

Expert Interview I with Sharon Panelo, Founder of Stories & Strategies LLC
Including | thoughts on positively impacting society, culture and the world at large.

>> Sharon guest curated Strands on August 4, 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?

I'm currently on a sabbatical between career chapters and keeping busy as the CEO of My Own Interests: reading, journaling, earthing, connecting, and vibing to a rotating list of seasonal playlists.

I've always been a story nerd, but even as an English major, I was unsure of how to make a living around storytelling, or what career paths existed beyond teaching, academia, law. In grad school I took a course from the brilliant Tasha Space on the Business of Brands and was blown away at how she applied insightful cultural trends to create new opportunity spaces for brands -- and it launched my pivot into adland, first as a cultural trend spotter for Wunderman Thomson Intelligence, and then into brand strategy at McCann NY.

My first job was in marketing for a financial institution, and it was tough to break into the agency world. I submitted many resumes but never got a call back because I didn't have agency experience. I believe that if you can't get in through the front door, try the side or back door. I started attending industry events around the city and hanging out where agency people hung out. One rainy night in the lower east side, I dragged myself out to a networking event where we learned to use the techniques of improv acting and improv comedy to improve our business pitching skills. That night I met my future first boss in advertising and sidestepped the entire interview process based on our meeting that night. I had been shooting my shot for almost a year, and really didn't want to go out yet again. But something in me said, if you go, there's a 50% chance you'll meet someone who can open the door to your next opportunity. If



you stay, home, there's a 0% chance. That saying - showing up is half the battle - changed my life.

What excites you most about what you do?

I'm incredibly excited about having a seat at the table of brands that can have a positive impact in society, culture, and the world at large. To work with agencies who have agendas even broader than just advertising has been a privilege and a joy, knowing that we are creating spaces and opportunities for more people to succeed in our industry. Also, how fun is it to work and play at the intersections of culture every day?

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

I have been shaped by the spaces and places I've grown up in. I return often to "Truth Well Told", the tagline since 1912 for McCann Erickson. At Martin, I leaned into our shared values of Fire, Heart, and Candor. And finally, I'm inspired by leaders like John Lewis who made a life and career by getting into "good trouble." My leadership style is open, authentic, collaborative, and energizing. I've absorbed the NYC culture of hustle and hype but increasingly trying to balance that with California chill and flow. Lifelong motto (especially in our industry): "If you're not having fun, you're doing it wrong."

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

The projects that have leveraged social media in service of social justice, such as the #MillionHoodies campaign, a response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, and one of the earliest surges of the Black Lives Matter movement. We created the campaign in real-time, staying late in the office to quickly come up with the strategy, design posters, develop a website and hashtag aggregator from scratch, set up an online petition, and organize a rally in Union Square, which Trayvon's parents flew in from Florida to attend. Our work made the front-page cover of *The New York Times*, and President Obama made his first public statement to the nation, the website was



getting hits from all over the world, and change.org was the fastest-growing petition in its history. We won a few Cannes Lions as well but the real victory of course was the cultural impact and leveraging the tools of brand-building for movement-building. Link to [Case Study Video](#).

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?

Thankfully, we now live in a time when more partners and clients are more aware of the need for diversity, but there are still huge gaps, blind spots, and apathy when it comes to actual change and actions. I am always looking for ways to advocate for more women, POC, and LGBTQ talent to break into and level up in our industry, even if it's just me giving my time to mentoring emerging talent and providing a real-world perspective on what it's really like navigating this industry. At the Martin Agency I pioneered a Social Accelerator program focused on diversity to attract interns and other emerging talent with a core curriculum, 360 performance reviews, and portfolio development. I also believe we are in a new era of ERGs, and I'm especially feeling the momentum from AAPI, Black, and Latinx employees that is pushing forward and gaining traction that we haven't seen in years. Visibility matters. Sometimes it's simply a matter of representation -- you can't be what you can't see.

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, a recovering workaholic (and first-born daughter of immigrants), have been addicted to achievement for most of my life. For many of us, the pandemic unleashed a glitch in the matrix and revealed that we have all been making it up, this



collective delusion of offices and commutes and PowerPoints and girlbossing and hustle mode on. I'm not sure what the answer to the elusive work/balance question is, but I know your environment is a huge factor in that. Finding a place where people work to live, not live to work. Just escaping NYC for the summer and, yes, touching grass and climbing mountains and swimming in canyons is the ultimate remedy for regrounding yourself and what really matters.

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

Way too many hours of TikTok. I swear it teaches you everything and gives you a direct unfiltered window into worlds you'd never see in real life. And the comments section truly are the last sunny place on the internet. The algorithm is genius. A true for-you experience if you're a learning and entertainment junkie like me.

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?

"Nothing ever is, everything is becoming." -Heraclitus