

How do you know your strategy is any good?

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The 1958 French film *Les Amants* (*The Lovers*) was about a woman involved in adultery. Directed by Louis Malle, the film was a hit in France, but when it crossed the Atlantic to the US, it was met with horror by the authorities who felt the material was obscene.

The result was the *Jacobellis v Ohio* court case, where the theatre owner was initially fined for showing pornographic material. However, the court subsequently reversed its opinion where Judge Potter Stewart made his now famous statement concerning pornography: "I know it when I see it..."

Here are 10 attributes to judge your strategy by, so you can 'know it when you see it':

1. Is it clear?

Strategy is an inherently messy endeavour. A good strategy is one that provides a clear picture, not only of the situation, but also provides a solid basis from which to make decisions. Anyone should be able to understand it. Granted some industries are highly technical where you won't survive without the three-letter acronym, but if there's no clear argument then its value is limited - you might as well just have had a discussion about the issue. More meetings.

2. Does it ask and answer the right question?

Do you clearly define the problem, identify the causes of the problem, and why and how you are going to solve the problem? I use the word 'problem' not in the sense of tackling a thorny issue, but what the issues are that the situation analysis reveals. It's about framing the challenge correctly so that you can avoid the pitfall of getting the right answer to the wrong question.



Like love affairs, strategies should be a wonderful journey of discovery.
(Image extracted from *Les Amants*)

3. Is it objective?

Leaders have been described as seeing things as they are, not how they would like them to be. Strategies should be held to the same standard. When beginning a strategy the first and most important step is to suspend judgement. It then makes it a wonderful journey of discovery - which it should be.

4. Is it a treatise as opposed to a strategy?

If you've written *War and Peace*, chances are you've put things into context that didn't need to be. Serving up voluminous amounts of data is often our insecurity showing up. Granted, a lot of information sits nicely with a large invoice, but if you've told a clear story using the relevant facts, no one should complain that the document/presentation was too short.

5. Have you taken it to the next step?

A strategy document is a basis for decision-making. That infers some action will need to be taken. If you've just presented the facts, you've come up short - the strategy should be a clear basis from which to make the next decision. It does not have to provide a definitive answer, but needs to be the foundation from which one can be arrived at.

6. Is it inspiring?

The strategy is seldom the main event in advertising, and is the procedure (or requisite 'preludium') we need to go through so that we can get to the creative work. Granted, tables and graphs are no match for a full colour DPS, but the strategy should be inspiring enough to be an event on its own.

7. Is it unique?

Strategies are very much like puzzles - you can't take pieces from different puzzles to build a picture - it just won't work. Each strategy must tell its own story - inserting a scene from another story just confuses the whole issue.

Unlike a good soufflé that depends on a tried and trusted recipe, putting together a strategy should never be a fill-in-the-blocks exercise. Although results of your soufflé will vary depending on things like the type of the oven, ambient temperature etc, it's a good idea to stick as closely to the recipe as a possible to prevent a flop.

Strategies are a different kettle of fish: although the qualities of a good strategy are synonymous, there is no one size fits all.

8. Does it answer the brief?

When you've presented a strategy and client looks confused, the little voice in your head screams "But that's what you briefed me!"

What you have just suffered from is the fact that you just took the brief as opposed to discovering it. It's not your job to be told exactly what to do - your job is to find out - to define the problem correctly.

9. Have you used tools with restraint?

Strategies determine the future and are essentially about risk. Only a few hundred years ago, the risk management toolkit contained little more than a leap of faith and a glimmer of hope. There were no calculators and it wasn't easy multiplying XXIII by VI.

Things have changed today where we have the pleasure of numerous tools at our disposal and PowerPoint has become the catapult of modern times. Sometimes restraint is better - just because you can easily draw a bar chart with 20 labels, doesn't mean that your strategy is necessarily better.

10. Are you high enough?

Terrain is best viewed from above - have you incorporated enough of the surrounding landscape such as marketing trends and competitor activity? Every story needs to have a setting that provides the context for your strategy. You need to describe the story from best altitude: not too high; not too low; just right.

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