



BECOMING A CREATIVE STRATEGIST

Bridge the gap between data and creative to
eliminate guesswork and improve ad results

A black baseball cap with the words "Creative Strategist" written on it in a white, sans-serif font. The cap is positioned in the lower half of the image, tilted slightly to the right. The background is a dark blue gradient with various geometric shapes and colors, including purple, pink, and blue, creating a modern, digital aesthetic.

Creative
Strategist

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF CREATIVE STRATEGY

Most teams recognize that bridging the gap between data and creative has become critical for success in paid social. But why is it so hard to do?

The challenge runs as deep as how humans are wired. Some are more analytical, while others are more creative. Some are into math, others into art. Some defer to logic, others to imagination. These differences fundamentally define our approach to work, so no wonder it's a hard problem to solve.

We need a uniting force who can combine the best of both worlds to build a data-driven creative process. That's where the Creative Strategist comes in.

In this guide, we gather insights from some of the best minds in the industry to unpack the role of a Creative Strategist and why it's quickly becoming one of the most important functions in marketing today.

We hope you enjoy it!

Reza Khadjavi, CEO, Motion

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THE CREATIVE STRATEGY PROBLEM TODAY'S ORGANIZATIONS FACE

Let's say your organization has a lot of good media buyers. Let's say they also have loads of creative talent on hand to produce media ads.

Sound like a problem? Of course not. Good media buyers, good creative talent—sounds like a winning combination. But the problem is today's organizations might have good teams on both sides...*but they don't have someone in that critical role that ties the two together.*

Too often, companies trust that the two roles have interdependent functions. Ideally, the media buyer's goals align with the creative strategists. What more needs to be said?

As it turns out, a lot. It's not enough to unify two disparate roles with singular goals. Each side may not know how to mesh with the other. And all too

often, both sides don't know how to come together and create a tangible, long-term creative playbook.

One problem: organizations are loading too much on their media buyers' plates. No, forget "too much." Some media buyers have everything on their plate. [Nick Shackelford](#), CEO/managing partner at Structured, points to media buyers who handle every task. Some, he says, handle everything from channel buying and data analysis to copywriting and storyboarding.

"The media buyer should be contributing or owning," says Shackelford, but is "often the only one doing these things. And it's excessive."

When media buyers do too much, creative professionals suffer. They don't have the media buyer's access to data analysis or a portfolio of ads that have worked for a client in the past. That leaves with creatives with no direction. They end up feeling like cogs in a machine rather than fully-empowered team members.

Put it all together and you have an organization with talented people who aren't empowered to do their best work. Even talented creatives can't help media buyers if they don't know what the goal of an ad is. And media buyers who do too much work for the creative team don't let them relax and produce their best work.

Everyone has the goal of doing great work, sure. But there's something missing. There's no connecting tissue that pulls it all together.

Bringing Different Roles Together

Challenge one, according to Nick Shackelford, is simple. You have to establish coordination between creative departments and media buyers.

Adding plenty of creative talent is a very positive thing. But while companies can build a hefty roster full of capable creative professionals, it still takes know-how to mold this roster into a cohesive team.

"When you're building an agency," says Shackelford, "you're just building a bunch of marketing departments."

The question, then, is how you can bring the different marketing roles together so that these departments never feel siloed—or separated—from each other.

"The media buyer is a channel buyer. The creative strategist should be involved in the designing, the scripting, and the storyboarding and the content team, setting some of the benchmarks around how the content should perform."

[Nick Shackelford](#), CEO & Managing Partner, Structured

Counterintuitively, Shackelford says it's better to start with separately-defined roles. This way, everyone knows their role within the overall structure.

CHANNEL BUYER

The role of the Channel Buyer replaces the traditional aspects of the media buyer role. This channel buyer is still responsible for media buying, data analytics, tracking KPI and handling KPI reporting, and conducting creative/ad analysis. But here's where the change comes in: that's *all* they do, deferring the creative aspects of the job to other roles.

GROWTH STRATEGIST

The role of the Growth Strategist, or sometimes the Chief Marketing Officer, is to look at all of the channels and communicate the overall direction of the project to everyone involved.

CREATIVE STRATEGIST

Finally, the third role, and the one we're concerned with today: the Creative Strategist.

How do creative strategists overcome these challenges in their roles? How do they overlap with other roles in a marketing department? How do they ensure their vision is part of the overall goal of each campaign? And how do they become the "connective tissue" between media buyers and the creative department?

That's where this handbook comes in.

INTRODUCING THE CREATIVE STRATEGIST

A well-defined, empowered creative strategist is a solution to the “creative” problem.

It sounds good on paper. But what does it mean to be “well-defined”? And how can a creative strategist take control over a project in an empowering way—or learn to empower others?

We’ll start at the beginning: defining the creative strategist’s role.

Defining the Creative Strategist

According to [Indeed.com](https://www.indeed.com), “A creative strategist is a marketing professional who focuses on improving a company’s overall marketing and advertising plans.”

But that doesn’t tell the whole story, does it?

It’s the unity of those two words—marketing and advertising—that can make the creative strategist’s role so difficult to pin down.



“Over the last 5 years, there’s been a new position created at most digitally-savvy brands – a creative strategist. This is someone who understands how to ideate and communicate to designers and editors, while keeping the importance of performance marketing KPIs top of mind. Every brand doing over 8-figures in revenue needs to have this position internally, on the creative team.”

[Nik Sharma](#), CEO, Sharma Brands

Here's how we like to think of it. The creative strategist is the connection an organization's left and right brains. **The left brain—analytical and methodical—is focused on data, KPIs, and ad performance. The right brain—creative and artistic—is focused on the innovations in writing and editing to produce an ad.**

Within your organization, a creative strategist is the bridge between the creative team and the media buyers. The media buyers root themselves in data and research to know what an ad needs to accomplish. But they can't necessarily pin down the precise messaging that will get there.

Typically, a creative strategist leads a team of writers, editors, or illustrators. These are the "creatives" who form the messaging of the ad.

But creative strategists serve as a conduit to the media buyers. That means strategists deal with both the left and right sides of an organization's "brain." Ideally, a creative strategist can handle data

and know what made previous ads work so well. But a creative strategist should also be forward-thinking. They need to find creative ways to turn data into new ads.

Ultimately, a creative strategist is a translator. They translate advertising data into actionable new projects. They translate insights into hypotheses to test with new ads. They translate a brand's goals into new ideas for the creative team to try.

The role of the creative strategist comes down to how well they can answer two questions:

What do we do next, and how do we do it?

Creative

Analytical



What a Creative Strategist Does— And Doesn't Do

As noted in the previous section, a media buyer can't flourish if they're doing everything from KPI reporting to ad copywriting. It's the same for creative strategists. They can't flourish if they try to do a little of everything.

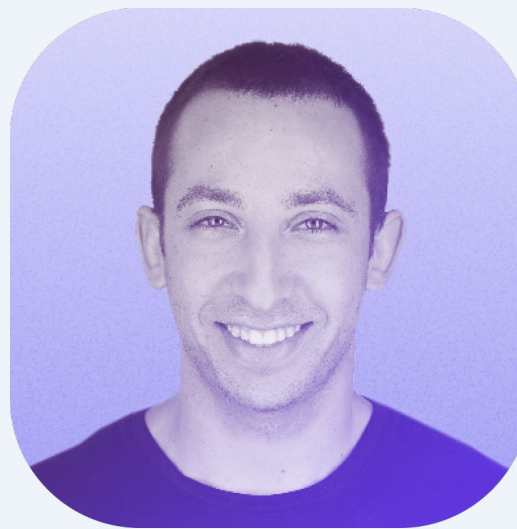
Just ask [John Murdock](#), who manages a team of creative strategists at Tinuiti. Murdock echoed Shackelford's point: defining the roles of creative and media buyers helps both sides do what they do best.

"It's really difficult to be really good at [media buying] and also be an expert at what creative moves the needle," said Murdock. "We found that it's best to split them off."

To Murdock, it's the partnership—not the total joining—of the two roles that works best in Tinuiti's paid social campaigns.

"[Creative strategists] work in conjunctions with media buyers at Tinuiti," said Murdock. For example, he asks, what if there was a large uptick in an advertisement's clicks, but overall engagement was down? At Tinuiti, creative strategists consult with media buyers to diagnose the problem. Was it creative fatigue? Time for new creative ideation? Both?

In this role, the creative strategist does have some exposure to the data behind the success of their campaigns. But they're not solely responsible for collecting, organizing, and interpreting that data. At Tinuiti, once a creative strategist and media buyer get on the same page, it's time to decide next steps. And that's where the creative strategist should thrive.



