

How We Work As Cultural Strategists

AKA our guidebook on how to do meaningful
cultural strategy...



Introduction

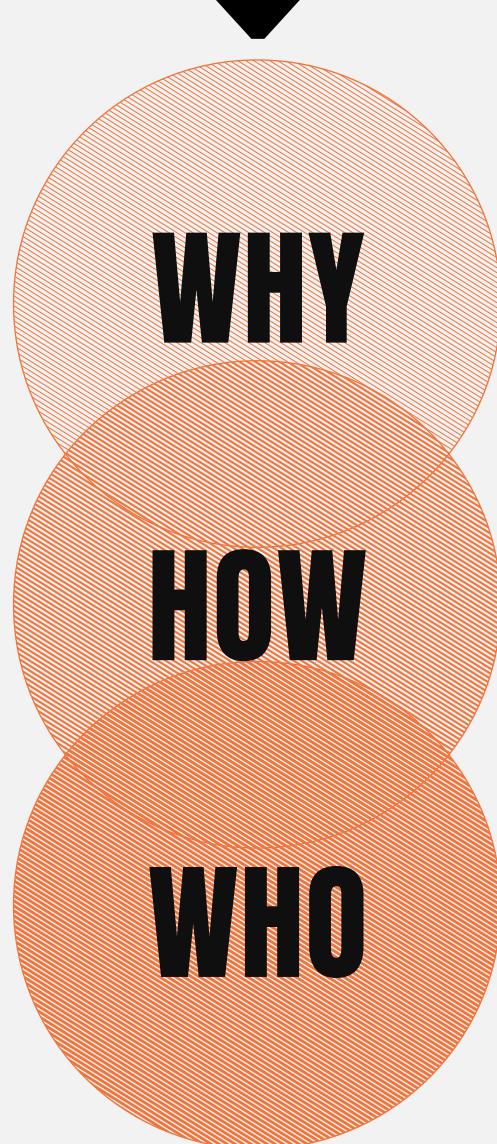
Since 2008, Crowd DNA has been reporting and acting on culture across the world, showing brands how (and when) to channel this energy to be part of people's lives, their communities, and what matters to them. And look at where we are now.

- + 06 Global Offices
- + 400+ experts as part of STRAT7 integrated ecosystem
- + 75+ markets working on projects for the world's most exciting brands
- + Hundreds of dream briefs and genuinely future facing, strategic opportunities

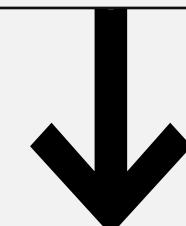
In 2023, we released **How We Work With Culture**, our guide to exploring culture from the street up and how we use this perspective to amplify impact for our clients.

This time we're back to dig a little deeper into how we do it. We look at why cultural strategy matters more than ever, and how to stay relevant with people in this rapidly changing world. And how our role as advisors, our toolkits and our approach needs to adapt too – and what we are doing to develop the role of Cultural Strategist is an important part of that.

We hope it gives our team and our clients a stronger sense of what we are about. Putting down on paper how we will continue to deliver *Culturally Charged Commercial Advantage* for the next 15 years...



In this book, we first talk about why cultural strategy matters more than ever now, the second chapter looks at how we get clients the culturally charged commercial wins and finally, we introduce our killer team of cultural strategists from around the world



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Why Cultural Strategy Matters More Than Ever

Culture Is Getting Messier

What we do at Crowd is guided by the single, simple belief that all brands and people live within – and are influenced by – culture.

Culture is everywhere around us – it's the unwritten rules and rituals that make our world(s) tick. It's the starting point for how people behave and trickles all the way down to how people see, feel, engage with and advocate for brands.

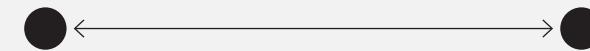
But culture is getting messier.



Society Is Getting
Messier By The Day

SOCIETY

Polarised: We can't agree on anything. We're divided on age, gender, income, ideology, class.



Atomised: We're more connected than ever, but live our lives in lonely cultural echo chambers.



Fragmented: Even where we do align – increasingly, this could be said about belief in climate change – we are still so fragmented – on the what, the why, and the where to go from here.



“Polarization.”

2024 Word of the Year
(Merriam-Webster, US, based on search traffic)

People Are Getting
Messier By The Minute

PEOPLE

And it impacts people too.

The way people identify themselves and their lived experiences aren't as binary/linear as they used to be.

People are...



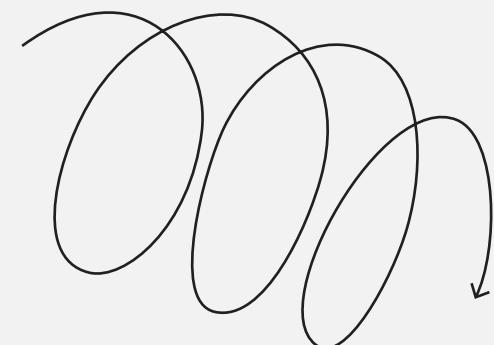
DIGITAL
TRADITIONAL
SPIRITUAL
LONELY
GLOBAL
HUSTLERS
AUTHENTIC
MASCULINE

ANALOGUE
PROGRESSIVE
SCIENTIFIC
CONNECTED
LOCAL
SLACKERS
CURATED
FEMININE

The Consumer Experience Is
Messier By The Second

CONSUMER

Consumer journeys and brand experiences have become fragmented, less linear and with a messy middle. How brands engage, create value and build lasting relationships with people has become impermanent, and in flux.

