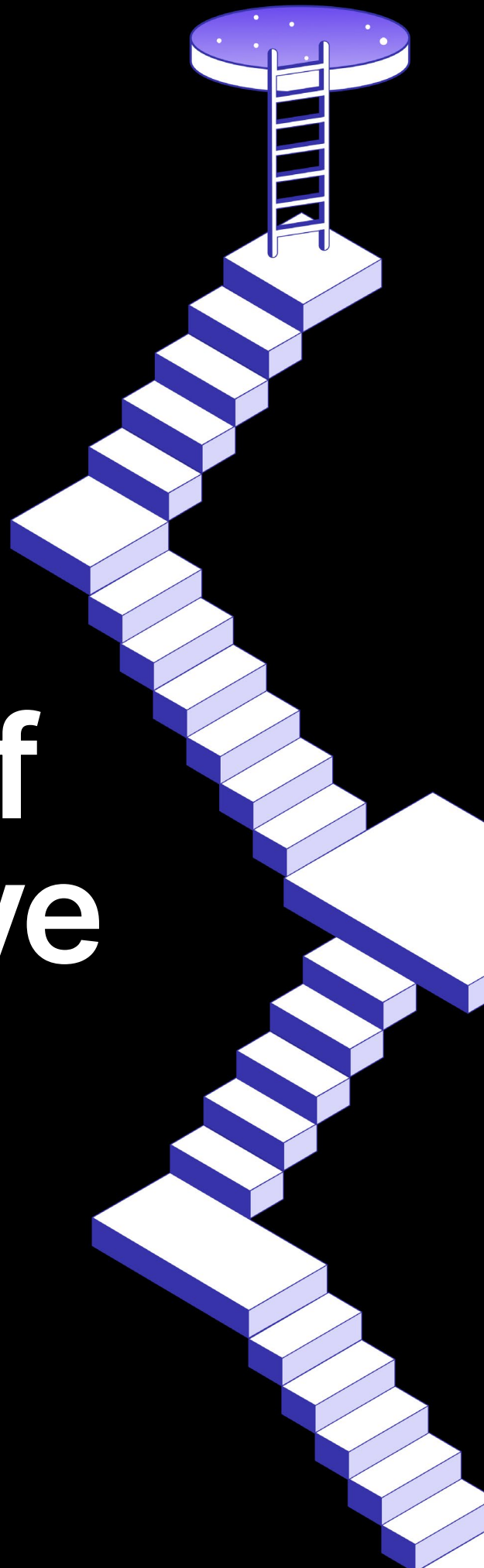




The Rise of the Creative Strategist

Meet the marketers changing the fortunes of 9-figure DTC brands



Diamonds form under market pressure

Creative strategists are helping 9-figure DTC brands and top agencies set themselves apart



Reza Khadjavi
Founder & CEO, Motion

Over the last few years, the creative strategist has gone from a role that very few people knew about, to the fastest-growing job in performance marketing.

Changes in consumer privacy protection and the integration of AI in ad distribution algorithms have ended two decades of targeting-based growth. Now, creative has become the most important lever in paid marketing.

But creativity alone doesn't cut it. To succeed with creative you still need the rigour of an analyst. You need a marketer who is as creative as they are strategic. As comfortable with cost caps as they are with analyzing ad copy.

You need a new type of marketer altogether. You need a creative strategist.

Creative strategists are changing the fortunes of top agencies, turning brands into household names, and managing billions of dollars in ad spend. In this guide, you'll meet six of the best of them to find out how they do it.

We'll show you what makes a successful creative strategist and help you understand how hiring one can transform your business.



^ Alysha Boehm

It's the Creative Strategist's Moment

"I was a designer and I was looking at my next career move.

I knew that good design was only one side of marketing.

That there was another world—metrics, going deep into the data, understanding if the creative works. And I wanted to combine these worlds.

If I could do that I would be able to unlock so many doors and make myself much more valuable.

That's when I thought, *I'm not a designer. I'm not just creative. I'm a creative strategist.*

Creativity is only going to get more important. Companies need this role. I truly think this is the Creative Strategist's moment."

