

## **Expert Interview I with Sean Choi, Sr. Strategist & AAPI ERG Lead @ The Martin Agency**

**Including |** thoughts on satisfying our restless brains and instilling responsibility

>> Sean guest curated Strands on June 23, 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?**

An Oceans 13 Start:

It's not every day that you hear a Strategist literally break their way into the industry, or is it? Like Danny Ocean, it started with an itch for the next challenge and in my case, a career change. This stemmed from a come-to-Jesus moment that was quickly followed by a spontaneous move to NYC with more bags than job prospects. The circumstances called for mastermind planning - monitoring top agency targets, automating job description processing, and planting the personal website bait. Then came the main course - impersonating a bike messenger to get past building security so I could hand deliver packages to Strategy leaders with hiring power. The package? A note about not judging a book by its cover letter or résumé accompanied by a bottle of Gruet, a champagne brand from New Mexico that similarly fooled some of the best winemakers in France. I was 5 years under qualified for that first agency Strategy role. But I got it and I haven't looked back since.

### **What excites you most about what you do?**

- 1) That strategy provides infinite puzzles satisfying our restless brains and incessant itch for problem solving
- 2) That we author creative solutions and also serve as muses for creatives. It's as if we're compensated and recognized for our shower thoughts.
- 3) That cultural awareness and fluency are so central to our function. We double as both empaths and proxies.
- 4) That we get to make advertising more than just advertising. That our messages have an influence on the way the world perceives, thinks, and communicates.

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

Experience Inventory: Deeper strategic thinking stems from an inventory of experience but we often forget to replenish or restock it. No matter where we're at in our development, we need to immerse ourselves in the new, different, or even uncomfortable because consistency kills creativity.

People First: Employees aren't costs, nor are they assets. They're people. When we prioritize that, we can properly invest in that relationship and in return, they invest in the vision/dream/dream. We forget that being professional can still be personable.

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

The most rewarding project I've worked on is one that never even made it out into the world. It started with a rather loose brief that came in from the client. After some time, we eventually authored an idea that was far more specific and weaved in a powerful narrative around immigrant small business owners.

After returning to and presenting to clients, the entire project was put on pause. This may not sound ideal, but it was actually because our work pushed them to reframe how they were approaching this entire workstream altogether.

The reward was being able to tap into personal experiences and explore them in ways that I hadn't previously. The results were that both clients and our internal teams were pushed to a level of thinking and purpose that became a new bar for all the work we did thereafter.

**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?**



With equal parts educational relevance and the instilling of responsibility. The conversation around DEI has become table stakes but the underwhelming amount of actual changed behavior has exposed the lip service.

When it comes to what I look for in an employer, a shared mission is one of my top criteria and I'm fortunate to work somewhere that is just as passionate about fighting invisibility as I am. At the Martin Agency, I've been able to exercise that passion in my actual work and I've learned that clearly showing the path of relevance between DEI and the audience your speaking to is the most impactful. After creating a forgiving, safe space for discussion, coming in with substantiation and personal anecdotes has helped everyone feel the same level of responsibility.

### **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?**

Admittedly, I suck at this. But I've thought about the matter deeply for quite some time so I hope this helps others that may feel similarly.

I believe work/life balance is indeed possible and most achievable when we first identify whether the barriers to it are internal or external. Externally, I'm fortunate enough to work at a place that is understanding and supportive of our personal lives but I recognize this may not be the case for everyone.

Internally, I find it to be imperative for us to be introspective about the barriers we actually place on ourselves. In my case, I am the cause of my own imbalance with the pressure I put on myself to perform and climb upwards. It will take me a while to 'resolve' this but being self-aware that this comes from a Confucian upbringing has granted me the patience for all that I need to unlearn.

What pushes me forward is recognizing that investing time in my personal self helps my work self. So my challenge to you would be to truly think about the potential internal barriers to your work/life balance. Is it the fear of being expendable? Is it the amount that work makes up your identity? Is it your obsession with status or even an ego? Explore it, work at it, and know you're not alone.



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

For snippets of what's going on in the world, my flavor of media is skimming through newsletters like Morning Brew, The Hustle, Robinhood Snacks, and Patent Drop

For inspiration, I often find it by going with the flow when spontaneous, unexpected opportunities present themselves.

Last month, it started with helping a stranger with directions at a subway station, ending up at a dive bar, hanging with new jazz musicians friends until 4am, seeing them perform the week after, and having randomly run into them twice since then. The entire series of events sparked heaps of insights around the gig economy, the evolution of music, the economy of prestige - all from simply saying 'yes' a few times.

## **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?**

"Particle of Truth". A nugget of wisdom from English philosopher John Stuart Mill that I've added to my beliefs since college.

The idea is that every interaction has value in it. Even if those that we are interacting with aren't teaching us something new directly, there is something that can be learned indirectly. Thus, it's our imagination or perspective that can help us find the particle of truth in any experience.