Expert Interview I with Alex Morris, Freelance Strategy Director
Including | thoughts on getting here, chaotic rigor and winning pitches.

>> *Alex Morris guest curated Strands on March 30, 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?

How did I get here? Well when a mommy loves a daddy....

But actually, my parents are highly responsible for the path I chose. My dad was a graphic designer and my mom a screenwriter and commercial director. One of my earliest memories is a Commercial set in our living room where a bowl of dip ended up hitting my dad in the forehead.

As far as recent events go, I joined the layoff party early this year. Everyone has always been telling me I should go freelance, and I finally caved. So– at the moment what keeps me busy is calls and outreach for potential freelance projects to take on.

More broadly, when I'm not in the midst of getting a freelance business off the ground, I keep myself busy in a number of other ways, none of them normal I'm sure...

I like to buy toys for my 2 and a half year old daughter in an ongoing experiment to see what the weirdest toy is that she'll ask to sleep with. Right now, she insists on going to bed with her rubber worms I bought from a gag toy store.

I compulsively make stuff. Some of it might be considered art. I'm really into making lamps right now.

What excites you most about what you do?

The concept that creative irreverence is a valid path to growth. Just wish it was more widely implemented.

Also – working with young, raw talent is truly the most fulfilling thing I've experienced.

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

My approach could probably be defined as chaotic rigor... But there are a few quotes I have taped about my desk that likely illustrate my work best...

"You're supposed to get in trouble, you're supposed to get banned.
Controversy is great. This is advertising. It Isn't for shy people.
If you want to be boring, go and fucking collect stamps"
- Dave Trott

"Be what's causing chaos in your field"
- John Waters

"Certainty is missing the point entirely"
- Anne Lamont

As far as my leadership style, I consider myself a mentor over a leader. People may disagree, but I like working with juniors etc and watching them make the connections. Seeing them light up when a connection is made. I'd rather facilitate that process over leading by example any day.

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

While I was at Virtue, we won a pitch for what would be our first ever TV spot. It was a project RFP for a single TVC meant to launch a new whiskey variant. While we won the pitch, they really liked a tagline that another agency had come up with. So much so that they bought it from the other pitching agency (respect), and told us that we had to use it.

The problem was, the tagline inadvertently was a reference to both drinking and driving as well as insinuating that "no means yes" – both hugely problematic for a spirit brand. Any brand really.

So we fought the client for weeks, and finally, with the blessing of both our President and ECD at the time, I prepared a final argument and ended with "we will walk from the project unless you let go of this tagline."

As a result, we were awarded AOR, and not only shot a great TV campaign, but defined the brand strategy across their portfolio and put a giant of the industry back on track, reversing sales decline and boosting brand salience.

It's easy to let little things slide in this industry. And often agencies fear putting their foot down on issues like this. But we are hired to be experts and creative partners. Not vendors.

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?
We talk a lot about insular hiring, nepotism and the need to hire outside our networks. But I think that's the wrong solution to the problem.

It's not that we need to look outside our network, it's that we need to be growing our network.

Because otherwise we're comparing paper resumes. And paper resumes are a product of privilege, in-group understanding, and luck.

Hiring from a pool of people you've had meaningful conversations with is how you hire people who are the best fit for a job, rather than people who are best at window dressing for the part.

That's the upstream solution. More immediately, there needs to be a willingness to delay work when there isn't representation behind the scene.

Representation ≠ casting.

Representation = input. Not output.

There needs to be a 'no exceptions' culture of acceptable dissent or input. From anyone, anywhere. And those voices need to not just be listened to, but trusted.

I do believe that good strategy work can be done by someone outside the target group...
A man can do strategy work for a women's hair care brand and vice versa.

But we have a moral responsibility as those who shape the media people consume. We need a socratic oath: do no harm. If every decision maker is male, you open up the door to doing harm with the work (let alone the decreased chances of resonance).

Representation is about 1. having diversity behind the scenes, and 2. about making sure that everyone is operating in a space where they feel safe to speak up, no matter what.

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?

Well, back when things were simpler, I had a hard rule. No work at home. I'd stay late if I needed to, and almost always got into the office an hour or two early. But I never brought work home. The subway ride cleansed me of the work day (I bet nobody's said "the subway cleansed me" before), and by the time I got home I was ready – no matter how hard the day.

Now, working from home, as a freelancer, with a toddler and a partner who works 9 hours a day as a low income mental health therapist, It's a little more complicated.

But it is still about time blocking, finding time to cleanse, and being strict about "where you are" at any given point in time.

My problem to be honest might be that I'm too good at leaving work "at the office"

What's your media diet? Where do you find inspiration?
I'm a big fan of curation-oriented sites. the most mainstream likely being Reddit. I also really enjoy Are.na and Startupy.world. Both are full of strange people who are far smarter than me. I also subscribe to too many sub-stacks. To the point where if I don't cut back, I'm at risk of not really reading any of them like I used to.

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?
This answer is cheating, but I'm going to say Jess Henderson, the author of Offline Matters. Because that book (and the accompanying set of cards) has been my biggest source of inspiration by far. It includes tidbits like "Make explicit what's implied" or my favorite quote in the chapter "Everyone is bored and nobody cares"

"HOW TO BREAK THE HYPNOSIS?
WHAT COULD RUPTURE THE MONOTONY OF BORED-BUT-BUSY?

EVERYDAY SURREALISM.
A PRANK.

A CHALLENGE.

AN UNEXPLAINABLE STRANGENESS.

ANYTHING ABSURD.

ANYTHING WITHOUT REASON."

Is there anything we should ask you that we didn't? If so, write your own question and then answer it below.

You didn't ask me if flat earthers believe the moon is flat as well. Which is good because I have no idea.