

Expert Interview I with Kuria Mburu, Learning and Practicing Strategist Including | thoughts on focusing on people rather than money.

>> *Kuria guest curated Strands on September 22, 2022 . [Read it here.](#)*

Tell us a little bit about yourself and what keeps you busy. How did you end up doing what you're doing today?

It's been 28 years since my first sale, working at my parent's store a few kilometers from the foot of the Ng'ong Hills, in Kenya. Through my family's building supplies business, product, packaging, price and promotion were a lived experience. So my first job - sitting still and waiting for a daily dose of harassment working as a customer care agent in a bank - didn't excite me. I wasn't getting my mind and body moving - just my mouth, and reluctantly at that.

When I got the chance to join an ad agency in 2002, where 'we got paid to have fun', and practice what I'd learnt in my Marketing degree, I jumped in feet first.

Twenty years on I have supervised account teams, ran operations at a sound studio, got schooled in PR, farmed hot peppers, and worked as a consultant planner for multinational and local brands selling in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Somaliland and Mauritania. Today, I'm learning structure in strategy craft at MA.D Toronto, as I practice my craft at a growing brand agency in Nairobi.

What excites you most about what you do?

I miss my days as a store clerk, where I spent my days getting my hands dirty to help customers solve small and big problems with their houses, farms, and projects. I try to relive the excitement of those days through my work by coming up with solutions for people and businesses, especially for small businesses.

What beliefs define your approach to work? How would you define your leadership style?

People, then money! I can't escape the hardness of capitalism but I can soften its demands on my team's mental and physical health, while enjoying the wealth. In my leadership roles, I've been labeled as "soft", and "too invested in the people who work with me". This approach has definitely lost me opportunities for promotion and more money, but gained me some friends, and a little more restful sleep!

What has been the most rewarding project you've worked on and why?

It was in 2002. I was the youngest at the agency and most junior in account services. The reign of a despot was coming to an end; helping to rid my country of a dictator was one of the first and more memorable campaigns I participated in. We had a great product - the man who would become president, Mwai Kibaki - and people loved the man and his ensemble.

The following year a report from a Gallup International poll (the only truly accurate one in my experience) stated that Kenya was the most optimistic country on Earth. Because of my little efforts in coffee and cigarette runs, research, mounting print-outs on paste up boards, and rushing print ad artworks to the press!

There have been few times in life that I experienced the joy from the outcome of that campaign. Since then, I've been waiting for that feeling again but it has proved elusive. In my moments of despair, memories of that campaign and the outcome inspire belief that my country can not only survive its worst impulses, but thrive again. Even for just one year at a time.

We are big believers in diversity -- Not only because we believe in equality, but because we also think it's better for business. The Black Lives Matter movement has shaped industry conversations around both global injustice, and also lack of representation in our industry. How do you frame these kinds of conversations, both

internally and with clients? Is there an emphasis on action, or are the conversations really more about communication?

I'm a Kenyan who lives and works in Nairobi, Kenya. It surprises people when I tell them that in a country that's 99% Black, the ad business faces issues of representation! For example: multinational brands on Kenyan shelves still rely on (more expensive) creative services from the UK. Local film directors are passed over in favour of foreign ones. Then add the pain of negative ethnicity in accessing economic opportunities. Change has been crawling in a positive direction before BLM thanks to an increasingly liberal society, smaller budgets, and social media's exposure of latent local talent, and the travel restrictions from the pandemic.

I feel that having the conversation around representation is getting easier. First, being a 100% Kenyan team from all over the country affords us a wide perspective of our sense of nationality. Secondly, and because of our diverse Kenyan backgrounds, we have been able to identify that young Kenyans are actively defining what it means to be Kenyan. They are setting the rules. Thirdly, we actively explore, curate, share and celebrate local work. This is still an ad hoc, informal process but effective nonetheless.

Our continuous conversations with clients and partners around the rich, diverse, emerging Kenyan-ness allows us to improve representation and remuneration within the local ad industry.

Switching gears a bit, how do you find time to balance personal interests with your career? Do you believe work/life balance is possible? Anything you've implemented that you recommend that others try?

My personal interest this year has been solely around protecting time for my kids and classes with MA.D Toronto. Here's my typical workday when classes are in session: work throughout the day, spare an hour for my family after work, snatch a nap, then get into 3-hour online classes at MA.D Toronto from 1AM. I'm investing with less sleep, for opportunities in the world outside Kenya.

Before the madness of school and work, this is how I managed work/life balance:

- started the day by cycling (on my indoor bike) for at least 35 minutes,
- muted calls from everyone but my family and close friends from 7pm to 7am,
- charged mobile devices away from my bedside, in the living room,
- allocated set playtime with my kids of 1 to 2 hours on weekdays, and all of Sunday too,
- allocated an hour everyday to hang out with my partner.

What's your media diet? Where do you find inspiration?

IG: Sweathead, Mark Pollard, African photographers

Reddit: I dream up a topic/idea and look for alternative perspective here

YouTube: stand up comedy from everywhere

Books: fiction, strategy, children's (love the simple presentation of ideas)

Substacks: Category Pirates, StratScraps (by Alex Morris), Salmon Theory (by Rob Estreinho), The Profile (Polina Pompliano)

As you know, we believe there is so much value in having a wide range of teachers. What's the best piece of advice/knowledge you've stolen, and who/where'd you steal it from?

"Don't forget to pack who you are every time you traveling away from home, it's what makes them want you to stay"

Essentially, carry with you what you are and where you're from proudly and you'll be unforgettable to others.

Advice from my dad. And I've seen and heard similar versions elsewhere.