

## Strat-FAQ

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### The ultimate strategist and freelancer FAQ page

Just click the freelancer FAQ question and you will be taken to the answer. Please email through any questions you'd like answered and I will add them to the freelancer FAQ list.

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### What is the difference between a strategist and a planner?

Realistically they are as similar as they are different. The general consensus is that strategists think and define, planners adapt and enact. I am a strategist. I am a planner.

See, they are not too different from each other and in both cases I wrote in the first person, why?

Because I am both a strategist and a planner, a strategic planner if you will, although I never use this term as it is confusing to both the client and the agency as it does not really define what you do but says you do everything.

How?

Because the evolution and nuancing of agency life and thinking around brands and how consumers interact with them has, for want of a better term, become polluted over the years. When in a permanent role you will be either a planner or a strategist, as a freelancer and consultant you can change your modus operandi to for the project needs a lot more.

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## **Do you need specific qualifications to become a strategist? What kind of experience is most valuable?**

There are MBAs in brand management and strategy available at most good universities now such as:

Graphic Branding and Identity at the London College of Communication

Brand Development at Bath Spa University

Design and Branding Strategy at Brunel University

... but in truth any degree in business and/or marketing should suffice. It is more about how you think and tell your story that matters – try to get internships in a couple of agencies to understand how things work or work client side, as I did, for a couple of years to understand how brands live and breathe and what the challenges are so that once agency side you are able to work with client issues and processes much more effectively.

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## **As a freelancer what are the general day rate guidelines?**

Here is a fairly robust set of brackets for how much to charge clients at each strategist level:

Junior Strategists	£150 – 200 per day
Middleweight Strategists	£200 – 300 per day
Senior Strategists	£300 – 500 per day
Strategy Director	£500 – 750 per day
Facilitators	£600 – 1000 per day

Source: Major Players Salary Survey [ but check out our freelance rate calculator here - [link](#) ]

The earning potential for the best strategists is great but remember that the annual equivalents of these numbers are immense – it is unlikely you will be employed for the entire year so enjoy it but be clever not only in work but in how you manage your finances.

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## **What are the salary bands as a permanent strategist?**

These are typically pretty good versus account management. Account management starts around £18,000 per annum as a junior and rises to about £34,000 as a Senior Account Manager (or SAM), then peaks at about £40-45,000 for an Account Director.

For Strategists it works thus...

Junior Strategists can expect to start on around £25,000 in most creative agencies, that then rises to about £35-40,000 after around two to four years for what we call Mid-weight Strategists. After you've grafted at the mid-level, Senior Strategists can command around £50-70,000 per annum depending on experience, rising to the region of £90-110,000 for Strategy Director if you choose to continue along this path rather than starting your own agency by this point.

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## **What are the benefits of agency side vs. client side?**

Where do I begin... In short, agency side allows you to touch and affect many brands and work with lots of people around the world on projects ranging from a few days to a few months whereas client side you specialise in 'owning' the brand that you are working with to build that up year on year.

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## **What should a strategist's portfolio include?**

In short: your point of view. Here is a set of questions that every strategist needs to answer throughout communications, presentations and websites in order to define you as both a strategist and a consulting partner...

- What makes you different? What is your edge? Are you differentiating yourself?
- What is your approach? How does that define you and rationalise your fee?
- What school of strategic thought do you subscribe to? Data-driven? Brand-driven? Consumer-driven? Reactive or proactive?
- How do you get towards your 'big idea'? Where do you draw your insight from?
- How do you – and do you want to – work with others?

Once answered, you will have on paper (or online) your reason d'être – your point of view and your place in the world all defined.

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## **Indispensable qualities a strategist must have?**

Flexibility.  
Passion for learning.  
Passion for brands.  
An interest in people and how they think / shop.  
Desire to win (especially when pitching).  
Ability to explain complex thinking in simple terminology.  
Integrity.  
Great socks.

