

Expert Interview I with Mike Jacobson, Freelance Strategist
Including | thoughts on playing a part in culture and figuring out how people tick.

>> Mike Jacobson guest curated Strands on February 16, 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 was a surprisingly introverted kid. Stranger danger was my M.O. But once I started to learn magic, it unlocked a deep-seeded love of not only entertaining people, but understanding them. Figuring out how they tick, what they're thinking, why they're thinking, and how to make them think something else. The secret of magic isn't figuring out a cool way to get a ball under a cup, it's figuring out how do you make people care! And so when I realized that strategy also hit all those boxes as a means to creating a brand or making a campaign, I was like well thiiiiiiiis seems coooool.

What excites you most about what you do?

I think it comes down to learning about our world. In what other job do you get paid to go deep and get borderline existential on... literally everything? I now know way too much about everything from baby mattresses to video games to cars to comedy to fast food to the intricacies of stop animation and everything in between. That said, the other thing I've always loved: just playing a part in culture. I love the ins and outs and weirdness that is the cultural conversation, and love to help brands play a role in it.

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

These days I've been thinking more and more about how all marketing is content and content is marketing. Like, in a world where where ads exponentially need to *not* feel like ads, the bar starts to shift. Today ads have to feel as interesting, entertaining, and/or useful as a TikTok. Leadership wise, I was recently described as



the Ted Lasso of strategy and I kind of loved it? Like an empowering coach, diplomat, giver, all without ego (as much as I can). Sometimes to a fault.

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

Far and beyond, the pro-social work I did with MTV. Regardless of how one might feel about their programming, MTV has consistently put its money where its mouth is when it comes to pro-social issues. I was able to help launch Mental Health is Health (MTV's new 20 year initiative to normalize the MH conversation) alongside Mental Health Action Day (to move the conversation from awareness to action) alongside the MTV Mental Health Media Guide (the first media industry-wide resource to establish MH storytelling guidelines for everyone).

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?

Great question. I think the key to these conversations is being blunt. We have to call it - and ourselves - out, and acknowledge reality. It's crunchy, but that's unavoidable. And that's the only way we can move forward.

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 might be oversimplifying, but to me this has always come down to an allocation of fucks. Mark Manson's book *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck* really helped solidify this mantra. Building a keen sense for when to stay up all night, and when to close a



laptop at 6p and stop caring, has been essential to my ability to have work/life balance.

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

I have to say, I am such a big fan of the Tiktok rabbit hole these days. It just feels like there's nothing that keeps me more connected to culture on a street level than it. The algorithm is undefeated, even if China is probably trying to slowly convince me why communism is totally chill.

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?

Looooove this. Whenever my wife and I make friends with an old couple who are clearly still deeply in love, we love to ask, "What's your secret?" We've got some amazing replies, but one of my favorites was simply, "Do more than your half." I love that phrasing, and it's a great goal to always maintain a strong relationship.