Alysha Boehm

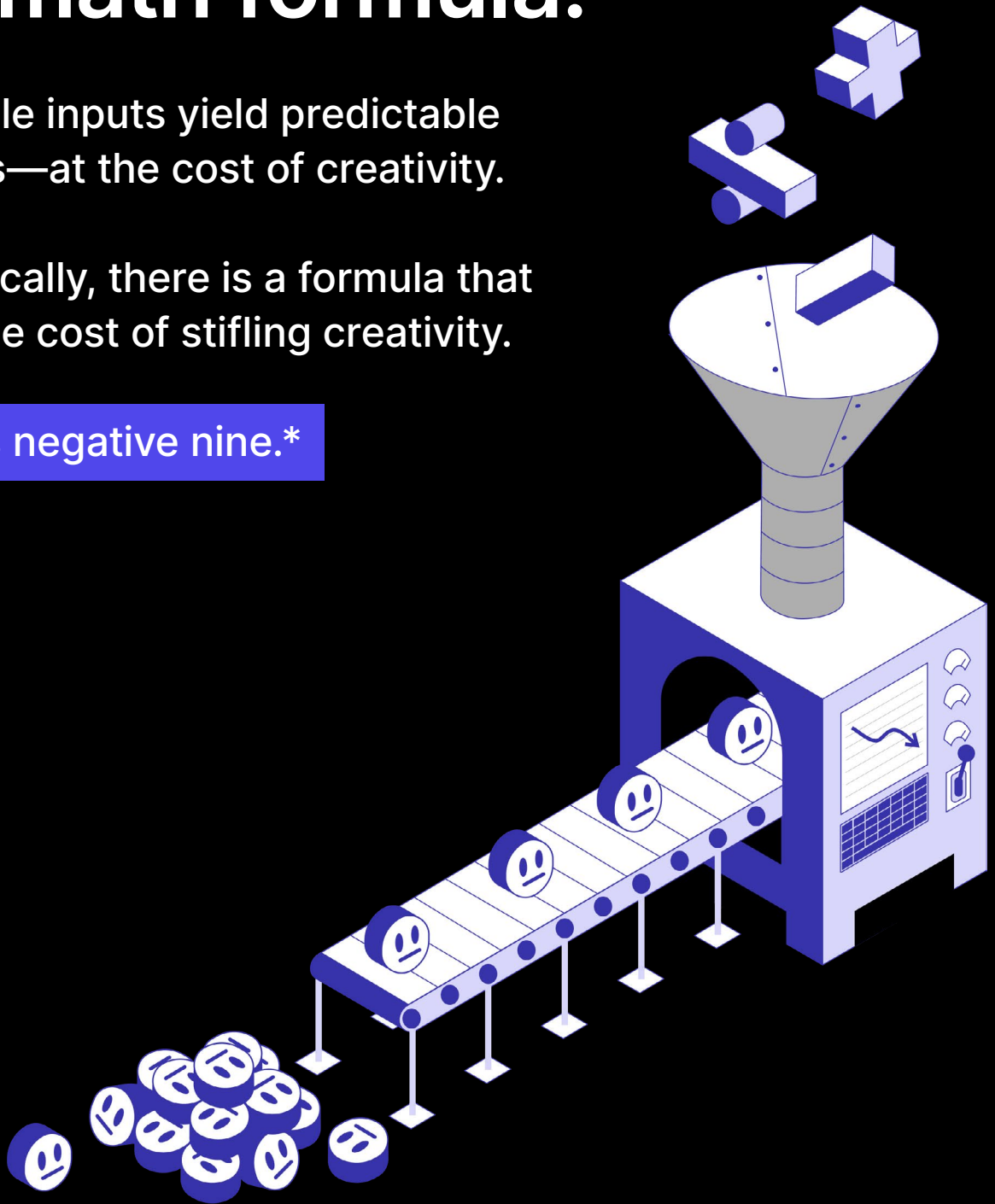
Creative Strategy Lead, Kulin

Marketing can't be reduced to a math formula.

Predictable inputs yield predictable outcomes—at the cost of creativity.

And, ironically, there is a formula that tells us the cost of stifling creativity.