"The role of a creative strategist cannot be overstated. Creative is one of the biggest levers to improve ad performance in 2022. Constant communication between the media buyer and the creative teams is paramount for success. That's where the creative strategist comes in."

[Cody Plofker](#), CMO, Jones Road Beauty

The Golden Metric for Creative Strategists

A creative strategist's north star is to improve the Marketing Efficiency Ratio (MER) of their organization.

$$\text{MARKETING EFFICIENCY RATIO (MER)} = \frac{\text{REVENUE}}{\text{MARKETING SPEND (Media spend, Creative production costs)}}$$

The Creative Strategist Feedback Loop

By creating a feedback loop between media buying and creative production, the creative strategist is able to help improve MER by finding efficiencies in the marketing spend. How?

- More high performing creatives produced vs low performing
- Less media spend towards low performing creative

Works with media buyers and creative teams to produce higher-converting creatives

1

Higher marketing returns open additional budget to improve creatives and scale spend

2

Better creatives result in better return from media spend and reduced spend on lower-performing assets

3

This results in an overall improvement to MER, making the creative strategist role the perfect function to create efficiencies in the performance marketing function without sacrificing ambitious growth targets.

Two Types of Creative Strategists

Not every creative strategist's role will be the same. In talking to experts in creative strategy, we found that there were typically two styles of conducting the role:

EXTENSION OF THE MEDIA BUYER ROLE

The creative strategist as an extension of the media buyer role. This is particularly true for companies without the capacity to hire a dedicated strategist. But there are problems with this approach, as Murdock and Shackelford outlined. Media buyers can sometimes struggle with finding time to execute creative strategies.

A DEDICATED ROLE

If a team is large enough, the creative strategist is often a dedicated role. This dedicated role is often similar to a project manager who has an understanding of both "sides of the brain" in every project. The creative strategist needs to understand the data as interpreted by media buyers. They then need to translate and visualize this data for creative stakeholders and team members. Finally, they should employ project management principles to tie it all together and produce a successful ad.

Generally, creative strategist experts recommend the latter approach. This clearly-defined role requires additional resources at the company to support a fully fleshed-out creative strategist salary—but those resources often end up being worth the investment.

Takeaways: the Role of the Creative Strategist

From what we've learned above, the first step in being an effective creative strategist is to work through a clearly-defined role. That includes:



“PROJECT MANAGEMENT”

A creative strategist is ultimately the head of creative projects. They're the ones through whom the creative work filters, whether that be in copywriting, editing, illustration, or animation. It's the creative strategist's role to direct the creative team with an eye on what the brand wants to see in its ad.



CONSULTING WITH MEDIA BUYERS

In some cases, the media buyer is also the creative strategist. But when the roles are separate, the two should work together, especially in the ideation phase. What can the media buyer show in the data from previous campaigns that reflects where the creative team should head in the future? And how can the creative strategist use KPIs and other data points to help fuel creative ideation? (Note: More on ideation below.)

Executing these roles is far different than merely understanding them. To help paint a picture of what creative strategy looks like in practice, we consulted our group of creative strategy experts.

THE “CREATIVE SPRINT”: WHAT DOES THE PROCESS OF A GOOD CREATIVE STRATEGIST LOOK LIKE?

Add it all together and you have “The Creative Sprint.” This Creative Sprint defines the performance of the creative strategist, while project management skills oversee each step. We’ll look at how to optimize all three steps to create consistent improvements to creative efforts over time.

In the four sections that follow, we’ll tackle the process of an effective creative strategist in four key areas:

IDEATION

This is the role that is most closely tied to right-brain thinking. Ideation means looking at the data and previous ad performance. Your goal? To spark new ideas, new messaging, and new hypotheses to test in future ads.

BRIEFING

A creative briefing is a blueprint for the team’s approach to the ad. It speaks specifically to brand goals, key performance indicators every ad should target, and the messaging style each team member needs to bring to the creative work.

RETROSPECTIVES

Retrospectives. This is the “debriefing” of the creative world. What went wrong with the campaign? What went right? What seemed to resonate with the audience? At this point, the creative strategist will sit down with other team members and media buyers to pinpoint future ideation and strategy.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT (PM)

Creative strategists aren’t always trained executives and leaders, which is why we’ll talk specifically about sticking points they often have in project management.

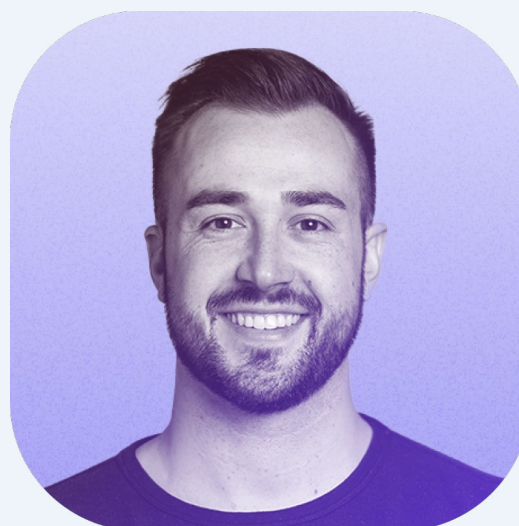
But now let’s zoom in and see what some top-performing strategists have to say about each step.

IDEATION

The ideation step of the Creative Sprint is often the most challenging one. If you've ever sat in front of a blank screen and watched the cursor blink back at you, you know what we're talking about.

Strictly speaking, ideation refers to the formation of the concepts and ideas that will inform your next campaign. But this is a fancy way to say it. It might be easier to say ideation is the stage of the process where you need to come up with new stuff.

The creative strategists we talked to had all sorts of ideas about ideation with one thing in common: they all had it down to a system.



“Your ad performance can no longer survive on brightly colored static images and raw UGC videos, to win in 2022 you must be amplifying your creatives.”

[Zach Stuck](#), Founder, Homestead

A good ideation process, we learned, typically involves two things:

-
- ✓ Analyzing data on existing ads. This should give you an idea of what’s resonating with people and what isn’t working. This is typically your “north star” for new ideation.
-
- ✓ Performing competitive analysis to see what other companies are doing. However, just as important is sifting out what might *not* be working for the competition.

ANALYZING DATA ON EXISTING ADS

Finding Insights in the Ad Account

To [Dara Denney](#), a marketing creator with professional experience in creative strategy at Thesis, the first step is sifting for gold.

Not literal gold, of course. We’re talking about the little nuggets of inspiration and insights that show up when you first dive into a brand’s ad account. Your goal here: to see what ads are living up to their performance indicators. Among the questions Denney says she asks herself:

- What type of imagery and messaging have the best hook rates?
- What types of ads have facilitated the longest “hold” rates—that is, held attention the longest?
- What are the best conversion rates for certain types of creative tests?

Denney says her typical strategy is not only to sift out what’s not working, but then to double down on what *is*.

Monitoring Ad Trends to Make Creative Decisions

When trying to nail down your ideation, it can help to have an understanding of what elements of your advertising resonates best with any given audience.

Take the example below, a report built on [Motion](#) that break downs ad performance from a set of ads according to what influencer that ad featured. At a glance, this report shows that Scott Sampson and Mandy Morgan outperform the other two influencers by a significant degree.