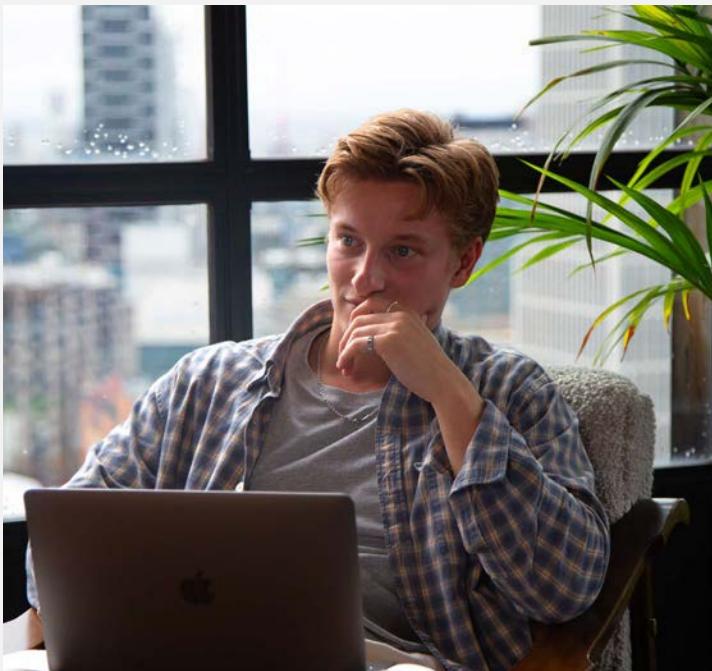
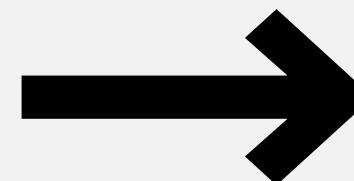


“The Age of Cultural Fragmentation”

Little Black Book Online, June 2024

From Mess To Meaning

At Crowd DNA we believe cultural and commercial opportunities come from mapping both fast and slow culture...



Slow culture refers to the deeper, long-lasting aspects of a society's values, traditions, and practices. These elements evolve gradually and tend to have enduring relevance over decades or even centuries. Think about traditional cuisines like Italian, or architecture, customs and rituals, storytelling and communication forms.

Fast culture, on the other hand, encompasses rapid, trend-driven shifts that often dominate popular attention for short periods. It is shaped by technology, media, and globalisation. Think fashion trends, social media trends, entertainment, technology, and health trends.

The bigger commercial wins don't come from responding (only) to the fleeting nature of fast culture. It's by tapping into slow, not fast culture that represents as much, if not more, opportunity.

Deeply, Rooted, Cultural Exploration

Untangling culture, fast and slow, is all about being rooted in cultural contexts and having cultural specific knowledge. These are our missions that guide us:

... we champion the real stories of people – in their real contexts, lives, homes, jobs.

The non synthetic stuff that's so essential

... we reflect the diversity of human and cultural experience.

The quirky/unexpected stories that direct us away from flattened culture



... we produce deliverables that make culture come to life using creative and journalistic principles.

Making stakeholders sit up and feel

... we create optimism about the future.

Working with the idea that the future brings change, renewal and opportunity – when looked at with the right lens

... we understand the transformative impact of Artificial Intelligence on the market research industry and use when it fixes or improves.

And not when it doesn't

... we tackle the messiness head on.

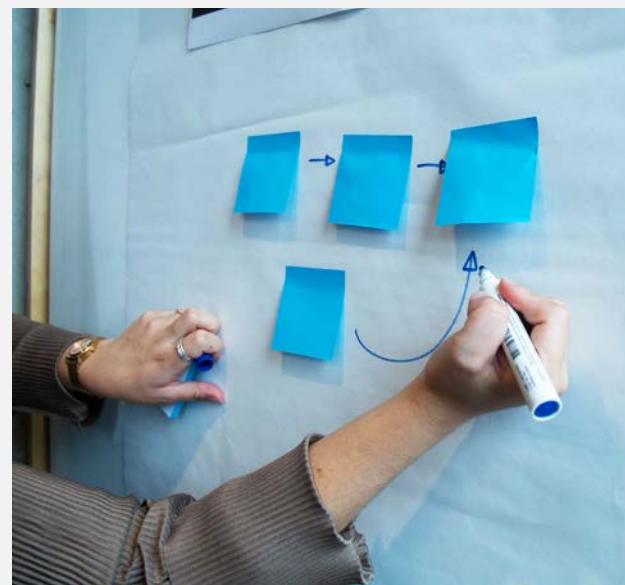
Just because what people feel in the real moment is complex, that doesn't mean we should look away from it in commercial settings

... we won't shy away from being brave and provocative in how we decode data.

So that human spark isn't buried in data or PowerPoint slides

... and we get uncomfortable.

We play in spaces where it's not just about binary, straight-forward answers. Being vulnerable and open minded we reflect the nuanced human experience

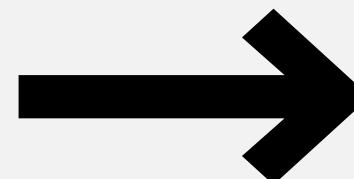


Untangling the mess comes with great opportunity.

Crowd DNA go extra deep and cultural. To keep in sight what really matters in insight, strategy and brands.

The people, stories, the culture, the feelings – the connection.

In this noisy world, it's cultural brands that make lasting emotional bonds.



Brands with the highest Cultural Resonance Score grew

25%

more than their competitors last year

(TMA, August 2023)

63%

of CMOs agree brands must create culture, not just borrow from it

&

84%

agree that to connect with younger generations brands need to entertain and engage, not interrupt

(Dentsu CMO Survey, 2023)

Businesses that listen to and lead culture enjoy better growth: they grow

six times more

than brands with low levels of cultural relevance

(Kantar)

Testimonial

“

Our partners at Crowd DNA have been instrumental in helping us understand our consumers and their experiences.

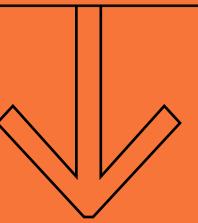
Their ability to gather meaningful insights and then deliver those insights through strategic storytelling has been invaluable.

Their work has directly impacted the simplification of our user experience, our onboarding approach, our value proposition, and our messaging frameworks.”

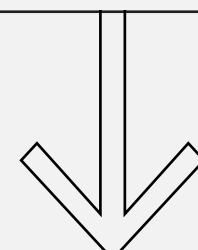
Sunaina Schultz, Senior Researcher, Microsoft



HOW WE DO IT



CULTURE ISN'T STATIC AND NEITHER ARE WE



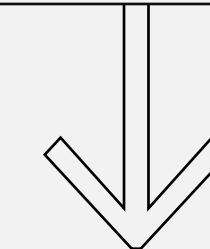
... but when it comes to our project design, we support this fluidity with commercial frameworks that translate insights into implications for a business challenge (whether that's audience, brand, category, comms or product).

We take tried and tested strategic actions to challenge and stretch our thinking, and ultimately ensuring what we're distilling for our clients isn't just the interesting stuff, but the impactful bits, the stuff that gives you the feels, but also shows you the commercial path forward.