It says it's negative nine.*



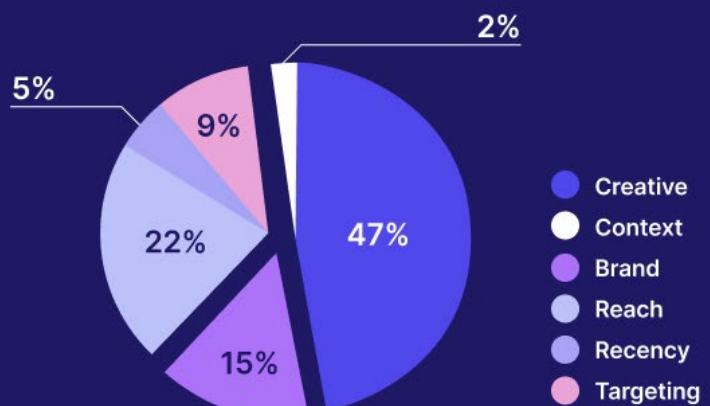
*Creatively awarded campaigns are 9.3X more efficient at driving ESOV than non-creatively awarded campaigns, Les Binet and Peter Field, *The Long and the Short of it*.

Advertisers pour billions into Meta ads without knowing what's driving creative performance

While brands have rushed to buy attribution software, hold-out testing, and incrementality studies, four charts illustrate why creativity is key to it all.

Creative quality is the single most important driver of ROI for advertising, social or otherwise

Percent Sales Contribution by Advertising Element

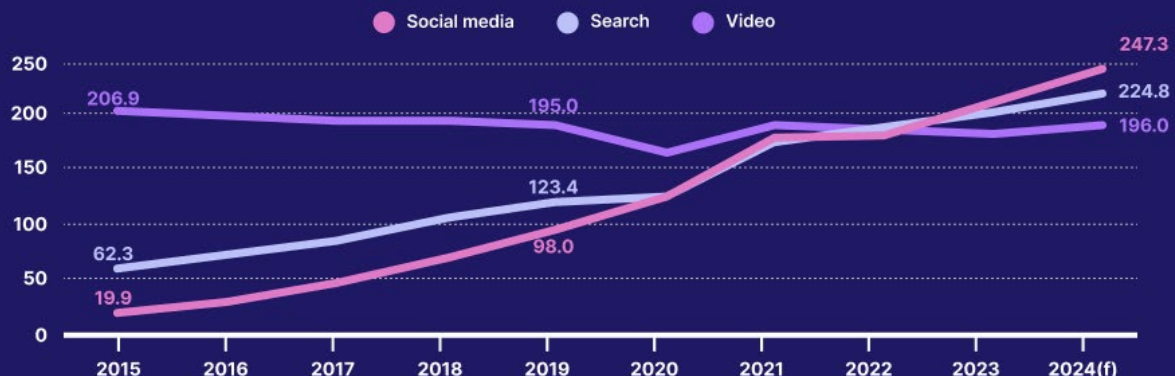


Source: Nielsen

Social ad spend hits \$247 Billion, continues to outpace search and TV

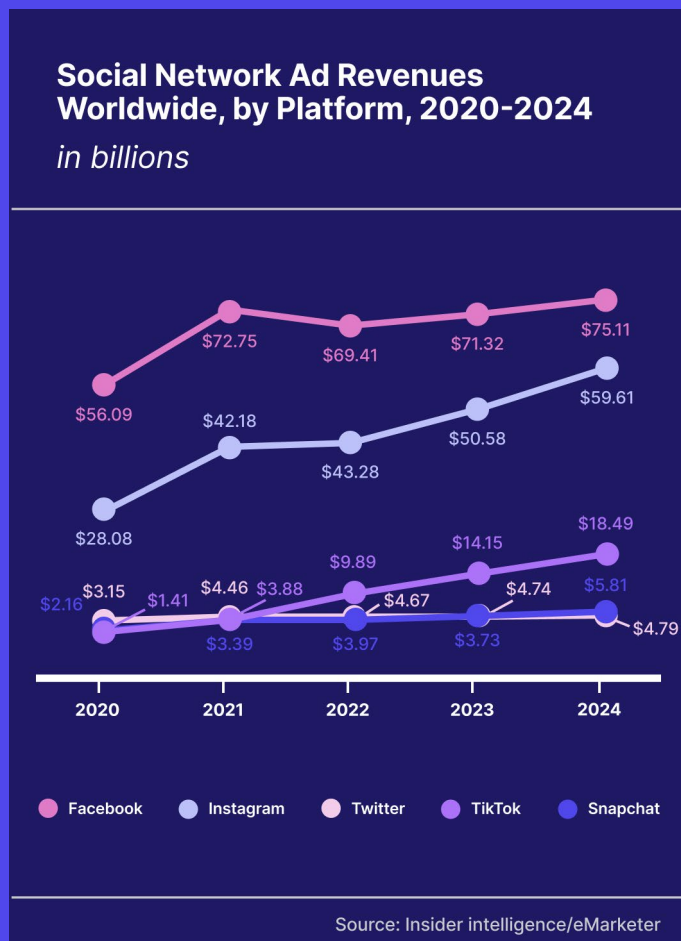
Global Ad Spend on Social, Search and Video