By monitoring reports like this, Creative Strategists greatly accelerate their workflow in two ways:

- Knowing the answer to higher-level questions such as “what ad format should we create for” significantly reduces the number of variables to consider in the ideation process
- Discovering what variables work provides breadcrumbs that Creative Strategists can use to dive even deeper into the ideation process

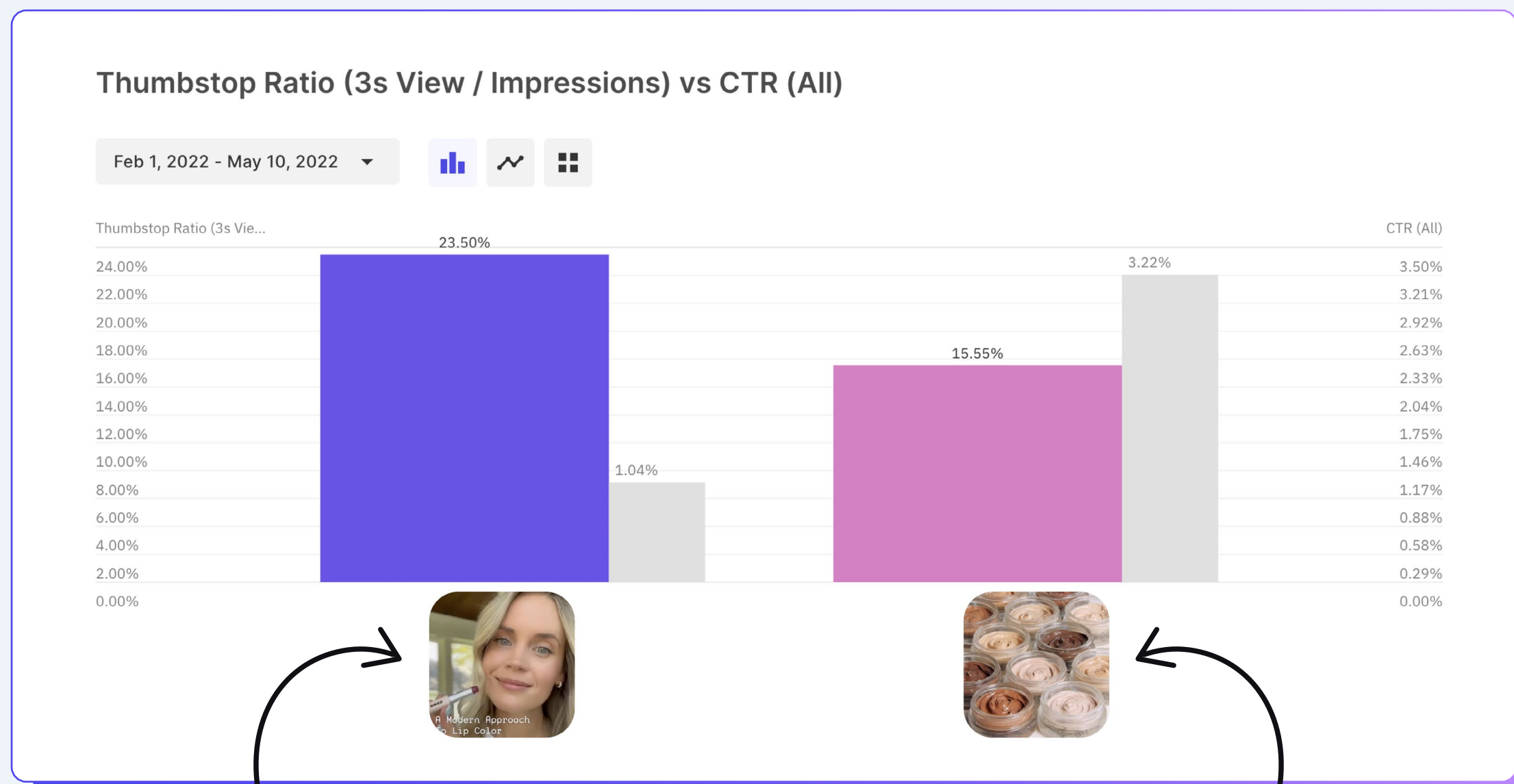
Creative Strategists should build a reporting system that tracks:

- Creative formats
- Influencers
- Ad Types
- Offers
- Ad placements
- Landing page paths
- Product categories

Using Data to Drive Ideation

Creative strategists often use tools like Motion to evaluate their most recent ads. This gives them insights not only into what ads are working, but the specific points in each ad that resonate most with the audience.

For example, consider a creative strategist reviewing video ad performance over the previous month. Imagine they come across two ads:



AD A HAS A HIGHER THUMBSTOP RATIO

Thumbstop ratio measures the performance of the first three seconds of an ad. It tells a creative strategist how high well the initial hook of the ad captures audiences.

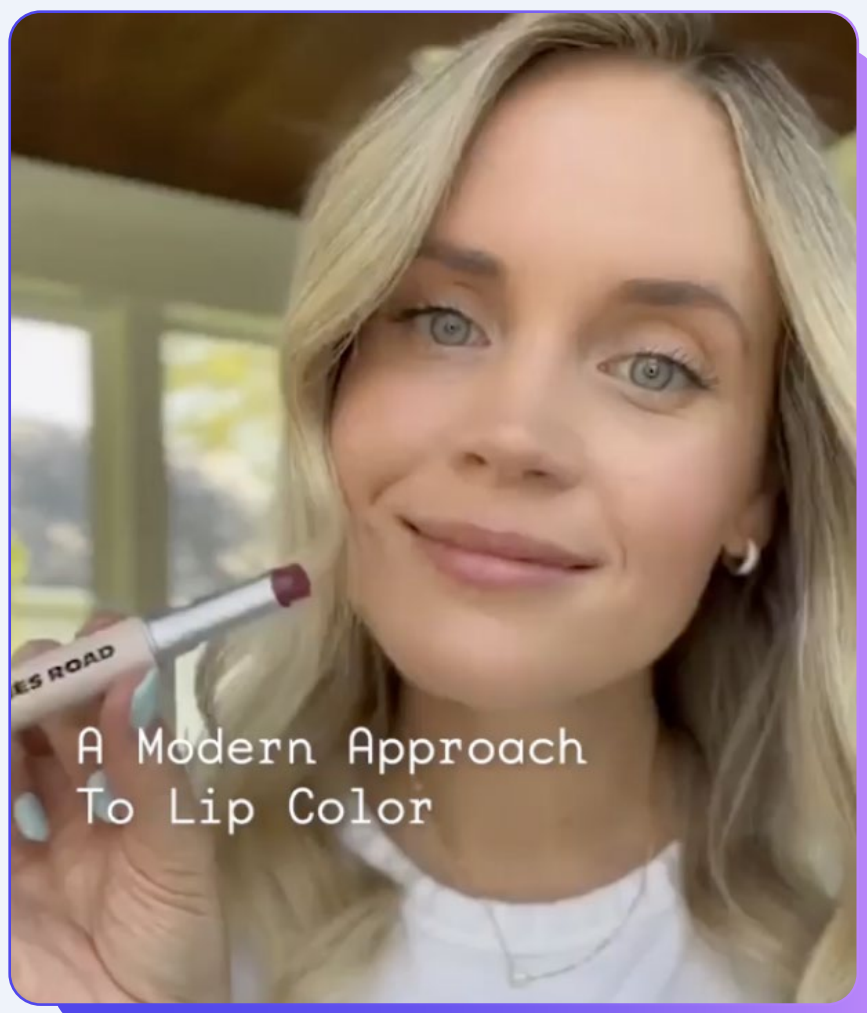
AD B HAS A BETTER CTR

Click-through-rate shows how well an ad converts audiences to a landing page. This tells a creative strategist how strong the call-to-action is on this ad.



“Using data to make decisions on creative is the smartest thing you can do because it takes the guesswork out of whether it works and lets the numbers speak for themselves.”

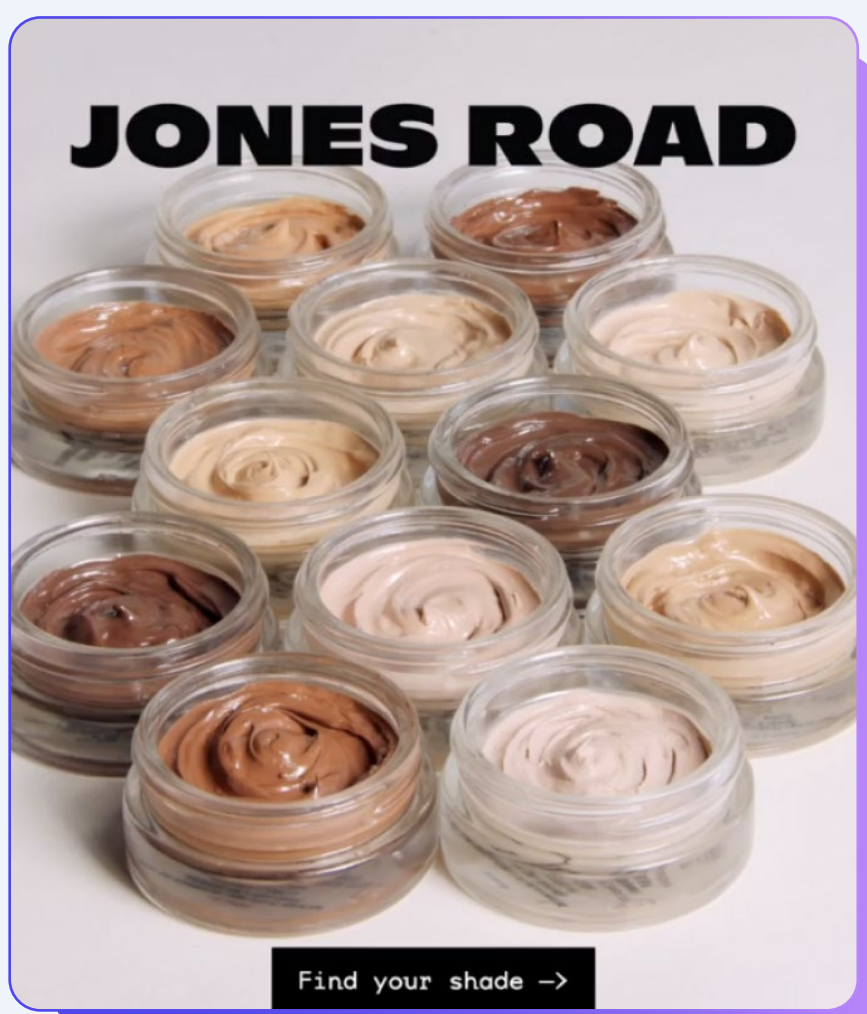
[Courtney Alexander](#), Lead Media Buyer, Foxwell Digital



WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Ad A is getting more attention from users who are scrolling, so the first few seconds of that ad seem to be high-impact. Something is going right with the hook.

