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OPINION: MY MONKEY. MY CIRCUS



Staff Writers

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In this opinion piece the Tall Planner, aka Kate Smither, reflects on her journey as a solo-preneur and the lessons about the industry and herself she has learnt on the way.

Today, The Tall Planner Pty Ltd turns seven. In dog years it's 49, and in advertising years it's probably closer to 700. But as the business I started back in pre-COVID 2019, I like to think of it as a wide-eyed seven-year-old, full of optimism and curiosity. And just as A. A. Milne kind of said in Now We Are Six, I hope it stays seven now forever and ever.

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A lot has been written about the more serious lessons of business, and what indies do when they grow up, and how to know when to do what. I truthfully never wanted to scale The Tall Planner — I just wanted the freedom to do the work I loved. Oh... and pay the bills.

When I set it up, I had a clear commitment to deliver straightforward strategy to as many different businesses and brands as I could. I knew I loved what I did, but when I started the business, I deliberately wanted to find all the problems I could that would make me fall in love with the work all over again. And seven years on, it has.

I always say that strategists are great at planning for others and hopeless at planning for themselves. When I was CSO leading teams of strategists, or teaching, I used to love helping strategists discover what kind of thinkers they were going to be and how their brains worked.



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The Tall Planner has made me go through that same discovery process myself. It has given me clarity on what makes me different... what my USP is as a strategist and, in turn, where it can be most useful.

Often I get asked, "So Kate, tell me how you are different from the other strategists in the market?" The standard "why you?" question. I answer with complete honesty that I don't have any proprietary tools, templates or tricks, and if you want that, I'm not your girl. There is nothing unique that I can tangibly offer, but what I can do is make the complicated simple — really fast.

So now I have the answer. What makes me different? I get to simple.

That's just how my brain has always worked, and over the last seven years I've realised that it's not only a bit unusual, but also quite useful. It does mean, to any prospective investors, that The Tall Planner only really has my brain to sell, though. No sexy process or slick-sounding toolkits — just me.

Seven years in, both the business and I have more focus. I think that's normal. Businesses cycle from doing everything to doing almost everything. When you start, you take any job, hoping that at some point you'll earn the right to be selective, but not really caring because you just love the work.

I was told when I set up the business that I'd be okay if I could live with two fears in equal part: the first, a fear of never working again; the second, a fear of having too much on while only being one person. Nothing has ever been so true.

Somehow that hasn't freaked me out completely. I'm comfortable in the uncomfortable. I also follow one rule when looking for projects: is it interesting work, is it a good problem to solve, and is it for people I want to solve it for?

It means that whilst the business is technically structured on three pillars, I still take on other jobs that interest me. "No" is not a word I've used much in the last seven years... well, maybe just once or twice.

Seven years in though, The Tall Planner focuses on what it can do well. All things brand — brand strategy (for clients or agencies, pitches or projects, in-house teams), research (positioning, product or concept testing), and brand advisory services (fractional head of brand, advertising or agencies).

Knowing your lane is liberating. Being able to tell people there are others better suited to something than you are, is too. If you know what you can do, you know where the gaps are, and you probably also know someone who can plug those gaps with their own skills.

The talent in and around this market is pretty astonishing, so pulling together a crack team when needed is far more straightforward than it used to be.

There has been much debate over recent months about where strategy lives. Has it "killed" the agency? Is it due to reinvent itself as a Naked 2.0-style offering? Is it best kept within a high-level business consultancy? Is it less pure when linked to a creative outcome? Is it undervalued, underestimated or under-resourced... or a little bit of all of the above?

What I've come to realise working on my own is the strength of strategy being independent. By that I mean brand strategy can and should be owned by the client. After all, they own the brands, so they should be as close as possible to every part of it.

When what I do sits with a client, it can actually do more. It removes the translation process of marketing brand plans into brand strategy, client briefs into agency briefs, and so on. Instead, the strategy becomes a shared source of truth throughout the development of the agency response.

No strategy should live in a PowerPoint deck, and with clients owning it, it has a far better

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No strategy should live in a tower on one deck, and with clients owning it, it has a far better chance of coming to life in everything from product to communications, channels to internal culture. Clients can make it real in lots of different ways.

I've also learnt that when the client owns the strategy, it can make the dreaded — but fabulous — pitch process much smoother too. If the client has taken the time to properly diagnose their problem and define their strategy, it levels the playing field. Agencies can then ideate from a position of buy-in and focus on what that strategy can do and become, rather than debating what it is.

Recently, through The Tall Planner, I've had the chance to test this theory across two client pitches. It's a much more relaxed process when the strategy and creative brief are internally ratified before agencies enter the room.

Between TrinityP3's "State of the Pitch" report and the announcements around the Woolworths creative pitch and KFC's expanded creative roster, it became clear that relocating strategy upstream into the hands of clients has never been more critical.

It might just mitigate the "testing of the market" and arduously long pitches Trinity identifies, and it would certainly help minimise brand schizophrenia. Once a roster or agency village is created, you risk multiple strategies being at play and, in a market already characterised by low attention and fractured messaging, that's pretty dangerous.

I've always loved new business and pitching, but now, working outside an agency, I can see the value of putting a diagnosis stage into the pitch process. An independent thinker — or thinkers — who can work with the client to do a strategy check-in, a review or a renewal. It might just be time and money well spent before going out to market.

So what does year eight, or even nine, look like for me as The Tall Planner? Hopefully more of the same. More problems to solve, more things to learn and more curiosity than is probably healthy.

I set out to do more of what I love, and so far that's exactly what I've been doing. Luckily I love my circus and don't really feel the need to grow up just yet... How lucky is that?

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