Here are three key steps and how we apply them to help brands cover different strategy needs.

1. **Research** – We decode culture. By collecting stories to pinpoint the human tensions and identify the job to be done.
2. **Analysis** – We reframe culture. We challenge what's dominant in culture to pinpoint what's emerging.
3. **Strategy** – We act on culture. How we get clients to ultimately go from reporting to seizing opportunities.



1. RESEARCH

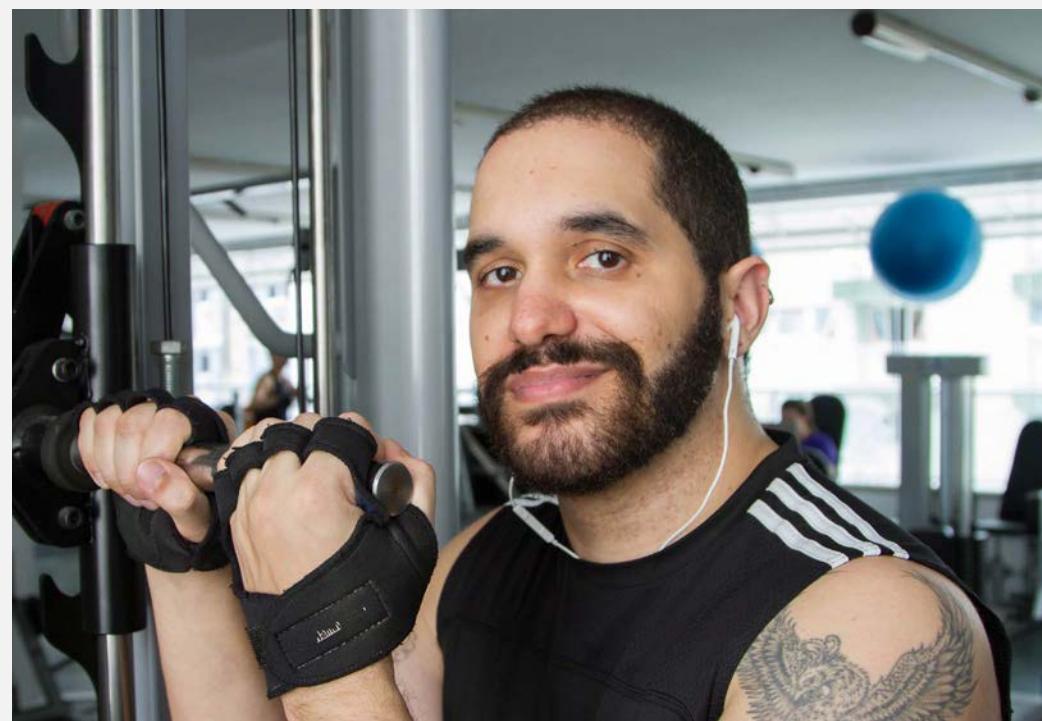
We decode culture

The first principle of working with culture is all about decoding it. Understanding it. Making sense of it. And finding problems to solve in the lives of people. It's about putting people first in everything that we do – even if that is (initially) away from the brand. And that all starts with stories. We collect and unpick the stories from: people, data and codes and signals.

**WHAT IS FRUSTRATING THEM
ABOUT THEIR COMMUTE?**

**HOW IS TECH PLAYING A
ROLE IN THEIR INTERACTION
WITH FRIENDS?**

**WHAT ARE THEIR GOALS AND
MOTIVATIONS AT THE GYM?**



How We Do It: Research

**... AT WORK?
... AT SCHOOL?
... WITH FAMILY?**

*From top left to bottom right:
Spotify 'The Power Of Audio'
Google Play 'Mobile Gaming'
Spotify 'The Power Of Audio'
ITV 'What Unites Mainstream Young Adults'*

We think we're all way too obsessed with people as 'consumers'. With what they put in their shopping carts or how they interact with the category. Instead, we start with the human experience laddering down to brands we work with.

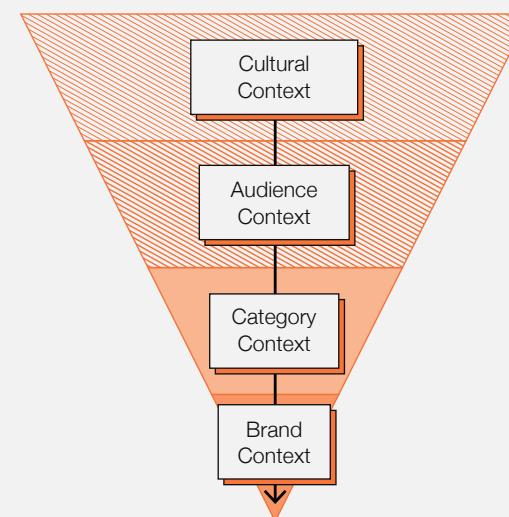
It's about embracing the ordinary not inventing imaginary audiences that sound good to stakeholders or worse – appropriating a culture without real care or knowledge.

We're method agnostic here, stories are found in more than just qualitative work: For example, we might find stories via ethnographic methods: observing people closely and unpicking deeper meanings behind their actions. Or quantitatively unpicking the stories behind data and humanizing the numbers. Or by tracking future cultural narratives through trends, signals, semiotic codes and cues, gathered via cultural artefacts (film, media, entertainment, print, advertisement, data and so on) - but always rooted in the human needs that called for their creation. **Whatever the method it's 'why' that matters most.**

OBSERVATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

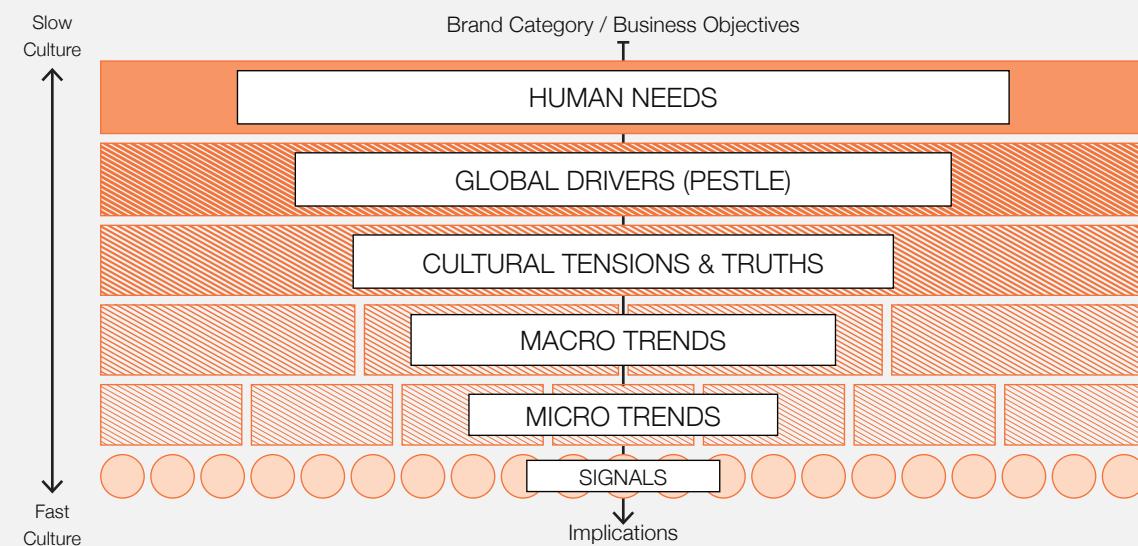
Cultural Strategy Layers

How we tackle the brief and then use it to structure how we make our way through analysis and reporting by attending to every layer of the landscape.



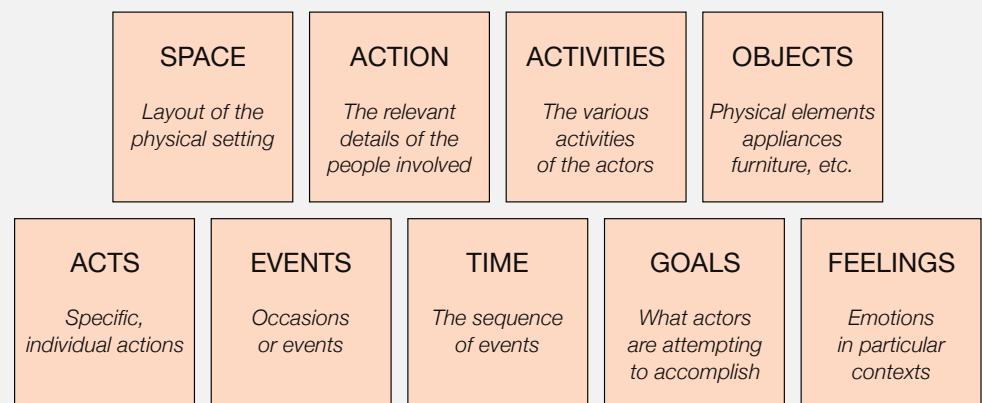
Cultural Futures Navigation

Futures frameworks structure and organise a rapidly changing landscape, forming an articulation of future trends and their component parts with uniform language and meaning - in a way that's hyper-relevant and focused for actioning client objectives.



Getting Real With Ethnography

We're experts at ethnographic research. Through years of experience, we've developed this framework to accompany our discussion guides (that we'll adapt together with the client) because we know ethnography is about observing so much more than what you get from simply having conversations.





2. ANALYSIS

We identify tensions
to reframe culture

So, we start with stories. Our Cultural Strategists then begin to untangle the messiness of stories – of how people live – and find the moments brands can benefit from. Analysis in cultural insights is about looking at all the stories we've gathered to find the tensions that sit beneath them. We examine the places of friction in both the 'slow culture' (society's values, traditions, and practices) and 'fast culture' (rapid, trend-driven shifts).

For instance, a common issue brands experience when working with culture is unpicking tensions under data, under verbatim, under manifestations.

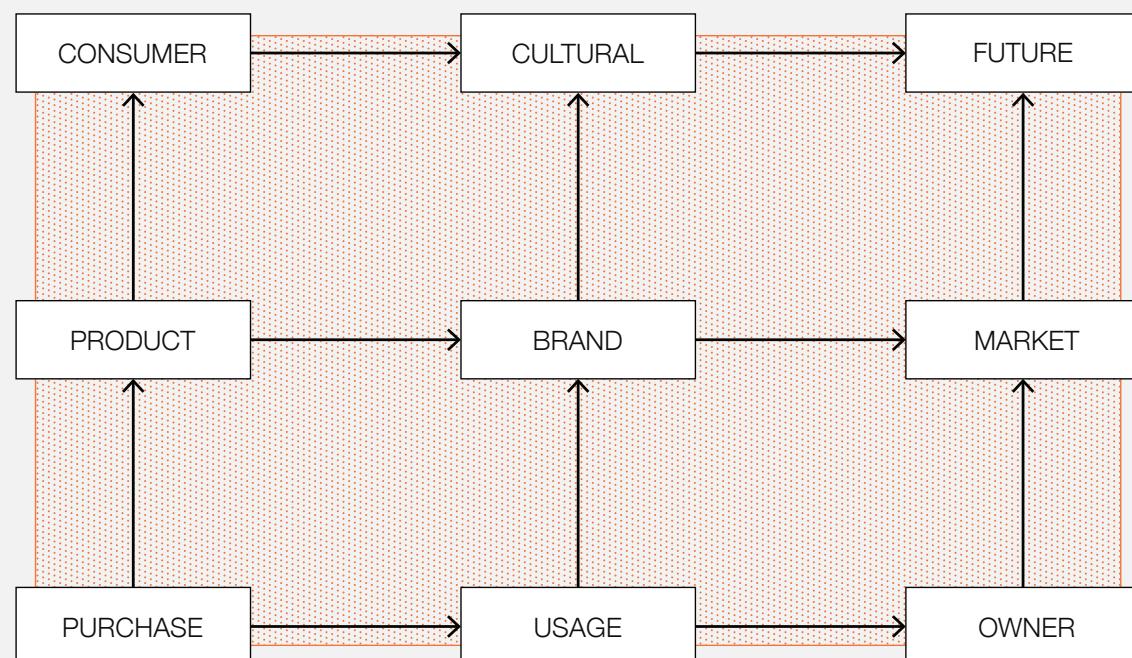
We unpick them and put our finger on the Why: What's the need/tension/or job that needs to be solved and that brands can react to in the short and long term. By challenging them instead, we can unlock new ways for brands to play in cultural trends in a way that is more meaningful. We zero in and question common assumptions, myths and insights.

