



Strategy is one of the oldest disciplines in human history, though the word itself has come to mean many different things over time. At its core, strategy is about making choices under conditions of uncertainty in order to achieve a desired outcome. Long before it was used in business, marketing, or communications, strategy emerged in military thinking, where leaders had to decide how to deploy limited resources, position their forces, and anticipate the actions of opponents. The word itself comes from the Greek "strategos," referring to a general or leader of an army. In that original context, strategy was concerned with the overall direction of a campaign, while tactics referred to the specific maneuvers carried out on the battlefield. This distinction remains important today. Strategy determines where to focus and what priorities to pursue, while tactics determine how those choices are executed in practice. Over time, the idea of strategy moved beyond the battlefield and into the realm of business, where it became the discipline of deciding how organizations compete, how they allocate resources, and how they position themselves within a changing environment. As markets grew more complex and competitive, businesses realized that success was not simply the result of operational efficiency or short-term actions, but of coherent long-term thinking about where opportunities lie and how they can be pursued effectively. From this broader business perspective, strategic thinking gradually expanded into specific domains within organizations, including marketing, communications, and brand management. In the context of brands, strategy plays a unique role because brands do not compete only through the objective qualities of products or services but also through the perceptions, feelings, and associations that they evoke in the minds of consumers. Brand strategy therefore focuses on defining what a brand stands for, what role it wants to play in people's lives, and how it should be understood relative to competitors. A strong brand is not simply a logo or a visual identity element; it is a collection of elements that work together to create a clear meaning and positioning. The strategic task is to determine what idea a brand should own and how that idea should be consistently expressed across experiences, messages, and interactions over time. One of the central concepts in brand strategy is the idea of a brand occupying a unique position in the mental landscape of its audience. Because people are exposed to thousands of messages every day, brands must find a distinctive way to be remembered. Positioning therefore involves identifying a unique space for a brand within a category and ensuring that it is perceived as different from others in the same category. Some brands become associated with reliability or safety, others with innovation, luxury, performance, or cultural relevance. These associations are rarely accidental. They are the result of deliberate choices made over time. Marketing strategy builds on these foundations by determining how organizations reach and engage the audiences they care about. It involves understanding who those audiences are, what motivates them, and the broader journey people take as they move from awareness to consideration to purchase. Brand strategy and marketing strategy are closely related but also have distinct focuses. Brand strategy is communication and public relations strategy, which focuses on how organizations build reputation and credibility in the broader public sphere. While marketing often concentrates on consumer engagement and demand generation, brand strategy is concerned with how organizations are perceived by a wider set of stakeholders, including media, communities, employees, partners, and regulators. Communication strategy recognizes that organizations exist within complex cultural and social systems, and that reputation is built not only by the stories people tell about a company, the issues it chooses to engage with, and the actions it takes in response to challenges or opportunities. In this sense, strategic communication often involves identifying narratives that are authentic to the organization and meaningful to the audiences that encounter them. These narratives might involve innovation, leadership, social responsibility, or cultural participation, but they must resonate beyond the organization itself in order to gain traction.

*We approached **Jon Crowley, Partner and Head of Strategy at FUSE Create**, to share his perspective on the state of strategy today – from curiosity and groupthink to AI and the value of a little inefficiency. In this candid conversation, Jon reflects on how strategy teams really work, what often goes wrong, and why disagreement might actually be a sign of a healthy department.*

Q: How did you first get into strategy? What was the path like?

A: I would trace it to a couple of things.

When I was 16 and didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, my dad gave me a copy of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, one of the first real pieces of media and communications academic criticism. Being sixteen, I put it on the shelf and never read it, and decided I was going to study English literature and write the great Canadian novel. That did not happen.

Midway through school, I took a communications theory course – technically an English literature course – but it focused on mass media theory. I remember being fascinated by how mass media impacts society: the stories we tell, the images we see, and the ways we communicate, and how all of that shapes politics, behavior, and cultural patterns. By the time I finished school, I knew I wanted to do something in communications, even though I didn't really understand what a brand was or how agencies worked. I lucked into an internship at a small entertainment PR firm. What really pulled me into strategy was the birth of social media, at a time when being on Twitter meant you were a very specific kind of person because most people didn't really know what it was – this was before tweets would appear on the evening news. I met a lot of people in that world, many of whom went on to do interesting things in tech, and many in agencies and advertising.

