

Expert Interview I with Alana Gleason, Senior Strategist at The Martin Agency
Including | thoughts on exploring book stores, strategic territories and getting out of your own way.

>> *Alana Gleason guest curated Strands on February 2, 2023 . [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?

You can often find me exploring book stores or botanical gardens, starting and abandoning new hobbies, or being walked by my Goldendoodle, Waco. Yes, he walks me. When I was little, I loved to write, but thought becoming an author was the only way to make it a career. It wasn't until I took an exploratory class in high school that I found advertising - more specifically, copywriting. I majored in Advertising at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and dove into the business writing world. It wasn't until my senior year (after accepting a spot in an exclusive creative-only portfolio class), that I discovered strategy. I asked my professor to grade me twice - first, as a copywriter and second, as a strategist. I felt my book would be better for it - sharp writing with a strategic thread to hold the separate campaign pieces together. This dual concentration launched my career in strategy starting in the midwest and expanding coast to coast.

What excites you most about what you do?

Territories. Strategic territories represent the potential of a brand - they're created from research, trends, and patterns found in the consumer, the web, and the world. A brand can hold endless creative territories (or directions in which the brand could go), but it takes a strategist to piece the possibilities together.

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

I heard a quote once, "As I rise, I raise." I take it to heart, especially as I've moved up in my own career. Mentorship and education is incredibly important to me. I've



hosted industry immersion events for students, guest lectured at Universities, and I am active in mentorship groups. I wouldn't be where I am today without all of those who took a chance on me. I'd describe my leadership style as nurturing and iterative. Even while teaching others, I am learning from them as well.

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

Oh, this was a fun one. Back when I was working as a Junior Strategist at TBWA Chiat Day LA, we pitched the TikTok for Business account. TikTok was just picking up steam. Charlie D'Amelio wasn't a household name and many thought the app was still for dance challenges. The pitch team needed an early adopter and someone who understood the content and humor of Gen Z. As a TikTok addict, since 2017 (aye), I helped launch TikTok into the B2B / monetized space all while using my age to my advantage. I had authority. I was the insider. And my team trusted me to guide the creative past, the newcomer, bandwagoner, surface-level insights. The creatives landed on "Don't Make Ads, Make TikToks," and I've never witnessed a more true or timeless line. Fast forward a few years and I'm working on a new client at The Martin Agency - they hand us a paid social brief and the takeaway is "Don't Make Ads, Make TikToks." Not only seeing this one liner appear in the context of an entirely different brand, but acting as an execution mandatory was the most rewarding moment of my career. To me, it felt like when society collectively made Google a verb.

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 try to assume good intent. Before initiating or engaging in a conversation that may be a bit uncomfortable, I try to remember that everyone is operating from a different context. It may be ignorance, lack of exposure, cultural beliefs, any number of things,

but often, asking the origins of an idea or thought process will reveal malicious intent if present. I have yet to meet someone who wasn't willing to converse internally or externally. I can only advocate for others if I am educated myself, so I do my best to follow leaders in the activism space and internalize all unfamiliar experiences as truth. I've found I can better speak up for others, when I listen first.

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?

Loaded question! Especially since so much of advertising intersects with my personal interests (celebrities, social media, pop culture). A good strategist will be painfully attuned to what's happening in the world (especially in media and entertainment), but the balance to that is spending time without it. I take nature walks to clear my head and get perspective on what everyone else (including the birds) are doing while I'm often immersed in the internet. When I am online, I don't fight my work lens - if one of my personal interests inspires a work project - I call that working smarter not harder.

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

I read a lot of books. Mostly books that have absolutely nothing to do with advertising. My favorite authors are Brene Brown, Sally Rooney, and Taylor Jenkins Reid. My screen time is way past a healthy limit (mostly because of TikTok). I've found so many inspirational creators across categories - there is a #Tok for everything.

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?

I actually just wrote this one down from Joanna Gaines' new book, The Stories We Tell, "get out of your own way." She likely wasn't the first to say this, but so much of what's actually standing in the way of accomplishing our dreams or goals is just



ourselves. I have to remind myself often that I don't have to be perfect, but I do have to start.