To show how the tensions become spaces brands can play, here are some of the frameworks we might use to identify tensions and reframe culture:

REFRAMING TENSIONS

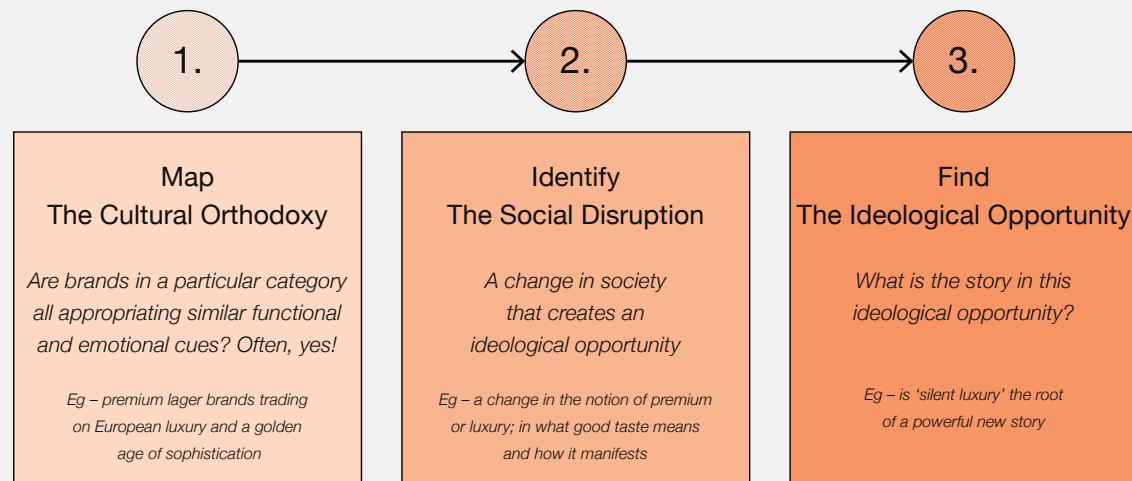
Identifying The 'Altitude Of Tension'

A tension can have various altitudes as we say, and we always look at where the tensions are manifesting. Is it a consumer tension? A market tension? A product tension etc. Identifying tension from various angles will define multiple possible opportunities for brands.



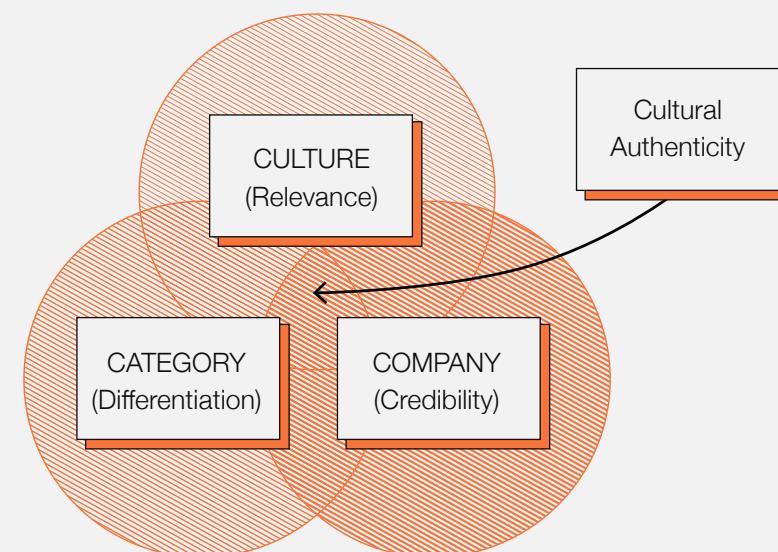
Finding The Cultural Tension

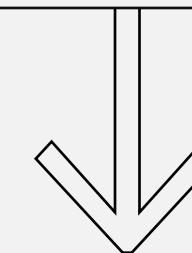
This Framework helps us understand the cultural norms and then how are they changing, which then leads us to find a ideological brand opportunity. An idea, movement, or disruption where a brand can place itself in.



Finding The Culturally Authentic Space

Through doing intensive research into the category, the company, the culture, we identify the uniting tension between all three areas. It's the place that's relevant in culture, different from the category, and credible for the brand to play. This leads us to the culturally authentic space.



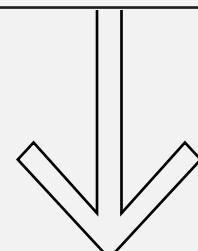


3. **STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT**

We act on culture to create commercial opportunities

And finally, we use the analysis as a springboard to show brands how to get ahead now and be resilient for whatever is coming next. This may be about changing to be part of culture in a relevant way, or to shift the narratives to help brands cement themselves in culture by not taking it at face value.

WE TURN THE TENSIONS INTO OPPORTUNITIES, SHOWING BRANDS HOW TO GET AHEAD ALONGSIDE MULTIPLE STRATEGIC TERRITORIES





CASE STUDIES

We help brands act on culture

Our work connects to what's happening in the larger world and helps brands find cultural opportunities.



HERE'S HOW WE HELP BRANDS CREATE MEANING:

ALIGNING TO CULTURAL MOVEMENTS

If a brand associates with a cultural movement, it can brilliantly pose itself within it in a disruptive way or simply by responding well to that cultural movement.

LEVERAGING CULTURAL MOMENTS

To align brands to a key moment, but interpret that moment through a more inclusive, and more contemporary way.

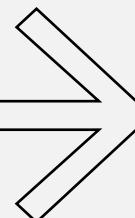
REPRESENTING CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

To get up and close to what their world looks like and what it feels like to live it, can embed the brand in that reality.

CREATING CULTURAL COMMUNITIES

By creating and curating, brands can become synonymous with a cultural community and reflect that in just about any strategy.

ALIGNING TO CULTURAL MOVEMENTS



If a brand associates with a cultural movement, it can brilliantly pose itself within it in a disruptive way or simply by responding well to that cultural movement.

Reckitt Australia | Reframing The Meaning Of Home

Reckitt have always sought to stay ahead of the curve and understand cultural changes that can impact the homecare category. The brand was looking to understand 'what's next' for homecare, to unlock actionable opportunities in the next 3-5 years.

We identified the drivers of change and clear opportunities based on consumer tensions through a blend of cultural analysis, KIN Expert Interviews and quantitative research.