USD, billions, current prices

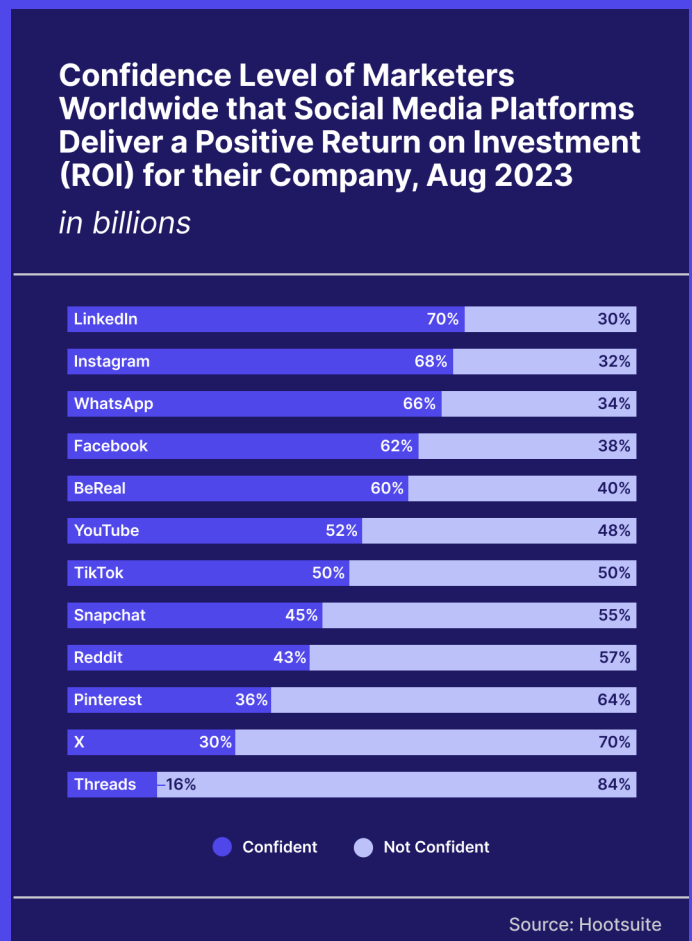


Note: 2024 data are WARC forecasts. Video includes linear TV and connected TV. Search does not include ad spend on retail media networks.
Source: WARC Media

Meta makes up 55% of social ad market, growth across almost all major networks



While more and more money is spent on Meta, 35% of marketers are not confident in their ROI



Put bluntly, billions of dollars are wasted on Meta ads because too many advertisers don't understand what drives creative performance.

As the role of creative grows, the best growth leaders know they need to spend equal time on understanding the science and the art of advertising. Media buying used to be almost exclusively technical. Now, the best teams are working to understand what's working at a creative level and how to build a data-backed pipeline of new concepts and iterations needed to scale spend on the biggest ad platforms in the world.

“We’ve seen the writing on the wall... to succeed in advertising you need amazing creative.”

Making effective creative is not just about following a trendy format or using some hack you saw in a YouTube video. It requires deep thought, strategy, and people who can make tough decisions daily—which is no easy task.

The biggest challenge brands face now is finding someone who can do this.

You need someone who can set priorities, understand the platforms, what’s culturally relevant, and where your business fits in.

They also need to be willing to take risks and experiment.