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## **Best and worst elements of the job?**

The best part of being a freelance strategist is that you get to work on such diverse brands from all around the world and work with some of the most creative and inspiring people on the planet. Another great thing about it is that you are always learning and always furthering your experience and understanding.

The worst parts are pretty few apart from when you have to choose between contracts and occasionally make the wrong decision, or when you are between contracts and frantically pitching for new business or calling your existing contacts to see if anything is coming up for you to work with them on. Apart from that I must say that I love what I do and the frustrating times are more around trying to make sense of the thousands of Post-Its in front of you after a workshop or trying to understand how a consumer thinks so I can build a brand strategy and ultimately a design strategy around it.

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## **What are the different types of agency?**

### **Innovation Agency**

These guys are all about thinking outside the box, be it from a product, a feature or a packaging point of view, the end result will be something new to market.

### **Creative agency**

These guys focus much more on the creative and design side of things and typically work with an established strategy or have a light-touch strategic process as part of their projects.

### **Retail design agency**

These guys think and work in 3D, building brands and brand spaces such as stores and hospitality and typically include a lot of strategic work in each project due to the high cost to the client of getting projects like this wrong.

### **Packaging design agency**

See that chocolate bar wrapper on your desk? Or the soft drink you are drinking as you read this? These guys design the look and feel for brands within retail environments. There is an immense amount of money in this discipline so these agencies normally have the nicest studios.

### **Strategy agency**

What I term a 'Stage One' agency, these guys are all about setting agendas and guiding clients and their brands forward with little creative execution, they are more board level and brand level strategy than product.

### **Service design agency**

Real thinkers, these guys are all about designing and thinking through consumer interactions with brands and building the on and offline service elements and processes around it to ensure seamless customer journeys and thoughtful interactions.

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## **If freelancing, how easy is it to slot into various agencies?**

That all depends on you and the brief. It is important to be personable and easy to get on with people so that your arrival does not cause waves but similarly you need to project your expert status and your knowledge instantly so that you can get the job done.

One thing that is key is around processes. As you will discover below, most agencies have their own processes that you will have to work with so don't be too wed to your ways of doing things if working as part of another agency. Do inform and advance their way of doing things with your own thinking but never sign over your tools to them as these are how you will be selling yourself later down the line.

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## **Is the UK climate a good one for strategists, or would you recommend working abroad?**

The UK is a hotbed of some of the best brand work on the planet. The climate for strategists, especially freelance ones, is very good. What you have to understand is that brand strategy is still relatively niche (there is only a few hundred of us strategists globally) so you can command decent day rates and work with some incredible brands on some brilliant projects.

What I would say is that working abroad is always a good idea – and it does not matter how long for. I spent six months in New York freelancing for a branding/packaging agency when I first went freelance and the experience could not have been better for me. It opened my eyes to how different cultures and consumers think and act, this in turn has influenced how I think about brands and projects now I'm based in the UK again. Since then I have worked on projects in 14 countries around the world and these experiences have made it easier for me to get new gigs as I am able to adapt to lots of different markets and consumers.

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## **How do you constantly come up with fresh thoughts/perspectives? Do you have a staple process, or is it a case of brainstorming until you come up with something?**

Personally I have a tried and tested process that works for most of the clients I have worked with over the last few years as well as a 'strategic tool' which I'm in the process of trademarking to be able to call it proprietary and to use it as a selling tool. The process at most agencies is pretty similar although some will focus more on the analytical side whereas others will focus more on the visual 'creative' side.

My process is roughly 50/50 in the middle of the two approaches that is heavy on the analytics/research/consumer insight up front but then looks to translate that into creative platforms and brand narratives that bring the thinking to life visually. \

For me, the process itself has to be pretty solid but with a degree of flex so that it can be tailored depending on the project. As long as the end result is build on solid consumer insight then it will be a success.

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## **What happens when you run out of post-its? (Genuinely)**

Cry. To be honest, I got through over 5,000 in my last business year so keep a very healthy stock in of all sizes and all colours.

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