“

Crowd DNA brings the expertise and best practice of a global agency and combines it with the feel, focus and flexibility of a boutique agency. Right from the beginning their desire to listen, understand and create the perfect approach for us marked them out from other agencies and that approach has been the hallmark of our relationship to date, giving us confidence that our investment with them will translate to genuine commercial advantage, unlocking superior growth for us and our retail partners.”

*Chris McKay, Head of Category Management,
Reckitt Australia*



LEVERAGING CULTURAL MOMENTS



To align brands to a key moment, but interpret that moment through a more inclusive, and more contemporary way.

Suntory Global Spirits | Future Of Drinking

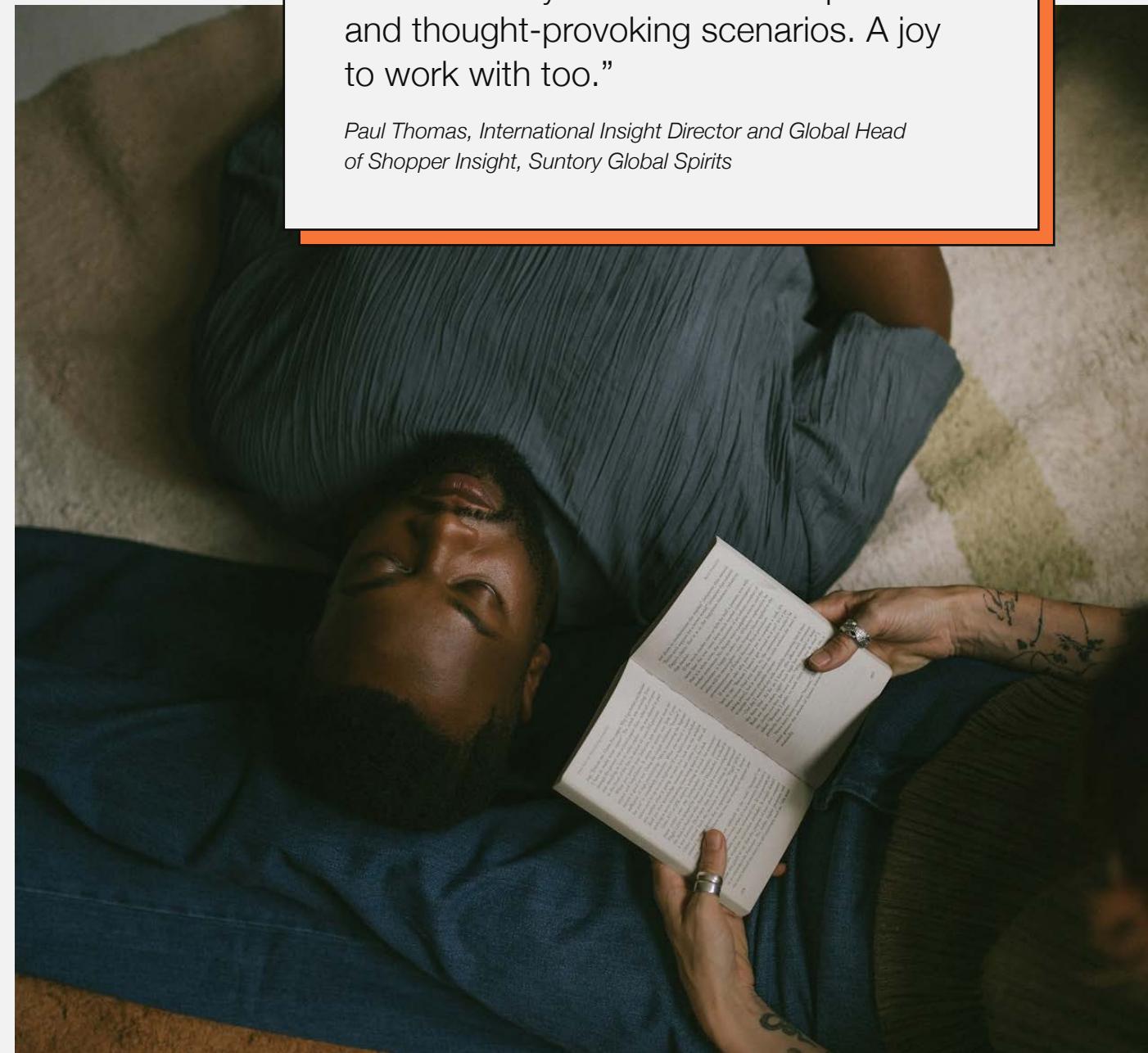
Suntory Global Spirits needed to ensure relevance in 10, 20 and even 30 years' time against a backdrop of a socio-cultural, environmental and regulatory uncertain future for alcoholic drinks.

We applied our culturally charged scenario planning approach to scope out six future proofed innovation springboards for Suntory Global to apply to future facing product, comms and activation ideas.

“

Working with Crowd DNA, and leveraging their KIN network in particular, allowed us to have a globally representative view of the future of drinking and worked collaboratively with us to develop realistic and thought-provoking scenarios. A joy to work with too.”

Paul Thomas, International Insight Director and Global Head of Shopper Insight, Suntory Global Spirits



REPRESENTING CULTURAL EXPERIENCES



To get up and close to what their world looks like and what it feels like to live it, can embed the brand in that reality.

Booking.com | Beyond The Bleachers: Understanding MLB Fandom

Booking had recently partnered with the MLB and wanted to better understand the fan culture for Baseball in the US. From personal connections to the sport, the role fandom played in their lives and how this manifested in their behaviour.

We blended creative citizen journalism style tasks and friendship interviews to explore MLB fans' history and modern relationship to the MLB. The final deliverable told a story of American Baseball fandom illustrated with baseball fan truths based on real participant experiences to inform Booking's strategy in connecting with fans.

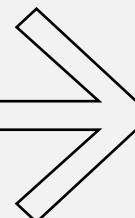


“

Crowd DNA did an outstanding job of uncovering deep insights into Major League Baseball fans, exploring the cultural significance of baseball in American consumers' minds and its intersection with travel. The personal stories shared by fans brought emotional depth to the research, making the process both engaging and meaningful. The study's findings were presented with exceptional clarity and compelling storytelling, making the insights easy to digest and directly actionable for the Booking.com creative team. This work played a crucial role in shaping the stories Booking.com communicated to its audiences, ensuring they resonated by tapping into the cultural, emotional, and functional connections between MLB baseball and travel.”