After a relatively short stint as a very mediocre account person, it became clear to me that I belonged in a more strategic space – first in digital and social, then campaign work, then brand planning, and eventually leading teams.

Q: What has surprised you most about the practice of strategy?

A: The thing that has surprised me most is how susceptible we are to our own hype cycles.

There's a tendency to believe that the new thing has changed everything and that we need to throw out all the rules and start again. Then, inevitably, we discover that we are still trying to help people feel things about stuff. Very often we return to first principles – what does the consumer actually think and feel? What surprises me is how quickly we abandon those principles when something new emerges, and how predictably we rediscover them months or years later.

Q: What qualities will always define a great strategist?

A: Curiosity is a big one.

People who are great at strategy tend to have absorbed a lot in their lives – they've watched a lot, read a lot, and experienced a lot. There needs to be a drive that comes from somewhere. I have friends who teach strategy, and one of the questions they get is how to generate curiosity. My honest answer is that if you do not have curiosity, you should probably find a different job. You can't force yourself to care about literally everything. If that's not how you're wired, the job becomes much harder.

The other thing is that you have to want to be understood. Many people want to be listened to or heard. They may want to feel seen or feel part of the process. But wanting to be understood is different – it means making sure the other person actually takes away what you were trying to give them. And that can be harder. Sometimes getting to that point doesn't feel as gratifying as simply speaking your piece. There's a difference between being a strategist and giving tiny TED Talks for a living. You want your audience to come away with a deeper understanding of the subject so it shapes the work they do.

Q: How do you know when a strategy department is functioning at its best? And at its worst?

A: When a strategy department is working well, conversations tend to go off on tangents.

It becomes a little difficult to keep people strictly on track because people riff off each other. Someone will bring up a fact, and someone else will bring up an adjacent fact they know, and before you know it, you're ten miles off the brief – but in an additive way. For that to work, you need people who actually want to engage with others' thinking.

Maybe most crucially, you need people that aren't carbon copies of each other. One of the worst things a strategy team can have is a leader who believes they have figured out the one true way to do strategy. They train everyone to think and deliver work in that specific way. They build a tight process, hire for that mold, and then train people to fit it even tighter. Eventually you end up with a room full of people who can only think one way. A successful strategy department needs productive disagreement. When the strategy team is smiling and nodding at each other, telling each other they're perfect all the time, it's very difficult to push the work beyond the obvious. Groupthink is one of the biggest risks to great thinking.

Q: How does that show up in the work itself?

A: Years ago, someone asked me how successful my strategy team was. I said, "We get great work. Everyone loves the briefs. Clients sign off on the work." They replied, "No — how many rounds of approvals does it take? How many meetings are required before creatives buy in?" That's the wrong metric. If strategy is sold too quickly, it is probably safe and unchallenging. Sometimes agencies look efficient because they are not doing anything hard or challenging. But this is not a business built on efficiency, and it shouldn't be. Creativity and efficiency are not cousins; they don't live close to each other.

Q: What happens when teams are not working well?

A: When teams fall into that pattern, briefs start becoming cookie-cutter. They use the same five insights for every project. I've seen teams use the same five insights for every project. The work starts to look like evolutions of an existing idea — not creative iteration, but the same person wearing slightly different costumes.

Q: What would you change if you saw that happening?

A: The first thing I would do is be very hard on briefs.

In the past, I've joined agencies and reviewed every brief one-on-one with the person writing it, asking annoying questions. Does this observation tell us anything new or interesting about how we are trying to connect with someone? Yes, you've described a demographic — but who are we actually speaking to? What problem do they have that needs solving? Agencies are often asked to solve business problems that are not interesting to normal human beings. If strategy does its job properly, we turn a boring business problem into an interesting human problem and then work with creative people to solve it. The client may want to sell more ketchup next year — and there is nothing wrong with that. That is their business. But if the ad is built on the idea that people should buy more ketchup because the client wants them to, it will not resonate. You need to get to a deeper reason for people to care. The fundamental question is: why would anyone care about this?

Q: With all the change happening — especially around AI — what is one thing you want to protect?