Diving deeper, we can see that the hook shows a UGC-style video of the influencer applying makeup. It's clear this style of video does a good job capturing users' attention.



However, Ad B has more conversions. Ultimately, it's the better-producing ad overall. It's meeting its goals. This ad leverages an image of the many makeup tones offered by this brand, with a CTA of "Find your style". A creative strategist would glean the hypothesis that users respond well to seeing the many foundation tones from this brand.

USING THIS DATA TO MAKE BETTER ADS

What is a creative strategist to do with this complex data? They might borrow the best elements from Ad A (the first few seconds of thumb-stopping goodness) with Ad B (the meat of the remainder of the video).

Now combine the two elements and voila: you've got an idea for a new ad. You've also arrived at a new ad hypothesis. Now you can test a version of the ad highlighting the best of both worlds, then measure its thumb stop ratio and a conversion rate.

COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS FOR IDEATION

“Good artists create,” Picasso once said. “Great artists steal.”

Granted, *actually* stealing intellectual property is a major no-no. But whenever any company does something in the public sphere, it’s exposing an idea to the marketplace that may be (legally) up for the taking.

Competitive analysis doesn’t mean stealing ideas. It means finding what themes are resonating with your prospective audience.

This side of the ideation process typically requires that you keep up brands in your niche or industry. But there’s one caveat: you don’t have access to competitor data. Competitors may repeat ads that *aren’t* working, simply because they haven’t reviewed the data yet.

It’s the creative strategist’s job to suss out what is working for a given audience.

One way to conduct legitimate competitive research is to scroll through Facebook’s ads library. There, you can find brands that serve similar audiences. You can then ask questions like:

- *What CTAs are my competitors using?*
- *What messages are the ads delivering?*
- *What do the ads look like?*
- *Do the ads showcase the product, or are they more lifestyle images?*

By dissecting high-performing ads in this way, you start to get a taste of what your audience might like to see.

Ideally, a creative strategist can save this knowledge and find inspiration for future ads. In some cases, discovering the trends in your marketplace will be enough to spark an idea.



“A good creative strategist has a deep understanding of psychology, economics, and consumer behavior.”

[Sarah Levinger](#), Creative Strategist

Finding Ideas from the “Bird’s-Eye View”

For [Savannah Sanchez](#), a social media consultant who works with multiple brands, the bird’s-eye view is central to ideation. “As a creative strategist, a lot of time has to go into the research process,” she says.

But she points out her role as a consultant to big companies has a key advantage: lots of data. She has worked with brands that give her access to that data, then dug in to see which styles of ads are landing for the most popular eCommerce brands. Where Sanchez works, sample sizes are not an issue.

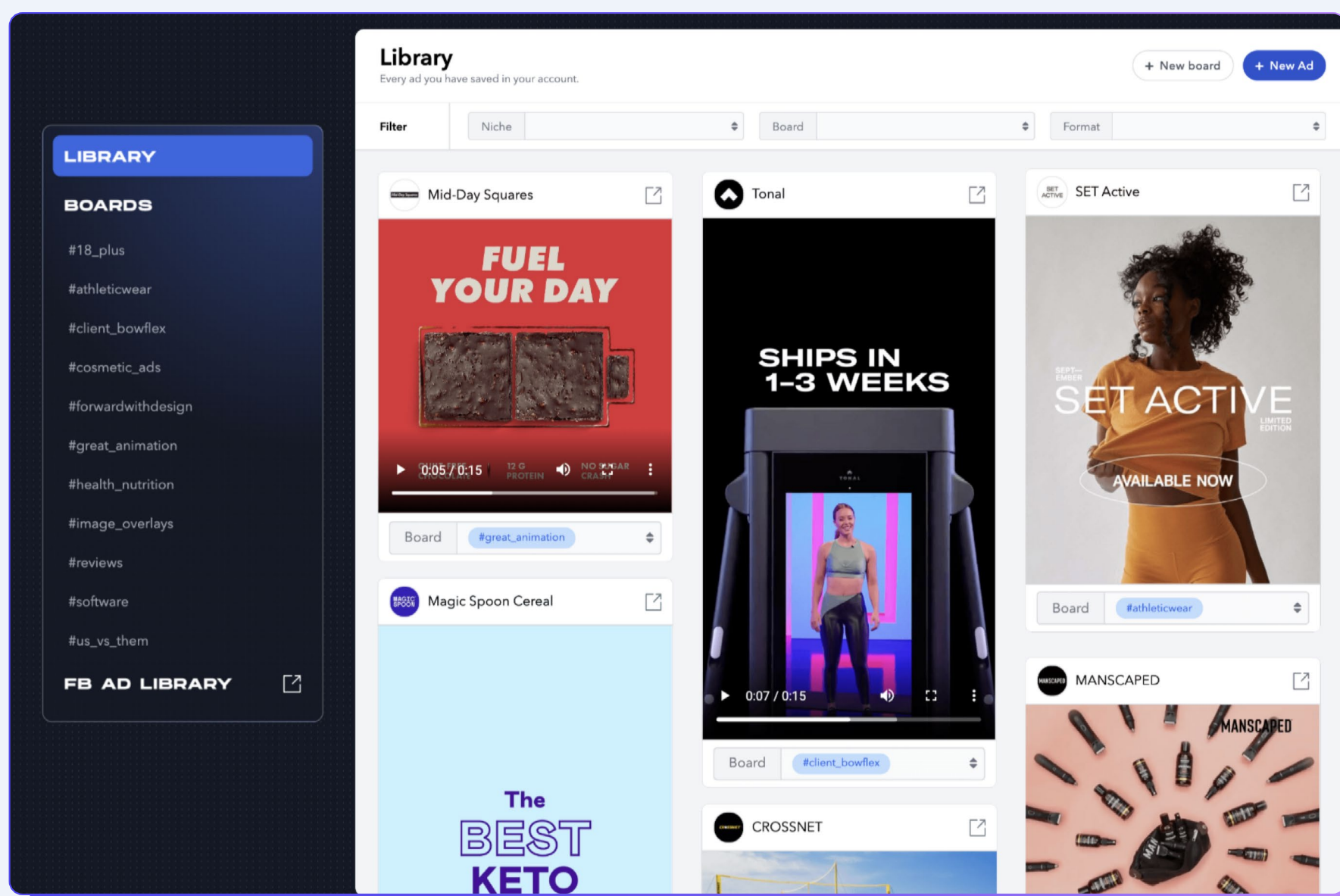
The result: Sanchez has a “bird’s-eye” view of the industry, seeing what works and what doesn’t.

“As a creative strategist, a lot of time has to go into the research process,” says Sanchez. She notes that she has it lucky because she works with big companies that give her access to data, so she can see what styles of ads are landing for eCommerce brands.

This might sound like wearing both the creative strategist *and* the media buyer’s hat. But there’s no reason that the two roles can’t team up to share the data that sparks ideation.

Level Up Your Competitive Analysis With Winners Circle Boards

Proactive creative strategists will keep up to date with ad trends in the ecosystem. The best way to do this is by keeping an eye on competitors ads. Tools such as Adison allow creative strategists to collect ads in a “Winners Circle” for later reference during the creative ideation process.



