

Expert Interview I with Katherine Diaz, Director of Trends and Client Success, Ebco Trends

Including | thoughts on nurturing junior team members, feeling a sense of play, and knowing that futures are always plural.

>> Katherine Diaz guest curated Strands on April 6, 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?

I'm Katherine, a Trends and Client Success Director at a boutique agency in the US. I started on brand side, working on behalf of a famous fast-food bee mascot in the Philippines. But I quickly realized my agencies were having all the fun, so I made the leap and I never looked back! Starting from the Philippines and going to Singapore, Hawai'i, and now to California, I've spent the decade bouncing around islands and coastlines for most of my career, keeping strategy at the heart of what I do.

What excites you most about what you do?

I love that learning, experiencing, and sharing cool things is my job description. Skincare regimes in Korea? Self-sustaining gray water systems for housing? Laser beams instead of litter for cat poo in the future? Yes, yes, and yes. There's nothing like being able to surprise someone into changing the way they think about a topic. I'm also fascinated by how and WHY cultures change, so my job is a great way to nurture my curiosity.

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

On leadership:

- I'm fierce about nurturing junior team members, especially mentees of color. I've been lucky enough to have had great, intentional, compassionate bosses and mentors everywhere I've worked, and I know how valuable that has been for my career. It's my duty to pass that on.



- I believe a leader is there to lift up their team, to be perceptive to their needs, to be alert to their strengths, and to intervene when necessary. I work to help juniors cultivate the education, the tools, and the psychic space they require to do the work.

On work:

- I do my best work when I can feel a sense of play. If you can play, then you're likely to stay curious and interested in the work, you're likely to innovate new rules, and the effort will feel richer and more rewarding.
- I've definitely been the "career comes first" girlie, with my late nights and constant vigilance for deadlines, but I am also enjoying and appreciating how modern conversations have turned toward the need for balance. I want to do interesting work with people I enjoy spending time with, then shut down my laptop, take care of my non-work relationships, surf, and eat. There will, of course, be times when I pull longer hours. It can take conscious effort to make sure work is not the only and absolute center of my life, but the effort is worth making.

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

I worked deeply on a piece looking at the future of the Philippines a decade forward. I'm Filipino, so of course this vision was close to my heart. I particularly love further out futures work, since it requires observational logic and creativity in equal measure. We conceptualized these futures for a company that was so influential in the national landscape; what they might choose to do can significantly reshape people's everyday lives. The company reports that our finished vision continues to shape their big bets, and I'm grateful that I got to be a part of that.

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 queer immigrant from the Global South, so my simple presence often brings those issues to the forefront, whether I choose for that to be the case or not! It can be fascinating, or depressing, to witness what people assume, and what they are clearly holding back, when they speak to me. I am fortunate to be at the point in my career where I know I belong in any room I'm in, so just showing up and doing great work shows people what's possible—if they're willing to look.
- I think it's also a matter of privilege to be able to drive those conversations. I've worked in places where being queer was not something you acknowledged, or could be used against me. I've found it impossible to get certain jobs because of my immigration status. When your ability to pay the rent is on the line, it's not so easy to rock the boat! Being able to say "my wife" in casual conversations with the client still feels brave and a novelty to me.
- Giving a leg up to other queer young people of color, and helping shape—or, in memorable cases, correcting—the corporate conversations we have around Pride month has always been a source of fulfillment.

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?

I won't lie, it takes effort to have other things in my life. Work can have its own gravitational pull. Since I work at home, my wife is constantly forcing me to leave the house. I know it's important to find something outside work that interests you and takes time. Preferably something with a schedule that you're beholden to, like a class or a volunteer group. Work expands to fit the time you have, so put a limit on that time! It also helps to reassess your relationship with ambition and the word "enough." It took a lot of therapy for me to reflect on this, but I really like my life as it is now. I don't feel the compulsion to be in cutthroat competition 24/7. If I'm happy with my work and what I've accomplished, then I'm good for the day.

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

I love a good newsletter. I will subscribe to basically anything that's recommended to me. I'm currently loving Culture Study and The Unpublishable. I've never really been into the latest TV, so I learn about pop culture by googling the summaries of the series (!) or from osmosis. Honestly though, I probably spend most of my time reading - YA, fantasy, science fiction, graphic novels, horror, cookbooks, I read all of it. Reading comes in handy in all sorts of surprising ways, sure, but as we just talked about, sometimes things should be done just because you like it and not because it's "productive." That's okay!

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?

Two things:

- Futures are always plural. It is never "the future," but "futures." It's the height of hubris to assume we can tell a singular future with any certainty, so it's important when we make predictions to allow for several scenarios. The truth is likely to lie somewhere in between, or overlapping!
- Client management doesn't have to be squicky or adversarial. I think this is something I've learned from observing my most skillful bosses over the course of my career. At its best, you're developing a real relationship with your client, just like any other relationship, and because of that you are genuinely trying to help them do whatever it is they need to do. As my mentor Jeremy Sy put it while I was working at Kantar: we learn what the client's needs are, and if we truly can't help them, then we point them to someone who can, and we respectfully walk away. At the same time, it's healthy to walk away from a client that doesn't respect your team. Accounts come and go, but your team is more important. Having bosses that were willing to sacrifice accounts or otherwise stand up for me has been so powerful. It's never about just closing the sale.