Veronica Ravaglia, Senior Researcher, Marketing Insights at Booking.com

CREATING CULTURAL COMMUNITIES



By creating and curating, brands can become synonymous with a cultural community and reflect that in just about any strategy.

Amazon Ads | The Anatomy Of Hype

We sought to understand what it means to be a fan today and how brands can get involved for Amazon Ads. A brand that uniquely sits at the intersection of sports, gaming, entertainment and commerce.

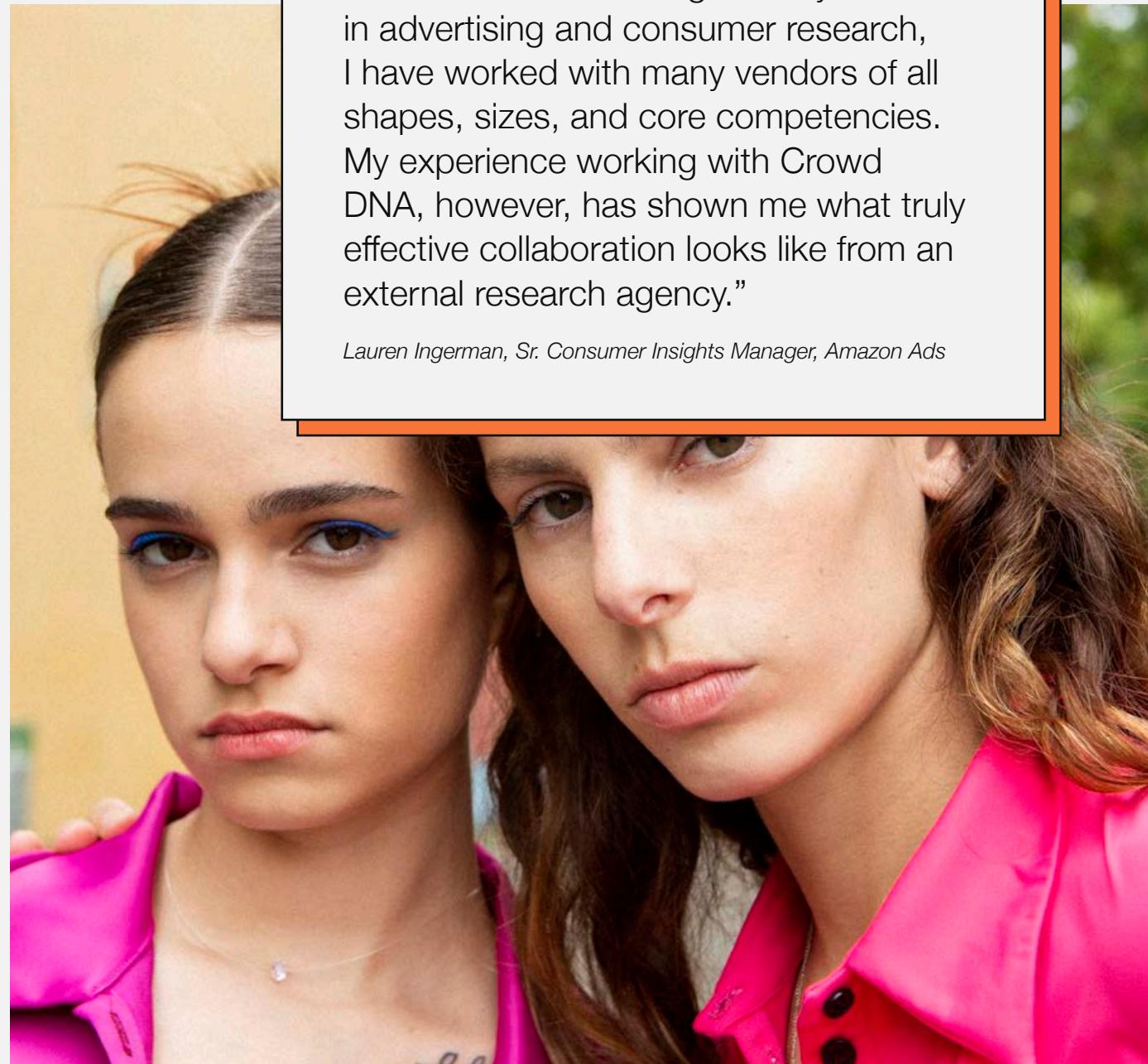
We blended innovative fan group sessions and visual mapping of their fan ecosystem, with qualitative research across 12 markets, cultural analysis, and a quantitative survey with 12,000.

Insights from the research gave Amazon Ads the tools to create compelling, industry disruptive thought leadership. It fuelled countless pieces of content across owned and paid channels, including branded content, and on-stage presentations.

“

I began working with Crowd DNA in 2022, and our collaborations so far have produced some of the biggest and most successful thought leadership initiatives at Amazon Ads. Throughout my career in advertising and consumer research, I have worked with many vendors of all shapes, sizes, and core competencies. My experience working with Crowd DNA, however, has shown me what truly effective collaboration looks like from an external research agency.”

Lauren Ingerman, Sr. Consumer Insights Manager, Amazon Ads



Testimonial

“

Crowd DNA is a strong thought partner. We have worked together to do deep discovery; peeling the layers to understand music listening behavior across the region.

We appreciate the professional excellence to go beyond the surface to provide actionable insight that is practical to be applied within the business.”

Cassandra Tan, Vice President, Strategy, CRM and eCommerce, Universal Music Group, Southeast Asia and Korea



Better Model, Better Outcomes





The Cultural Strategist Role

Being leaders in cultural strategy all begins with how we recruit and runs through how we train and collaborate at Crowd DNA.

We've made Cultural Strategist our primary job title with the ambition to arm – and inspire – our team to not think of themselves as (*only*) researchers, futurists, semioticians, strategists, or data specialists, but as cultural strategists: always seeking out fresh ways to work in a blended way.

Here are some key processes that develop the Cultural Strategist role

T-shaped skills.

We really believe in the power of working together and here's why: Culture is a fabric. It isn't just something that you can find in a group room, or by looking only at data. It is when all threads come together in the micro, the macro and the in between that you can understand culture and unlock insight.

So, specialisms-wise, we mimic that by using a blended model designing our teams; combining the skills of our semioticians, ethnographers, qualitative and quantitative researchers – and so on, cultivating an enthusiasm for moving fluidly between areas of expertise.