It’s hard to find that person, but it’s becoming a necessity.... *not a nice-to-have.*

Dara Denney

Performance Creative Consultant
& Motion Chief Evangelist



Two decades of targeting & distribution-based growth have come to an end

Once upon a time, the ability to precisely target audiences across platforms and the scalability of digital channels allowed brands to reach more people with the right products quickly.

Flashy creative directors and mercurial copywriters were no longer the sages of the marketing department. As advertising was democratized, media buyers—many who could pass for web developers—became the most sought-after hires at agencies and brands alike.

This shift was driven by the proliferation of data analytics, programmatic advertising, and social media, which enabled marketers to focus on delivering personalized content to the right audiences at scale.

But then something changed...

iOS 14 allowed consumers to opt out of being tracked for targeting

This tracking is crucial for advertisers to know whether someone bought an item or downloaded an app after they saw an ad that promoted it. As more people opt out of sharing those identifiers, increasingly bigger gaps are created in data for marketers.

AI & algorithm-based targeting took more control away from media buyers

Algorithm-based targeting has shifted control away from media buyers by automating the process of audience selection and ad placement. While this increases an ad's efficiency and precision, it also means that media buyers have less direct influence in media placement.



Creative has become the most important lever in paid marketing

Social platforms have commodified the distribution of advertising.

With fewer levers to pull, the most enterprising marketers have realized that creative is the most impactful lever left in paid marketing.

Creative dictates targeting. Creative ensures an ad's distribution to the right audience. And creative is what allows advertisers to scale spending more confidently.

But at many businesses, the people accountable for the performance of advertising (media buyers) are not the ones responsible for making it (the creatives)—leading to miscommunication, inefficiency, and ultimately poorer ad performance.

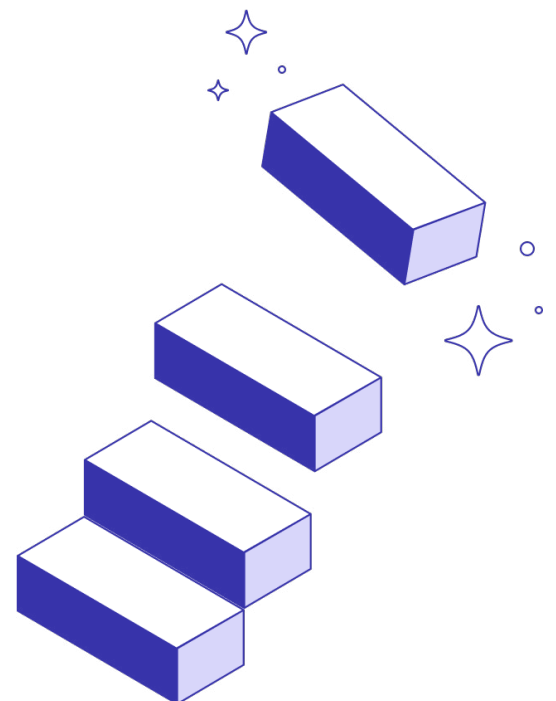
Most marketing leaders recognize that bridging the gap between buying and creative has become critical for success in paid social. But why is it so hard to do?

This 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 that can combine the best of both worlds to build a data-driven creative process.

That's where the creative strategist comes in.



Meet six creative strategists helping the biggest DTC advertisers & agencies make better creative



What are they doing to get ad strategy right when the cost of being wrong is the highest?

The best advertising ideas these days aren't coming from Madison Avenue. They're coming from DTC, an industry that has been forged in the fire of thin margins, highly competitive categories, and hooking attention in noisy social channels without the benefit of a well-known brand.

DTC's dependence on direct response forces marketers to understand channels more deeply, be more attuned to changes in algorithms, and operate on much tighter margins than more traditional advertisers.

Whether that makes advertisers in DTC better than the rest is up for debate. But what's absolutely certain is that these advertisers have much less room to be wrong. As a result, things

that work in DTC tend to be a good leading indicator for what will work for the rest of the advertising industry.

And, right now, the DTC agencies and brands seeing the most success have one thing in common: they have a creative strategist at the helm.

Creative strategists are being incubated at the biggest performance marketing agencies...



^ Meredith Unger, Creative Strategist, Tinuiti

As a Creative Strategist at the largest full-funnel marketing agency in the United States, Meredith brings teams together to create campaigns for leading brands like Culligan, Etsy, and Boston Proper across paid social and beyond.