BUILDING ON YOUR ANALYSIS

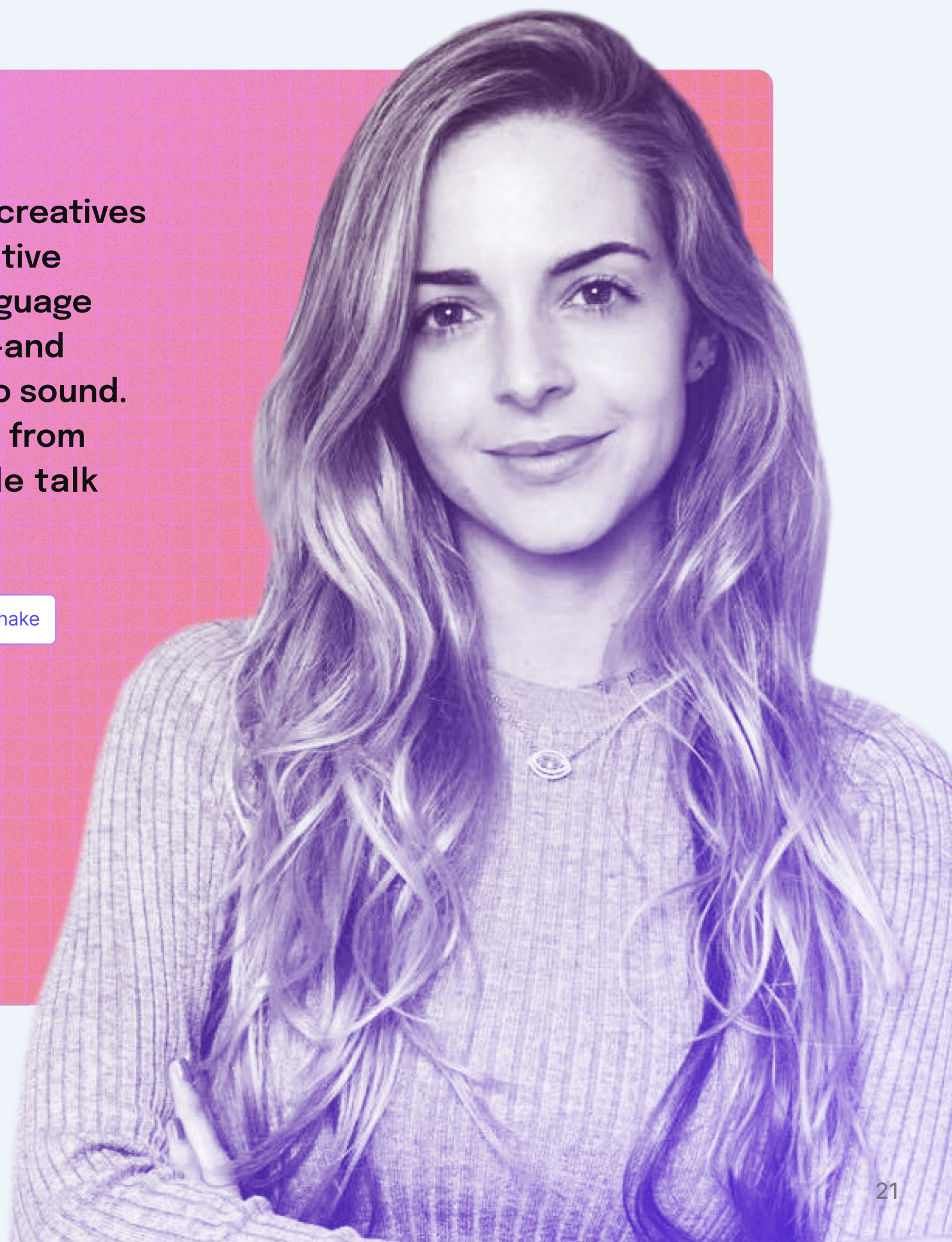
Learning to “Speak the Language” of Potential Buyers

[Mirella Crespi](#), founder and CEO of Creative Milkshake, always looks for ideation in learning to speak the “language” of potential buyers.

To that end, Crespi finds herself performing a lot of research. She even dives back to what she calls the “basic stuff.” That includes the target audience, the problem a product solves, the nature of the campaign (product launch or promotional campaign?) or even any creative references from previous winning creatives.

“The best direct response creatives are written in simple, effective copy. That’s always the language of the user, the consumer—and not how the brand wants to sound. A lot of the ideation comes from understanding how people talk about those products.”

[Mirella Crespi](#), Founder & CEO, Creative Milkshake



Finding Ideas from a Customer-First Perspective

Nick Shackelford agrees with this approach, noting his own process can go down a checklist of what every creative needs to know:

- Who the advertisement is selling to
- The pain points of those key buyers
- What platform the ads will appear on
- What platforms the users typically appear on
- What placement the advertising will use
- Aligning the messaging with a landing page
- How much does the potential audience know about the product?

Like Crespi, Shackelford's approach is to inform the creative team who's on the other end of the screen. Who's the target customer? Who's the person scrolling TikTok whose thumb is about to stop because of an exciting hook? Once the creatives have a solid grasp on these principles, the ideas start to spark.

"The build of what we do and why we're doing it is extremely important," said Shackelford. "Before we even get to the ad or the landing page."



"I've been advertising on social since '08. Over the years, creative strategy has become increasingly important as marketers have been able to collect more data about advertising performance."

[Barry Hott](#), Growth Marketing Consultant

Bringing Data and Competitive Analysis Together: The “Hypothesis” Approach

In science, the basic method is simple. You come up with a hypothesis, test the hypothesis, and review your data before deciding what to research next.

A creative strategist’s role is often similar. Using data and competitive analysis to reach conclusions, the creative strategist then comes up with a *hypothesis* for future creatives. This fuels a new round of creative experimentation.

To [Anze Markovic](#), a freelance creative strategist, the process is a balance between ideation and new concepts. And he fuels it with background research to generate these new concepts.

“First, when I work with a client,” says Markovic, “I—like every copywriter should do—[start with] research.”

In addition to sending his clients questionnaires and soliciting feedback, Markovic’s process includes research that seeks users out directly. For example, if he’s researching a product for insomnia, he’ll go on a Reddit community where users are talking about the problem. There, he’ll identify particular pain points he might not have come up with in traditional data analysis.

Markovic says he also visits Amazon, but not for the good reviews. He wants the low-star reviews. He’s looking for anything that stands out. The more honest, the better.

“Then I try to put out the top five value propositions and top five angles, and then I float between the ideation phase and new concepts,” says Markovic. “You need to find a balance between those.”

When you do, you’ve come up with a hypothesis—a new idea to test. That’s when it’s time to give your new idea a structure via a *briefing*.



“The Creative Strategist is a bridge between the Media Buyers, Content Creators and Editors.”

[Anze Markovic](#), Freelance Creative Strategist

Finding New Pain Points With Competitive Research

On top of direct customer research, some creative strategists have found another novel way of sourcing creative inspiration. By looking at reviews on Amazon and discussions on forums such as Reddit, creative strategists can uncover additional pain points that might not have emerged from traditional data analysis.

