

Expert Interview I with Will Humphrey, Proposal Strategist at a Consultancy You've Heard Of

Including | thoughts on injecting empathy, understanding, and compassion into the world.

>> Will guest curated Strands on September 8th 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 a father of two under fives, so large parts of my day is made up of making sure they're both happy, well fed, and stimulated by their father's silliness. (And watching a lot of Bluey, which is a genuinely valuable strategic resource).

Beyond being a parent, I've been working in strategy since 2007, in a variety of differently shaped comms roles; from traditional brand planning at Lowe, to founding a strategy function at Edelman, right through to more integrated, digital work at the likes of R/GA and Wunderman Thompson. Most recently, I've moved into consultancy, where I help with strategy for some of our largest proposals/pitches. I'm only a few months in, but it's been a fascinating new train set to play with.

Outside of work, I read a lot (largely fiction, as I firmly believe you're much more likely to grow empathy away from the typical business books, which is vital to any strategic role), long to play golf again (one day, one day), enjoy the odd point and click game (here's to the new Monkey Island!) and love a Dad joke or three (which reminds me, I hate those Russian Dolls - they're so full of themselves).

What excites you most about what you do?

The opportunity to inject a little empathy, understanding, and compassion into the world based on helping shape some of the choices companies and governments make. Numbers are just people, after all.

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

Oooh, this is a Big Question(tm). Actually, it's really two, but I'm going to do my best to answer this as one.

Being very blunt for a moment, the job is about bringing people with you, whether you're nominally leading a team or out on your own. Strategy is about creating the conditions for success, whether that's one on one time with senior stakeholders, or cajoling your junior planner to help you turn what could be a very dull creds document into something sharp, provocative, and interesting. My leadership style, and my approach to the job is just that; understand the current conditions along with try and affect change. Not by charging in with bluster or behaving like strategy Jesus.

Where I see a lot of people get it wrong, at least in the early days, is the belief in the cult of right (or even interesting, to be honest!) It's about neither of those things; it's about helping very large organizations make incremental changes. Not about showing just how right you are.

The world is a fuzzy place; everyone is guessing to some degree. A strategy is a lateral leap into what something could look like, and no amount of data will prove its rightness. Frequently, those within the strategic community, due in part to a lack of individual training and a reliance on empiricism ('it worked for my degree, why can't it work here?' Or, 'this person's successful, I must ape precisely what they've done'), will fall back on commonly held truths without stopping to consider the conditions they're dealing with it.

This is turning into a long comment, which could be summed up by a cricketing idiom - in strategy, play each ball on its merits.

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

I'm working on a number now I can't name - so i'll talk about one from the semi-recent past, the work I was involved with at Wunderman Thompson for ZSL (London Zoo).

During the pandemic, the zoo was in trouble. Like a lot of cultural institutions, it received all of its funding from the general public, who couldn't visit it. It was losing somewhere in the region of half a million pounds a week (just think of the animal feed costs alone, to say nothing of its investment in research).

So, they approached our parent company for a bit of help. There was lots of back and forth, but the upshot was this - how do we convince a general public with less money than ever, who think ZSL is comfortably off - that giving is a good idea?

The solution lay, as content on the internet often does, in the animals themselves. Research indicated that the 'charismatic megafauna' (the big, famous animals like tigers, elephants, monkeys) took the lion's share (sorry) of content - whether that was being showcased in Pixar films, or in broader animal comms.

So, we took the decision to shine a light on the lesser known animals. Those who had a greater role in feeding the imagination of their attendees (like AA Milne, or Darwin). The proposition became "Feed the Animals today to feed your imagination tomorrow", which spoke to the provenance of the place and unified the key audiences of small children and scientific researchers. You can see the lead film here (Marketing Dept): <https://www.wundermanthompson.com/work/help-us-to-stay-open>

I was most proud of it because, at speed, it showcased the best things about the brand strategy role - working, evolving the work and thinking - whilst empathizing and understanding your audience. And it worked, generating over a million pounds within the first few weeks of campaign launch.