A: It's going to sound funny, but I'd advocate for a little bit of inefficiency. Inefficiency can be generative, in the same way that boredom can be generative. When you give yourself time to wander, you can look at things from different angles. A lot of AI implementation is driven by efficiency — charging clients less or employing fewer people. I see it as an opportunity to buy more time to do the difficult human work. When I started my career, I would often spend a week or two doing research for a pitch. If I'm honest, the content of that research was rarely substantially better than what you can get from advanced AI tools in a few minutes today. That can feel threatening, or it can feel exciting. You can start that research phase with a large part of the groundwork done instantly and then spend more time thinking about human tensions, contradictions, and meaningful problems.

Q: What grinds your gears in strategy practice?

A: I think the concept of cool hunting and trend watching became too dominant in the early 2000s.

Tracking what is relevant today is useful for the creative process, but it should be a much smaller part of day-to-day strategic work. Trends are often temporary. I am more comfortable with strategists focusing less on what is cool this week and more on how culture works this year.

Q: How do you spot a lazy strategist?

A: The biggest sign of a lazy strategist is someone who picks one half of the job and pretends it is the whole job. Strategy has two main components: learning and leading. Some people love research. They build a 100-slide deck and drop it on someone's lap, then blame others when it doesn't become brilliant work. Others avoid research completely and want only the big presentation moment. Being good at strategy means doing both. Most strategists go through a phase where they decide one part is "real strategy" and the other part is the annoying work they are forced to do. The moment you stop being lazy is when you realize you have to do the entire job.

Q: Is that a result of the person or the system they work in?

A: I think most strategists and agencies spend a lot of time trying to justify their existence, so they end up conforming to what makes their specific place successful. If you work in an account-driven shop, you will likely deliver statistics-heavy, crunchy results – data that helps clients approve briefs. If you work in a creative-led shop, you may end up writing very emotive briefs because that is what leadership and creative teams reward. It is not entirely on the strategist, but the strategist is often the only person who can say: This emotional idea still needs to be grounded in observable reality. Or that a statistic is only an observation unless we have explored why it is happening and developed a theory about how to influence it.

Q: If strategy disappeared tomorrow, what would agencies and clients miss?

A: Some of the most strategic people I have worked with have been creatives, so some teams would still function. But agencies would be less consistently successful. It would become harder to push back on clients with rationale rather than opinion. Clients might get what they want, but not necessarily what they need.

Q: What advice would you give your younger self?

A: I was too focused on proving that I was smart. I wanted everyone in the room to know I deserved to be there. I should have been more focused on whether the work was smart, rather than whether I looked smart.

Q: What is the role of strategy, simply put?

A: Strategy is about increasing the chances of success by narrowing the aperture. The job is to decide where to focus. If everyone agrees on where to focus, there is a better chance of solving the right problem. Many bad pieces of work are not bad because of execution – they are bad because the team did not know what they were trying to do.

Q: What is your view on frameworks in strategic practice?

A: Frameworks are tools for explaining or organizing, not tools for thinking. You can tell when someone mistakes a framework for a thinking tool because they stop considering ideas that do not fit the structure. If you use something like the 4Cs as a checklist rather than an organizing method, you will miss interesting insights. The insight should inform the brief – it should be everywhere in the thinking, not isolated in a box. You should be able to explain what you are saying in a couple of sentences in any meeting or on any slide.

Q: What is the weirdest or most controversial perception of strategists?

A: I think the worst thing strategists sometimes define themselves as is “the smart ones.” There needs to be a mix of insecurity and arrogance – leaning too heavily into the idea that strategists are the smartest people in the room can actually reduce good outcomes. Another damaging perception is that strategists are the “fun police” – people who kill ideas with logic or data. We should not kill ideas. We should try to understand why someone is excited about them before giving feedback.

Q: Final thoughts on the state of strategy right now?

A: The best time to build a career in strategy is when everything feels like it is exploding. I owe my career to the era when social media upended marketing and advertising. I got my first strategy job because they needed someone young enough to explain how Facebook worked. There is a moment when a field is new enough that only people immersed in it can explain it to others. We are in another huge moment of disruption now. It is a difficult time for the industry, with legacy agencies closing, layoffs happening, and uncertainty everywhere. But if strategy is something you find interesting, this may be one of the best times to build a career in it. Things will change, and whenever things change, opportunity appears.

Going forward, the core principles of strategy will remain the same. Someone will still need to figure out how those principles apply to new ways of connecting, learning, and making decisions about products and brands.