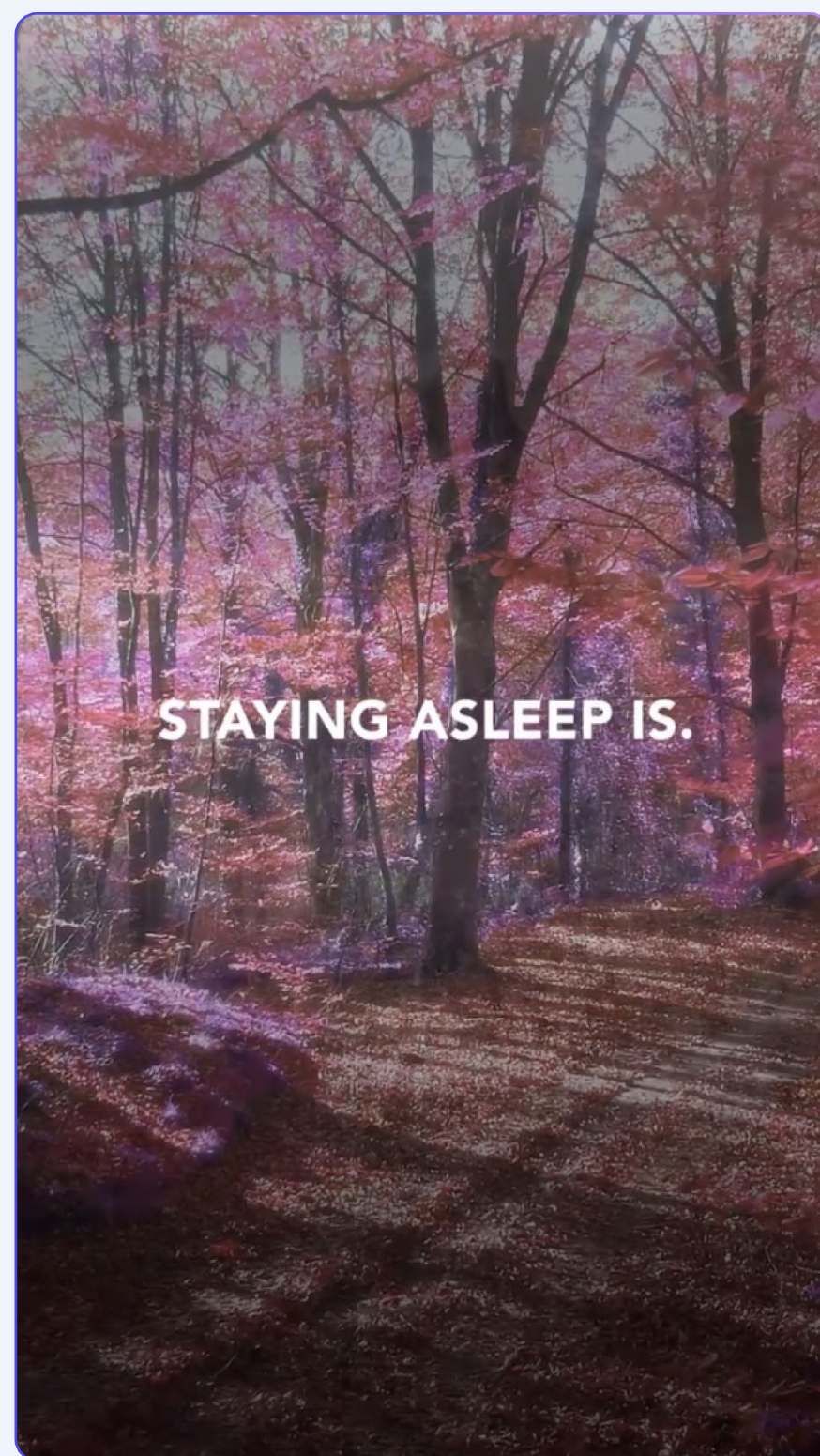
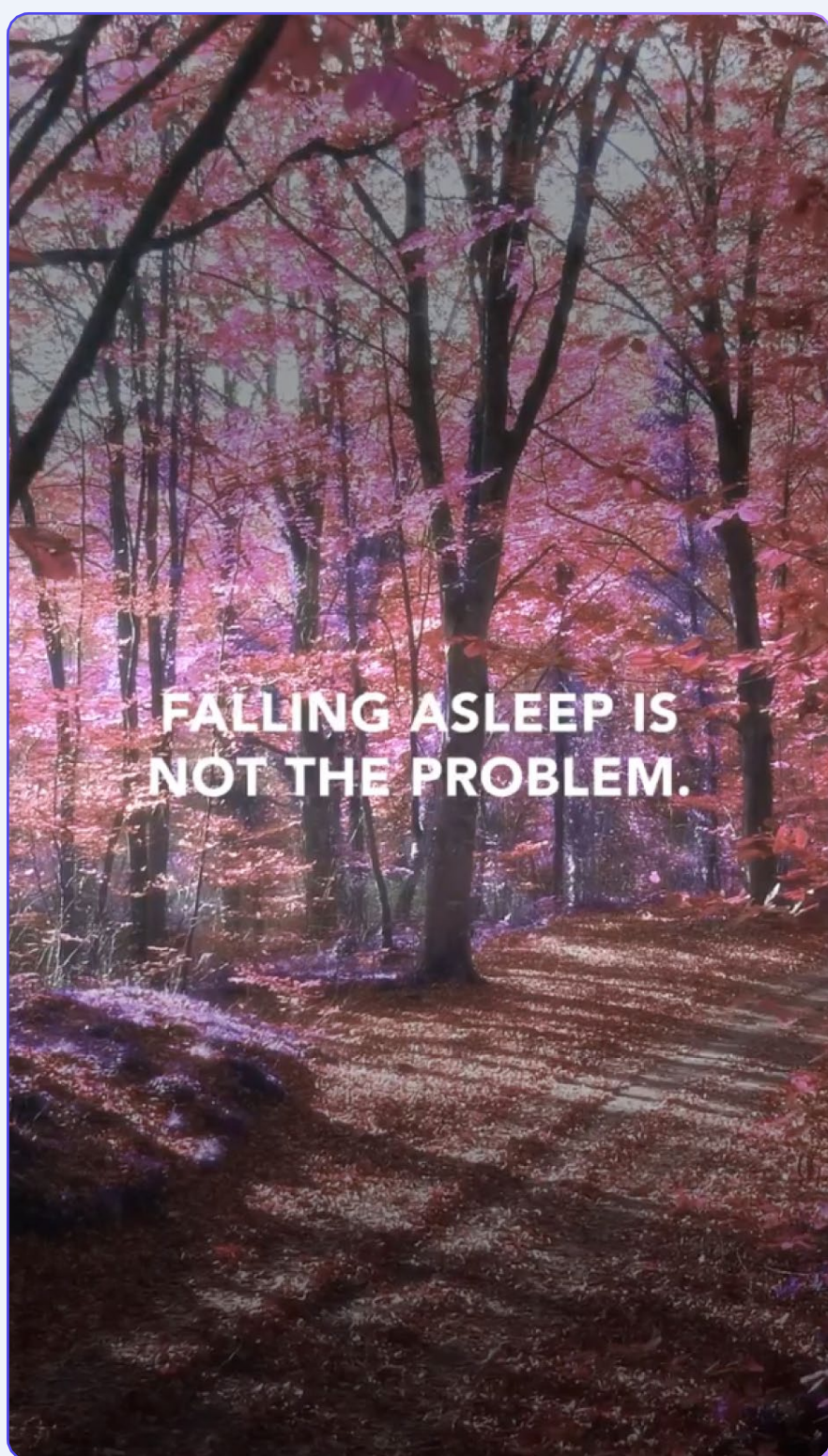
In the example below, a creative strategist looking to make ads for a sleep aid scanned Reddit threads about insomnia and read reviews for competitors products on Amazon. Their findings exposed a pain point that they had not yet tested - not only do insomniacs struggle to fall asleep, they are often even more frustrated with their inability to stay asleep. This finding would go on to inspire a future round of creatives.

☆☆☆☆☆ **Waste of money**

Reviewed in the United States on February 20, 2021

Verified Purchase

This is no bueno. Don't waste your money on this one. It MAY help you fall asleep, but it certainly does nothing to keep you there. Why use a "sleep" product that does nothing to help you stay asleep?



BRIEFING

Once the creative strategist knows where they want to head, the next step in the Creative Sprint is the blueprint. In other words, the **brief**.

What is a brief? It's easy to define: it's a set of details and instructions for your next project. But there are contrasting opinions on what it should

contain. Every creative strategist might tell you something different.

But in the interviews we conducted, we found a good brief generally includes the following:

A HYPOTHESIS YOU'RE TESTING

What is the goal of the creative? What's the idea you're testing out? This is the overall direction of the creative, the goal you want to hit—or, at the very least, what you want to learn by the time you're done.

HOOKS, DEMOS, AND FEATURES

Nick Shackelford believes creative strategists should communicate with plain, nuts-and-bolts language about what's going into the creative. What's the hook? What product or feature are you demonstrating? What feature are you highlighting? Keep these points simple.

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF WHAT THIS ROUND OF CREATIVES WILL LOOK LIKE

This can be anything from rough sketches, written outlines of copy, or even examples of existing ads that you're aspiring towards.

Dual Approaches to the Creative Brief

The experts we interviewed had two perspectives on what to include in a brief. There's the "Brick-by-brick" approach of Nick Shackelford, which means to include every detail, such as:

- Hook
- Benefits
- Branded elements
- Demonstrations
- Objections (and answers to objections)
- Problems/Pain Points
- Validation
- Features
- CTAs

John Murdock agreed with the detailed approach. "You need to make sure you're communicating who the audience is," he says. "You can't assume a designer is going to know."

Under this model, you might include the points above. This removes any possible ambiguities for the creative team. If you include supporting

composition (such as data, charts, or Motion visuals) that show the data that led to this creative experiment in the first place, even better.

Most importantly, a brief should contain a full outline of what needs to happen next.