No CV? No Problem

Crowd DNA aims to support initiatives to encourage people from different backgrounds to join the industry. One of these is interviews without a CV.

Our Director, People and Culture (Alex Smith, right) told **Research Live**: "The diversification of talent has been mad."



We get out, a lot.

We find new ways of seeing by being among the everyday, the familiar and the commonplace as well as the extremes and fringes. We get to unpack with a middle schooler in Chengdu about his hatred for mandatory fitness tests, or role play with toys to get on the same level with younger children, or if we're really lucky, sofa surfing cross country chatting about television.

We spend time not just hitting the brief, but getting to know people – and that's one of the best bits of the job. And for the client? It's how we get the stuff that fails to surface in surveys, focus groups and search enquiries and is suffocated in large data sets.

Cast rather than recruit.

Our project producers are part of our Senior Leadership team because we value the importance of casting. Leading our recruit with just consumer behaviour in mind means we miss out on understanding and engaging with the whole person – which is the bit we think is the most important.

It's about finding people from a background that's overlooked by panels. It's about getting unique people for unique brands. So our quality recruitment and participant coordination are crucial to the success of a project, whether that means working with local, experienced recruitment partners (we work in 75+ markets), street casters, or a free-find approach, as well as utilising our KIN network of experts and creators. And while more is sometimes better, we also generate more with less by recruiting friends, paired interviews, or remote groups.



Passing the mic.

Our staff and moderators have lived experience, a lot of sensitivity or are from specific communities themselves. We try to limit bias, working with people that genuinely understand the complexities of the human experience to then pass the mic to the ones we research. We're here to empower our participants to tell their stories, rather than just take from them.

Cultural Strategist, Tom Meadows, recently wrote a guide to **Making Research More Accessible**, about the tools to conduct research that engages people who might think, feel, move or communicate differently.





Meet Our Cultural Strategists

Being A Cultural Strategist Is...

“

To me, being a cultural strategist is a privilege. Not everyone gets the opportunity to do what we do – to be intimate witnesses of stories that are often missed. It's in holding on to this belief that reminds me to be humble, and keeps me in awe of how much there is beyond the surface. Yet also comforted by the fundamental and intersecting truths that make us all human.”

Teresa Yong, APAC



“

Ultimately, it has given me a greater perspective. Not just using research to amalgamate people to an average or mainstream attitude but appreciating the vast array of quirks and characteristics that make us all tick.”

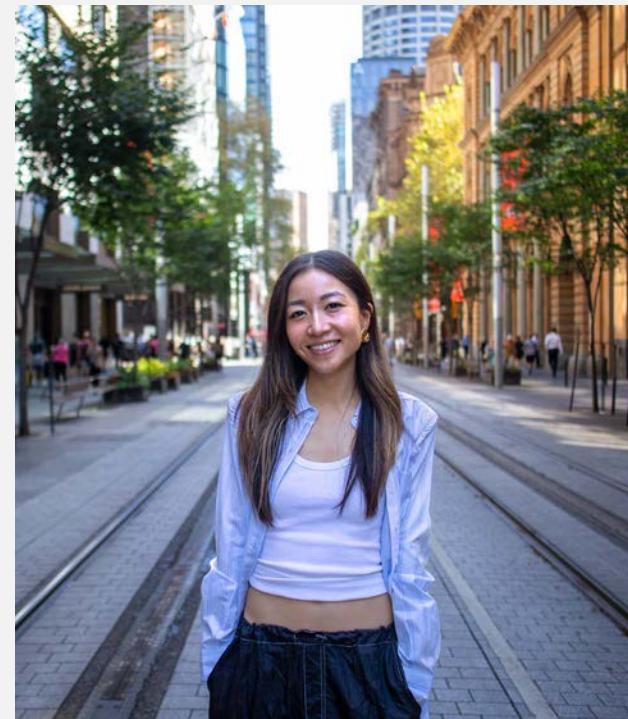
Ed Bird, EMEA

“

Our bold and rich storytelling doesn't just resonate – it builds lasting trust. One standout project was with a major activewear brand to redefine the meaning of sportswear for North American women. We pushed the brand to stay true to its ambition – to serve women's evolving needs.

The client really valued our abilities to help them stay accountable to their commitments.”

Dr Jennifer Simon, EMEA



“

I truly believe in the power of cultural strategy above ‘strategy’. The best strategy is backed by powerful insight, true not just of people, but the world they live in.

That's why we're always looking to get beneath the surface – what do we actually mean by the things we say? I'll never forget the first time our team cracked a complex brief through analysis (I was a junior). It all made sense, a genuine lightbulb moment. I've been chasing that feeling ever since.”

Katrina Phan, APAC

“

A sincere and sort of magnetic curiosity towards what it means to be human is rewarded in this job. You must be curious about what might make a long haul trucker listen to old Rage Against the Machine CDs while also wanting to know what draws older folks into joining bridge groups.

It's a cool job, it really is.”

Jake Renk, US



“

Though I lean more towards the qual side of things, working in a blended way with our brilliant quant team has shown me that they are two sides of the same coin. Quant data always stems from a human 'qual' moment – an observation that was noticed, categorised, and then counted. And the real magic happens when we bring them together.”

Athena Chen, EMEA

“

Working in strategy and insights – clients WANT you to tell them uncomfortable truths, if that's what will bring them further. It's so rewarding to be invited to speak up for how people really are, feel or do.”

Luzie Richt, EMEA



“

Coming into this role, I was new to insights and research, but Crowd DNA has been instrumental in my growth – offering constant learning opportunities and a community that feels more like family. It's fast-paced, ever-evolving, and fuelled by curiosity, which makes every day an adventure.”

Dave Armstrong, US

Testimonial

“

Crowd DNA are the most unique strategic and insights agency I have partnered with at TWE.

They take the time to understand our business and have an impressive ability to provide outputs that are creative, easily interpreted and break the mould of traditional research.

They are ahead of their time with a flexibility to do things differently for a better outcome.”

Laura Millington, TWE Global



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Thanks for reading!

Crowd DNA is a cultural insights and strategy consultancy with offices in London, Amsterdam, New York, Singapore, Sydney and Stockholm.

Formed in 2008, operating in 75+ markets, we bring together trends specialists, researchers, strategists, data analysts, writers, designers and film-makers, creating culturally charged commercial advantage for the world's most exciting brands.



Culturally charged commercial advantage

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