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?

So, I'm very interested in this topic. I am a tall, white, plummy sounding man, someone whose father worked in the advertising business. So far, so cliché.

But I'm also someone who, unlike a lot of the industry, went to a state (read, non fee paying) school. Someone who didn't know what strategy was, DESPITE having a parent who worked in industry (planners didn't really exist as a single job outside of London then). As a result of that, I became determined to demystify that business; I've set up blogs (AdGrads, the AdMission) and free training days (Getting In & Getting On) to help let people know about the industry.

In my mind, I didn't know about it because I couldn't see it. And to quote Billie Jean King, 'you've got to see it to be it'. So few potential candidates even know the job exists, and those who do, and get in - many churn.

It's our job, regardless of race, colour or creed, to shine a light on those people who REALLY use our products and services - and in the case of communications recruitment, help uncover where the real lateral thinkers are.

This means more of a socio-economic focus on investment in uncovering and addressing those people, checking in with them regularly. What we can't do is expect them to come knocking because of the latest D&I initiative - they need to be able to afford to come to London to do work experience first, or be able to afford the rent on their first flat. It'll pay back, both in terms of the work made, and in terms of the sales generated for our clients' businesses.



It's far too easy to sit in a gilded cage and assume because you got in, others will be able to. You've, like an earlier answer, got to help create the conditions for diversity to thrive. And that doesn't start and stop with a D&I event, as well-intentioned as that is.

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?

The short answer? With difficulty.

The slightly longer answer: I find the time, boringly, by re-imagining my work day, and being ferocious with my diary. Prior to 8am, I am with my kids. Chatting to them, having breakfast, and doing the nursery or school run. Between 5-7pm, I'm also with them (mostly), picking them up, doing bath and bed routines. Work fits around that, for the most part, not the other way around.

I do believe work/life balance is possible, but I do also think it's something of a privilege based upon seniority. I'm now old enough to know when I can dodge something, or do it later. I wouldn't have known that at 25. I do at 38.

In terms of what to try - first of all, acknowledge that there is no perfect. Work intrudes at times, you do the odd late night; don't be hard on yourself! However, if you can, signal like mad. Let people know, repeatedly, that you're going to be leaving or getting in at XYZ time. If you don't, work will take you over. People are respectful of my time because I'm largely available outside of the times I mention above. People get it, for the most part.

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

My media diet is somewhat conditioned by being a parent. (I watch a lot more Hey Duggee and Peppa Pig than ever before).

That said, there are three recent discoveries that I like a lot.

1) My regular, Friday Aeon newsletter. Yes, it's a newsletter about philosophy, but it's the most laterally minded way of thinking about the world I read regularly. Am I stoic with my children? Perhaps more so after reading it.

2) The Red Right Hand Files, Nick Cave's meditations on life, the universe, creativity and everything. Would that more wrote or thought like him. (I'm also a massive fanboy of his music, but you needn't be to enjoy his writings).

3) Bandit, Bluey's Dad. Yes, he's a cartoon dog. Yes, his sometimes ocker Aussie ways couldn't be more different to my somewhat more starchy RP approach to parenting. But my God, he's a role model in terms of how he plays with his (fictional dog) children.

Where don't I find inspiration? The overwhelming bulk of communications newsletters/channels/books. There are a number of obvious exceptions (Tone Knob, Russell D's newsletter, Neil Perkin's Firestarters YouTube channel), but they are very much in the minority. Read and expose yourself to weird stuff; don't read what everyone else reads!

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?

Hmm. Well, my favorite piece of advice is "Life is how you respond to it"...but I can't remember where I stole it from. Probably a bastardisation of a Talk Talk song (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3VqAsMXE7o>) and David Foster Wallace's 'This is Water'. In essence, things will happen to you in this life. Your measure as a human being is how you respond.

You can curl up in a shell, but the very best use their situation as fuel, in my experience.