Creating a bridge between paid media & creative teams

“At some agencies, creative and account management don’t always get along.

I started on a channel team and have worked in almost every side of the ad business throughout my career. That experience allowed me to bridge the gap between these two teams, which often clash, and help them collaborate instead. I’m surrounded by creatives—my spouse is a

graphic designer, and most of my friends are copywriters, designers, and art directors. Those are the people I naturally connect with.

At the same time, I love digging into the details and tweaking things for performance. I’m driven by what drives business results—not just what looks good, but what performs.

In the end, being a creative strategist is really about getting people with very different mindsets to work together toward a shared goal - because that’s what it’s all about.”



Proving the value of creative at scale

< Josh LeGuern, Creative Strategy Lead, Ready Set

Josh ships winning ads and world-class creative for the globe's biggest DTC advertisers. His client portfolio includes 9-figure brands like Hims & Hers, Sunrun, Hotel Tonight, and Win Reality.

"I manage creative for brands with over \$100 million in revenue. These businesses invest heavily in advertising, and they are laser-focused on maximizing the return on that investment.

For some clients, the priority is growth, while others are focused on profitability—which often means a slower path to expansion.

A billion-dollar brand can afford to focus more on growth, but for a seven-figure company, profitability is key to staying in business. That's why being strategic is crucial, especially when it comes to making every purchase profitable at scale.

I love thinking about how to optimize creative across channels—paid social, email, retention strategies, and organic social—all working together to deliver the biggest impact. By seeing the bigger picture and knowing which levers to pull, we can achieve the results our clients need.

When we work as a team, we deliver creative solutions that drive value at scale."



^ Kyle Goldman, Managing Partner, Omnia 1 Analytics

As a Managing Partner at Omnia 1 Analytics, Kyle advises senior leadership at high-growth startups, private equity firms, digital marketing agencies, and brands like Mickey Drexler's Alex Mill, Bandier, and Jolie Skin Co.

Developing cohesive campaigns

"In performance marketing, you have founder content, testimonials, etc. - there are so many genres of ads that exist. So what we'll do is make sure we run the gamut.

Even if testimonials may always be better than founder videos, for example, we know that both work. So for us, it's really about how we can test within the founder video genre to figure out which hooks are going to work the best and so on.

But what is the most fun is when we get the entire team together to ideate. It's a fun experience, we're usually laughing. We'll think

of something that's going on in culture that is meaningful and something that is unsaid that everyone experiences.

And then we ask, how can we bring in the brand and integrate it with that unspoken idea. That creates an interesting moment for people, they feel seen, and... then hopefully they'll want to share it.

We try to create ideas that go beyond just the channels that we manage so that way we're engaging with culture and thinking holistically. We might come up with a really big "organic" idea, and say let's hold ad spend so that the brand can afford to do it."

Creative strategists are finding themselves comfortably in-house at 9-figure brands...



Training media buyers and creative teams

◀ Joanna Wallace, Director of Paid Media Creative, HexClad

Joanna oversees the paid media creative team at HexClad, a luxury cookware brand backed by veteran chefs like Gordon Ramsay. As a pioneer in the field of creative strategy, her past clients have been some of the biggest in DTC. Her portfolio includes Dollar Shave Club, Ipsy, Noom, Savage X Fenty, Rocket Money, FabFitFun, and Dr. Squatch.

"I'm a collector of people. I really try to focus on mentorship.

I like bringing people from different backgrounds together and helping them think like strategists—and finding that perfect mix of creative risks and data-backed hypotheses.

Mentorship, collaboration, and shared learnings are the keys to navigating the highs and lows of ecommerce, and creating a cohesive, successful brand that isn't just a flash in the pan.

And it takes a lot of soft skills to make that happen. Things you can't learn from a blog or in a textbook."



^ Mark Magdayo, Creative Strategist, True Classic

Mark is a Creative Strategist at DTC darling True Classic. He gathers and analyzes consumer data and trends to brief highly targeted campaigns that spend over 100K across social every day.

Conducting research and gathering audience Insights

“What I love most is consumer research. Research is the opportunity to discover something new in the process.

While doing research for True Classic, I delve into social listening to understand how the market perceives our product and what people are saying about it.

