

MADDIE UMALI

CUSTOMER INSIGHTS, RESEARCH & STRATEGY

Award-winning Lead Researcher and Strategist with 8+ years of experience across consumer goods, automotive, technology, telecommunications, home improvement, retail and tourism. Accomplished in Qualitative and UX Research methods, with a specialization in metaphor, empathy, and the unconscious mind to uncover the “why” behind behavior. Experienced in Brand and Experience Strategy. Super powers are uncovering human truths, creative problem solving, cross-functional collaboration, and leadership.

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 Fraser, Colorado

WORK EXPERIENCE

VML

VML is a global creative company across 55+ markets, combining brand experience, customer experience, and commerce capabilities to offer clients brand growth strategies and transformation initiatives.

Research Director, Strategy & Insights

Jan 2023-Present

- Built and lead a cross-functional research discipline within the Experience Strategy practice, defining capabilities, frameworks, and offerings that elevated research as a core business driver
- Oversee all research requests, proposals, and studies for a team executing 30+ qualitative and quantitative projects annually, ensuring rigor, creativity, and actionable insights
- Develop and lead embedded research teams for Sherwin-Williams and Ford Motor Company, establishing always-on insight engines that deliver continuous, strategic input to product, strategy, and design partners
- Expanded Sherwin-Williams’ research program by 50% year-over-year, uncovering new opportunities that generated 5 incremental organic growth initiatives in 2025
- Grew the client portfolio from 4 to 11 accounts within one year, reflecting 175% expansion in reach and increasing cross-category demand for insights-led strategy
- Support project-based requests for clients like Washington’s Lottery, Hill’s Pet Nutrition, Spectrum, New Balance, and Tennessee Tourism.
- Solved complex business challenges through custom research roadmaps, test-and-learn experimentation, and scalable mixed-method approaches including ethnography, UX testing, and surveys
- Cultivated trusted partnerships with marketing, product, and insights leaders—contributing to being named Sherwin-Williams’ “Marketing Partner of the Year” in 2024
- Support new business by using agile, rapid-turn methodologies
- Lead events for the remote employees in Colorado, managing community events communications and budget

SKILLS

Research Methods

- In-depth Interviews
- Ethnographies
- Focus Groups
- Diary Studies
- Surveys
- Unmoderated Studies
- Desirability Testing
- Usability Testing
- A/B Testing
- Card Sort Testing
- Tree Tests

Brand & Experience Strategy

- Brand Positioning and Purpose Development
- Consumer and Cultural Insight Generation
- Market and Competitive Analysis
- Experience Mapping and Journey Design
- Persona Development
- Creative Brief Development
- Workshop Facilitation
- Trend Forecasting

Project & Client Management

- Scoping & Planning
- Stakeholder Alignment
- Budget & Vendor Management and Oversight
- Cross-Functional Team Leadership

VML

Associate Director, Research

Nov 2021 - Jan 2023

- Lead researcher for the project-based, growth focused side of the agency's research department, supporting end-to-end research initiatives for clients like Microsoft, Intel, NARCAN, Ford Motor Company, and Lincoln Motor Company
- Create an ongoing insights engine for U.S. Navy, focused on Gen Z and Multicultural audiences, resulting in the 2022 Silver Award in Sports, Media & Entertainment from the ARF's David Ogilvy Awards
- Develop and publish thought leadership, to position the agency as a audience and culture expert in the industry
- Collaborate with client and agency teams, research vendors, and leadership to provide timely, insights driven reports
- Support New Business opportunities through quick-turn research
- Assist with the research department's capabilities and training development and facilitated headcount growth

Senior Strategist, Research

May 2021- Nov 2021

- Lead qualitative research projects for clients like DICK'S Sporting Goods, LIDL, Colgate, and The North Face
- Conduct research methodologies like in-depth interviews, ethnographies, concept testing and secondary research
- Conduct market and competitive analysis, to provide clients insight into their category and positioning
- Contribute to agency thought leadership initiatives

Strategist, Research & Brand Strategy

Oct 2018 - May 2021

- Support secondary and qualitative research and brand strategy for clients like Danone, Red Bull and 3M
- Uncover insights around consumer, culture, category and brand to unlock creative opportunities
- Develop inspiring creative briefs rooted in human truths
- Collaborate with client and agency teams to create impactful strategies that solved consumer and business challenges

Associate Strategist, Brand Strategy

Aug 2017- Oct 2018

- Support brand strategy initiatives for PepsiCo brands including Gatorade, Tropicana, Propel, and Brisk
- Summarize large amounts of data to assist in strategic planning, creative briefs, and category or culture POV development
- Assist in secondary and qualitative research like focus groups, shopper research and competitive audits
- Contribute to brainstorm sessions and workshops

Internships

Brand Strategy Intern at VML

June 2017-Aug 2017

Account Management Intern at 360i

June 2016 -Aug 2016

TOOLS

- UserTesting
- UserZoom
- User Interviews
- SAGO
- Instapanel
- Pollfish
- Qualtrics
- Dynata
- Figma
- Miro
- 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

Applying best practices and executing CX goals and responsibilities within an organization

2023 Ascend Leadership Program for rising AAPI leaders in advertising

Silver, 2022 ARF David Ogilvy Awards, Sports, Media & Entertainment

U.S. Navy