- What creatives need to be made?
- When will they launch?
- Who on your team is responsible for what?

Savannah Sanchez agrees with the comprehensive approach. She gives her content creators explicit instructions for shot lists, scripts, and the like. For editors, she tells them how to piece the content together, down to text overlays and transitions.

We asked her how she balances that with providing her team with creative control. Her response? "I lean way more on the side of no flexibility."

However, this isn't to say that every brief needs to spell everything out in fine detail. There's another approach.

"For my team...it's really important to get the exact shots I'm looking for. It's almost like when you watch a TV show—like when I watch *The Office*, for instance. [I assume] they're probably coming up with this on the spot. But then I watch the behind-the-scenes. And they're saying every single move and every single line is scripted, [though] it seems so natural. And that's what I'm looking for in the ads."

[Savannah Sanchez](#), Founder, The Social Savannah

The “Brick-By-Brick” Approach




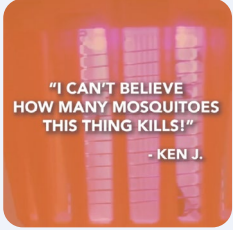

When developing creative briefs, Nick Shackelford uses the “brick-by-brick” approach. This entails breaking down videos into different segments, each with detailed instruction of what that segment should include.

As seen below, these segments can then be rearranged and restructured to make a virtually limitless number of assets for a single product and concept - making iteration stupid simple.

PRODUCT 1/CONCEPT 1

Asset 1	Hook	Demo	Feature 1	Benefit	Demo	Feature 2	Demo	Solution 1	CTA
Asset 2	Hook	Benefit 1	Valid	Feature 1	Demo	Testimonial	CTA		
Asset 3	Hook	Problem 1	Feature 1	Solution 1	CTA				

Let’s take a look at what this looks like with an example of what some of these segments might look like in brief form:

SEGMENT NAME	DESCRIPTION IN BRIEF	OUTPUT
Hook	Mosquito biting user to “shock” audiences and capture their attention	
Problem	“Mosquitos ruining the campout”	
Feature	Demonstrate that the zapper is waterproof for those rainy campfire days	
Testimonial	User reviews to highlight product quality	
CTA	“Click to learn more”	

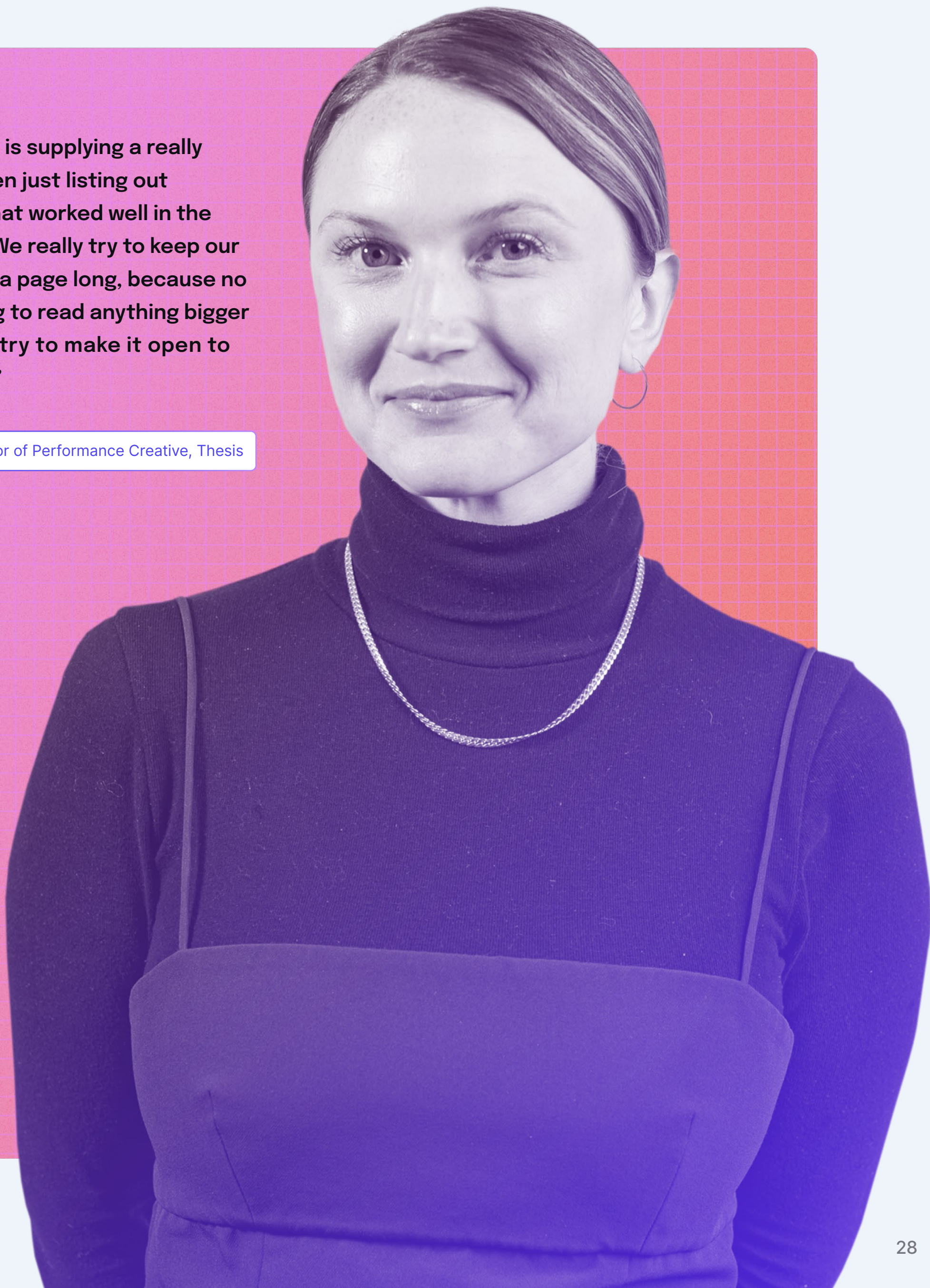
The “Sweet Spot” Approach

According to Dara Denney, a “loose script” approach works best for her.

Yes—we just got done telling you all the details you need to include for the brick-by-brick approach. But creative strategists like Dara Denney keep the brief loose. She allows creative professionals to fill in the gaps. To her, that’s where the empowerment lies.

“Our sweet spot is supplying a really loose script, even just listing out core benefits that worked well in the [previous] ads. We really try to keep our briefs less than a page long, because no one else is going to read anything bigger than that. [We] try to make it open to interpretation.”

[Dara Denney, Director of Performance Creative, Thesis](#)



The “Sweet Spot” Brief

Used by agencies such as Milked Media, the Sweet Spot brief takes a less specific, more ambiguous approach than the Brick-by-Brick approach to creative briefs. This can include elements such as:

- Hypothesis of what will be tested
- Higher-level creative guidance
- Style or aesthetic approach
- Inspiration

WHEN TO USE:

The Sweet Spot approach is particularly effective when used in an organization that has an experienced in-house creative team or by a media buyer who doubles as a creative strategist. It is especially useful when leveraged for generating new creative pieces versus for more focused iterations.

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MEDIA

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IRVINE, CA 92617
hello@milkedmedia.com

Lorem Upsum
March Monthly Ad Campaigns - Part 1

Evergreens

1. Video - Review Iteration

Iteration: Since we have been seeing great results from the video review ad we are currently running, we would like to test out a slight iteration. The current ad has a 40% above average click-through rate but a 17% below average thumbstop ratio


Hypothesis: If we change the hook then we can increase our thumbstop ratio and therefore increase conversions.

Guidance: We want to test out a more stylized and product demo-focused hook at the start of the video to grab the consumer's attention while scrolling. We have seen this perform well for other video ads we ran during the Valentine's gift guide last month

Inspiration:

The Makeup Set Dresses Up
like you, but glowier

Before



We like how this ad is stylized while demonstrating a strong before and after.

Copy

1. Statement-making makeup for everyday wear. See why everyone is talking about Lorem Ipsum.

2. Lipstick that sparks conversations - and compliments. Shop Lorem Ipsum for your next favorite shade.

3. Everyone loves Lorem Ipsum. Experience the eclectic elegance of everyday foundation.

4. Come see why everyone loves Lorem Ipsum. Just be sure to prepare for the compliments.

5. Five star reviews for a reason. Lorem Ipsum believes in quality sourcing and quality skincare.

Implementation Notes:

- Platform: FB/IG

- Campaign: Remarketing

- Link To:
<https://www.loremipsum.com/collections/shop-all-makeup>

How to Pull Together a Creative Brief that Suits Your Style

We've just pointed two alternative ways to construct a creative brief. Given that each way has its own advocates—many of whom are successful creative strategists—which is the best approach?

