you all the best and hopefully, we meet again one day.*

**BM:** Indeed. It's been a pleasure. Thanks for the questions. I hope African Bank is one of your assignments. If so great, go kill it. It's a small industry so we will definitely meet.

## ABOUT BOGOSI MOTSHEGWA

Bogosi Motshegwa is a strategic planner at Thinkerneur, a brand strategy consulting firm and is Advisory Council Member at Vega School of Design | Brand | Business. He is a brand consultant who specialises in but is not limited to, brand, digital and communication strategy.

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