





MADDIE UMALI

CONSUMER INSIGHTS & RESEARCH LEAD

Award-winning research and consumer insights leader with 8+ years of experience leading end-to-end research to uncover human needs, behaviors, and motivations. Known for translating ambiguous problem spaces into clear, actionable insights that drive strategic direction and business impact. Proven at building and scaling insights engines, partnering cross-functionally, and delivering research that informs decision-making for complex brands and organizations.

Industry experience includes: CPG, Retail & Ecommerce, Automotive & Mobility, Technology & SaaS, Energy & Industrial, Healthcare & Pet Nutrition, Government & Public Sector, Travel & Tourism

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PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Group Director, Research & Experience Strategy Jan 2026- Present VML | Remote

VML, formerly VMLY&R and Wunderman Thompson, is a global creative marketing agency specializing in brand experience, customer experience, commerce, and technology to build connected brands for business transformation.

- Lead the Research offering within the Experience Strategy group, supporting digital transformation and web, product, and app development initiatives for Fortune 500 companies.
- Own discovery, research strategy, and problem definition, translating ambiguous problem spaces into clear insights about user needs, behaviors, and opportunity areas.
- Build and scale research practices for clients with a spectrum of research experience or capability, establishing standards, workflows, and embedded research models.
- Design and oversee end-to-end mixed-methods research programs using ethnography, in-depth interviews, usability testing, surveys, quantitative analysis, and experimentation to inform product direction, evaluate designs, and guide iteration.
- Create and lead embedded, always-on research programs for enterprise clients including Sherwin-Williams and New Balance, delivering continuous insight to product, design, and strategy teams.
- Partner cross-functionally with strategy, creative, design, technology, data, account teams, and client stakeholders to align research with business priorities.
- Oversee all research requests, proposals, and delivery for a team executing 30+ qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research initiatives annually, ensuring rigor, scalability, and impact.
- Define and grow the research discipline's capabilities, offerings, and pricing models, and support new business by applying agile, rapid-turn research approaches that surface insights quickly.

SKILLS

- **Qualitative & Mixed-Methods Research** – In-depth Interviews, Ethnography, Focus Groups, Diary Studies, Surveys, Usability & A/B Testing
- **Research Synthesis & Insight Development** – Pattern Identification, Opportunity Framing, Narrative & Storytelling
- **Experience Strategy** – Journey Mapping, Persona Development & Workshop Facilitation
- **Brand Strategy** – Brand Positioning, Creative Brief Development & Trend Forecasting
- **Stakeholder & Cross-Functional Collaboration**
- **Research Leadership & Operations** – Scoping & Planning, Research Roadmaps, Budget & Vendor Management, Team Leadership

Director, Research & Experience Strategy

Jan 2023- Dec 2025

VML | Remote

- Led end-to-end qualitative and mixed-methods research for digital products and experiences, supporting web transformation, product development, and app optimization initiatives for enterprise accounts like Sherwin-Williams, Ford Motor Company, and New Balance
- Owned discovery and research execution, partnering closely with product, design, and technology teams to define research questions, conduct primary research, and synthesize findings into clear insights that informed ideation, design direction, and decision-making.
- Drove measurable business impact by embedding research with cross-functional teams to evaluate concepts, reduce risk, guide iteration, and expand research programs—contributing to 50% year-over-year growth on key accounts and portfolio expansion from 4 to 11 clients.

Associate Director, Research

Nov 2021-Jan 2023

VML | Remote

- Led end-to-end qualitative and mixed-methods research for growth-focused, project-based enterprise clients including Microsoft, Intel, NARCAN®, Ford Motor Company, and Lincoln Motor Company, partnering closely with cross-functional teams.
- Built and maintained an ongoing insights engine for the U.S. Navy focused on Gen Z and Multicultural audiences, delivering timely, insight-driven research that informed strategy, supported new business efforts, and contributed to the growth of the research practice.

Senior Strategist, Research

May 2021- Nov 2021

VML | Remote

- Led qualitative research initiatives for major consumer brands including DICK'S Sporting Goods, LIDL, Colgate, and The North Face.
- Designed and conducted primary qualitative research (in-depth interviews, ethnography, concept testing), complemented by market and competitive analysis to inform strategic and positioning decisions.

Strategist, Research & Brand Strategy

Oct 2018-May 2021

VML | Remote & Kansas City, MO

- Supported secondary and qualitative research and brand strategy for clients including Danone, Red Bull, and 3M, translating insights across consumer, culture, category, and brand into clear, human-centered strategies and creative briefs that addressed consumer and business challenges.

Associate Strategist, Brand Strategy

Aug 2017- Oct 2018

VML | Kansas City, MO

- Supported brand strategy initiatives for PepsiCo brands including Gatorade, Tropicana, Propel, and Brisk by synthesizing quantitative and qualitative research into strategic inputs, creative briefs, and category or cultural POVs.

TOOLS

- **User Research & Testing Platforms** – UserTesting, UserZoom, Instapanel
- **Survey & Panel Providers** – Qualtrics, Pollfish, User Interviews, Dynata, SAGO
- **Design & Collaboration** – Figma, Miro, Keynote, PowerPoint
- **Consumer & Market Intelligence** – Mintel, Global Web Index, MRI-Simmons, Forrester

EDUCATION

University of Kansas

Bachelor of Science in Journalism

Strategic Communications and News & Information, minor in Human Sexuality
Graduated May 2017

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

2025 Forrester Customer Experience Certification

Certification focused on applying and executing CX best practices within an organization

2023 Ascend Leadership Program

Leadership program for rising AAPI leaders in advertising

2022 ARF David Ogilvy Awards, Silver in Sports, Media & Entertainment for U.S. Navy

Prestigious industry awards honoring advertising campaigns that excel through deep consumer research and insights