Choose whichever suits your team and your leadership style.

For a while, that may sound vague as you discover the right mix for your creative strategy. But we can help you identify key mistakes you can avoid along the way.

For starters, don't micromanage off the bat. It can be counterproductive and lead to feelings of stagnation in your creative team.

"If we had a 30-minute control for every asset [we do] like social media," said John Murdock, "we would never get anything done."

Murdock says his team builds from a template. But that template leaves them plenty of room to talk about each brand's specific voice and what the project is looking for. They'll also list example ads to show creatives the tone they want to strike. The brief provides thorough scaffolding—but the creative professionals fill in the rest.

As for specific tools for creating briefs? Answers ran the gamut. Favorites included Google Docs, Notion, and Basecamp, but the overall answer was simple: do whatever makes it easy to communicate the essentials to your team.



“Be as clear as possible. Designers are not mind readers or magicians.”

[Lauren Schwartz](#), Owner & Creative Director, The Loft 325

RETROSPECTIVES

After the brief, the team gets to work. You finish the ad, get approval from the client, and launch. Now what?

Now you begin assessing. The final stage of the Creative Sprint might not sound as fun as ideation, but it's equally fundamental. It's what the creative strategist often calls the **"retrospective."**

Think of it as a "de-brief." Now's the time to examine what went wrong and what went right. Did the hypothesis you tested bear out in reality? Or do you need more ads to test your ideas?

Your first step in creating a retrospective is to decide where you'll spend your reflection time. This can get confusing at times. For example, let's say you're holding a meeting with a media buyer who only wants to handle the retrospective from an analytical point of view.

"The creative strategist needs to understand what metrics are making sense," said Nick Shackelford. "And the media buyer has to be very mindful of what information is being shared back with the creative strategist."

Shackelford recommends having the creative strategist determine which benchmarks a project needs to hit. That might include thumbstop ratio, conversion rates, or how long users are watching each ad. With that information gathered, the creative strategist can then start to determine how well the ad performed against expectations.

To Mirella Crespi, the retrospective process isn't a one-off meeting. It can include a couple of phases, from gauging the overall ad concept to the iteration of each campaign's essential hook. Once an ad has passed muster on multiple fronts, then it's ready for primetime. If an ad passes muster, it's ready for scaling up.

Much like the creative brief, creative strategists often have different approaches to how they evaluate the success of a project. But most seem to agree that this is the time to remove yourself from what you thought you would work, zoom out, and gain perspective.

Turning the Retrospective Into a Repeatable Process

“You have to basically batch a time to reflect” on the project, according to Nick Shackelford. He notes that with his team, there are generally three steps they use to evaluate a project that’s just concluded:

- Examining what they tested—and what the hypothesis expected
- Examining what happened in reality
- Examining what to do next

“Nine out of ten times,” says Shackelford, that process “is going to be led by the creative strategist. If it isn’t, it’s going to be the media buyer communicating that to the growth strategist.”

This process—hypothesizing during ideation, defining the hypothesis in the brief, and reviewing

the hypothesis during the retrospective—may seem straightforward. But completing all three steps helps creative strategists spark ongoing ideation. With a clear track record of results on previous tests, they can point to specific data points for future projects.

This isn’t “guesstimation,” but new ideation based on real-world conclusions.

To accomplish this, creative strategists should catalog their retrospectives for each brand. This builds a “knowledge repository” for ongoing creative learning. In the industry, many strategists dub this the “Creative Playbook.”

The strategists we talked say they like to document this playbook in some way, often with Google Sheets, Notion, or Google docs. But the result is always the same: a “Creative Playbook” that details previous creatives and their performances with real-world data.

“I would describe [the retrospective process] as: take a breath. Make sure that you’ve dotted all your is and crossed all your Ts and thought about the fullness of the project. Have you communicated? Have you followed the template? Have you looked at the briefing template? Have you checked every box?”

[John Murdock](#), Senior Manager, Creative Strategy, Tinuiti

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Throughout the creative sprint, the creative strategist is essentially a project manager. Their role: to keep everyone on-task, on-time, and fully in possession of the information they need to do great work.

Typically, the creative strategists we talked to handle their tasks on tools like Monday or Asana.

They use a Kanban board that follows the same three essential stages you see above: Ideation, Briefing, and Retrospective.

In talking to creative strategists, we noticed two common pain points relating to their project management work:

KEEPING THINGS “LOOSE”

It’s hard enough to get your own creative juices flowing. How can you get a *team’s* flowing? Anze Markovic does this with a highly-detailed brief, but then tells his creative team: “make it in your own words.” He looks for team members who project a looseness and relaxation from the very first project—because he knows he’s going to continue to get that kind of creative work from them in the future.

AVOIDING TEAM SILOS

Mirella Crespi recommends inviting everyone on the team to think of the big picture—the ultimate goal of the creative. Without that, she says, you’re running a production machine, but not a true team. A production machine might get things done, but the silo-ing of different teams can stifle creativity. They’re thinking “insert this clip here,” “cut that voiceover into this section,” or “add the voiceover there.” And while that gets work done, it sometimes fails to speak to the voice of the brand. Crespi invites everyone to see a brand’s goals so they can be clear on how an ad needs to end up.

TAKEAWAYS: THE CREATIVE SPRINT

[Zac Fromson](#), COO of Lilo Social, believes that a successful creative sprint is a means to test assumptions towards a desired goal.

Fromson recommends studying the data to find elements of the creative that are performing below grade and iterating to fix them. To that end he recommends asking a few core questions to uncover opportunities:

- Is there a Thumbstop rate issue?
- Is there a Click-through rate issue?
- Is there a Conversion rate issue?

This helps identify the problem areas that need improvement and creative sprint cycles are aimed at solving those. To Fromson, once the right issues have been diagnosed, it points the team in the right direction to ideate on solutions.

“We identify elements that are performing below grade and we iterate to improve them.”

[Zac Fromson](#), Chief Creative, Lilo Social

From a purely creative standpoint, the strategist's role should be clear. But what does it really mean to be "creative"? Our experts had some ideas that broke it down into specifics:

***DON'T STEAL FROM
COMPETITORS. LEARN
WHAT WORKS***

According to Savannah Sanchez, looking at a competitor's ad isn't enough to come up with a good ad. But it can teach you to dissect what works. Being vague with these conclusions—or plopping down an ad on a video editor's door and saying, "hey, can we make it look like this?"—isn't going to be enough

KEEP IT CASUAL

Once again, Anze Markovic says he looks for relaxed content creators who are that way from the beginning. That way, he knows those creators will be the same for future clients. The "looseness" of the team helps them feel comfortable enough to try new ideas.

***KEEP PEOPLE IN
THE LOOP***

Zac Fromson has had success in giving designers feedback from an overview perspective. He provides previous ad data, the status of a campaign's current results, and what the client wants to achieve. For instance, if a client has had trouble converting buyers from its ads, that information is going to be vital at every step in the creative process—not just the brief.

Then, Fromson says, strategists should interact with other team members if they have a say in where the ad is going to be placed. He recommends asking whether you have any say in the landing page, or whether there's someone with whom you can coordinate on messaging. These questions are all pertinent to the role of the creative strategist—and ultimately, result in better creative work.

CONCLUSION: MASTERING THE ROLE OF CREATIVE STRATEGIST

The creative strategists we spoke with had some different ideas about how to approach each step of the process. But they did share something in common. They each had an answer for what to do for the following steps:

IDEATION

Without having a direction for your next ad, there's nothing to be done. Most of the strategists we talked to had specific systems in place for consulting with ad buyers and clients for turning goals into creative ads.

BRIEFING

Though some strategists prefer a looser, briefer-briefing, others have more success in spelling everything out for their creative. But every one of them had a hypothesis to test, and a clear vision of what every ad needed to accomplish: to resonate with their audience and come back with measurable results.

RETROSPECTIVES

Finally, the “de-briefing” stage of a project helps fuel the next cycle. With a retrospective done the right way, you'll measure what went well, what didn't, and begin the next ideation phase with a clearer picture of what your ads need to look like.

The creative strategist sometimes feels the connective tissue between wholly different aspects of a business. But if you master wearing the hat of creative strategist from these perspectives, you'll be able to put out work that isn't only creatively satisfying, but produces continual improvement for your clients.



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