Take, for instance, one of our latest campaigns. During research, I found a play on words about our shirts transforming a dad into a ‘Daddy,’ which I thought was a unique angle.

We decided to use this insight, and it performed exceptionally well.

The first step towards generating ideas that get noticed is research. It’s crucial.”



Refining performance creative with data

◀ Yash Thapar, Growth Strategist, Lucyd

Yash helps North America's biggest advertisers use performance data to refine and optimize creative. As a growth strategist at Lucyd, he works to continuously improve creative assets by testing and iterating creative to maximize spend.

"Our primary focus is on performance creative.

Unfortunately, many brands don't grasp the importance of diverse media or lack the funds to invest in their creative. They might struggle to see immediate returns and become discouraged, leading to a narrow focus on short-term results.

I diplomatically navigate concerns while pushing the creative we have.

Our team has mastered the art of optimizing limited creative for performance. And we've done it by having a solid system in place for iteration and testing.

We test a large number of creatives which helps refine our clients' approach. We take as many copy and design variations as we can, we see what's working, develop qualitative theories as to why, then we go back and make more.

Managing and testing ad variations efficiently is key to understanding what works best—and then working to maximize its impact."

What can a creative strategist do for you?

If DTC leaders want to remain competitive as creative becomes more important to their bottom line—they'll need someone to ideate, inform creative direction, and help them find a balance between paid media and creative.

Clearer goals. Better performance.

Without a creative strategist

- ☹ Lack of strategic guidance leads to unclear direction, causing more revisions and delays.
- ☹ Creative and performance teams operate in silos, leading to misalignment and friction.
- ☹ Multiple rounds of revisions slow down campaign timelines, increasing inefficiency.
- ☹ Performance often falls short due to a lack of strategic alignment between creative and data.
- ☹ Teams feel overworked and frustrated, especially with constant changes and revisions.
- ☹ Misaligned campaigns result in wasted ad spend due to underperforming creative assets.

With a creative strategist

- 😊 Clear strategic direction from the start, reducing creative confusion and revisions.
- 😊 Bridge to foster collaboration between performance and creative teams.
- 😊 Higher volume of creative concepts, iterations, and big swings shipped every week to scale spend
- 😊 More efficient workflows with fewer iterations and quicker decision-making.
- 😊 Campaigns are optimized for both creativity and performance, driving better results.
- 😊 Strategic insight improves targeting and creative effectiveness, reducing wasted ad spend.

Motion is the command center for creative strategists

With Motion, creative strategists get help at every step of their workflow including visual analysis of top-performing ads, competitor tracking, research tools, and automated recommendations to help prioritize what to ship next.

Motion's customers include some of the most prominent advertisers in paid social. Brands like HexClad, Vuori, True Classic, Jones Road Beauty, and Ridge use Motion to analyze over \$6B in media spend every year.

Trusted by 1000+ brands and agencies



VUORI

TRUE CLASSIC

JONES ROAD

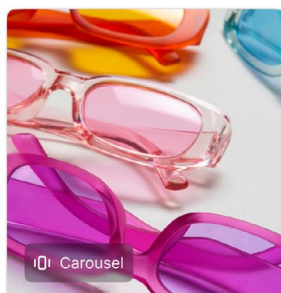
RIDGE

🏆 Last week's top creatives

Save Share

Last 14 days Group by Ad name Add filter

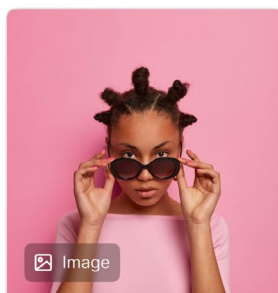
1 ROAS + 2 Spend +



Summer Collection

ROAS 2.3

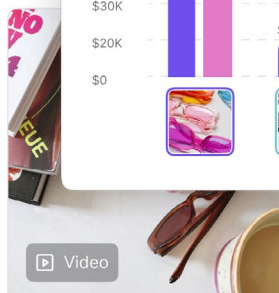
Spend \$58.8K



Creator Photoshoot

ROAS 2.3

Spend \$27K



Vlog

ROAS 3.5

Spend \$18K



Acknowledgements

A special thanks to all of the experts who gave their time and expertise to this piece...

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Dara Denney
Alysha Boehm



Appendix

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