



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 other arenas of organized activity. In business, strategy 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 could not simply be achieved through 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, such as 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, memories, and associations that they evoke. A brand’s identity, which includes its name, logo, and visual elements, is a key component of this strategy. However, a brand’s 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 challenges in branding is to create a brand that occupies a distinct and desirable 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 the space a brand occupies in the market and how it differs from its competitors. 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 how a product or service might address those needs. Marketing strategy considers not only the message itself but also the timing of those interactions, and the broader journey people take as they move from awareness to consideration to purchase. A closely related perspective on 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, communication strategy recognizes that organizations exist within complex cultural and social systems, and that reputation is shaped 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 **Crystal Sales, VP Strategy at Leo Toronto**, to share her perspective on the state of strategy today—from her journey into the discipline to the tension between global adaptation and local craft. In this candid conversation, she reflects on the role of frameworks, the challenges of briefs and client relationships, and the growing pressure of speed, AI, and short-term thinking. Crystal explores what makes strategy effective (and where it often falls short), why clarity and a shared point of view matter, and how the industry can balance creativity with real business impact.*

**Q: What brought you to strategy?**

**A:** I’ve always been an avid reader; I love to read. I also really love fashion, and for a long time I thought I’d end up in journalism or editorial within the fashion space.

After school, I was interning at Bloomberg Businessweek in New York. That was the time social media was starting to take off, and a small group of us took on social channels. I became really interested after returning to Canada I tried a few roles in advertising and digital shops.

Then I took a break when I had a child. During that time, I reflected on what I really wanted to do next. I loved social, but I kept wondering: who decides the bigger picture? Who defines the role of the brand? I wanted to be part of that thinking.

That’s what led me to Ogilvy, where I worked on Unilever brands like Dove and Hellmann’s. That’s where I really cut my teeth in brand strategy, while still bringing in my digital background. And that’s where I fell in love with it. I was also lucky to be there at a time when, in my opinion, some of the best talents sat across creative, accounts, and strategy. We had brilliant clients, and we were still doing real strategic work locally, it wasn’t just, “the UK says do this, now adapt it.” We were shaping thinking at a country level.

**Q: How do you think the balance between global adaptation and local craft has evolved since then?**

**A:** It’s actually one of the reasons I ended up leaving Ogilvy. At that point, more and more work was becoming adaptation... global strategies being handed down, with increasing price sensitivity from clients. I didn’t want to just adapt work; I wanted to build it.

That’s what led me to Sid Lee. I knew they had strong domestic clients—brands where the strategy was built here, not inherited globally. I got to work on President’s Choice, Loblaw’s, and PC Optimum—all work created in Canada, within the agency. That’s what I was craving. Since then, I’ve mostly focused on domestic or Canadian-born brands, some of which later expanded globally.

So yes, it has changed. Where adaptation used to be most common in categories like auto, now we’re seeing it across CPG as well. A lot of it has shifted toward global adaptation, leaving less room for locally driven strategy. As a result, strategists are looking for relevance wherever they can find it—which is why reactive work has become so dominant, with everyone competing for a share of attention in the global landscape.

**Q: What led you back to multinational after working with an independent?**

**A:** I spent almost 10 years at Indies and loved everything about it. The industry antagonizes multinationals and part of returning was because I wanted to challenge myself to see if I could bring fresh perspective. So far, I feel like a really small fish in an ocean of people and hierarchy but I’ve finally found the confidence to speak up.. and trust me, I will.

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

**A:** I grew up at Ogilvy, so I was exposed to every framework imaginable. Early on, that’s incredibly helpful. It gives you structure and teaches you how to think within constraints. But over time, you have to learn how to move beyond that. If we become too rigid, frameworks can limit thinking. Not every problem fits neatly into a predefined box.

Strategists are creatives too. And creativity doesn't always thrive inside rigid structures. I find them useful in certain situations, but I don't think we should be beholden to them. Sometimes, trying to force an idea into a framework creates paralysis— "it has to fit this box, in three words." And that can actually block good thinking. This also ties into the broader conversation around independence versus holding companies. Big holding companies can feel hierarchical and, at times, sterile. That's why independents have risen as challengers—they know the rules, but they're not constrained by them. And I think that's true of creativity as well.

**Q: What are your biggest frustrations with how strategy is practiced?**

**A:** Honestly? The brief.

Every agency believes they have the best brief format—proprietary, perfect, the one that leads to great work. But often, strategists don't stop to ask creatives whether the brief actually gives them what they need.

Sometimes strategy presents something and creatives are like, "I don't know what you're talking about." You're speaking to yourself, not enabling the work. Then it turns into a debate—who's right, strategy or creative? But there is no "right" brief. There's a choice. If everyone aligns on that choice—if it's grounded, clear, and feels right—then that's the right brief. But there is no objectively perfect version.

**Q: Sometimes client briefs can be a challenge too, right?**

**A:** Absolutely. And I think we need to be more comfortable having difficult conversations with clients. Strategy sits between the marketing plan and the advertising output—we're the bridge. It's our responsibility to challenge when needed. Are we going to completely change how clients write briefs? Probably not. But if we approach those conversations from a place of solving business problems and achieving their objectives, it becomes easier for them to engage.

Too often, strategy tries to fight instead of discussing. And that's where breakdowns begin.

**Q: How do you spot poor strategy? Is it a people problem or a system problem?**

**A:** Poor strategy is the unclear one. When we try to solve everything at once—multiple directions, multiple ideas—we end up saying nothing. Clarity comes from making choices.

It's also poor when it's not true. We sometimes force cultural insights into a strategy where they don't naturally belong.

I've encountered strategists—and I'm probably guilty of it myself at times—who become too attached to an idea, convinced that this is the answer. But if it's not clear, if people question it, if it doesn't hold up—it's probably not right. You have to be willing to adapt.

It's also very hard to teach strategy. We lean heavily on frameworks and say, "if it fits this structure, it's correct." But that's not true. Sometimes the issue is the person—brilliant thinkers who struggle to translate their thinking into something inspiring and actionable. So, is it a system problem or a people problem? It can be both.

**Q: What indicates that a team isn't working well?**

**A:** A strategy team needs a clear point of view. At an agency level, we should all understand the overall ambition. But as a strategy team, we also need to be clear on our role in delivering that. What do we stand for? That should be our calling card. If we're disjointed—if everyone approaches strategy differently with no shared point of view—then we can't support each other, and we don't stand for anything.

The first step is clarity: what is the agency's ambition, and how does strategy contribute? That should be written down, discussed, and shaped collectively. Every day, we should work toward that shared standard. Otherwise, we're just individuals—not a team.

**Q: With all the change happening, especially around AI, what is one thing you would protect?**

**A:** Creativity that comes from living in the world.

AI can generate synthetic responses, but it can't replicate human experience. There's something about talking to people, observing, feeling things—that's where real insight comes from. That has to be protected.

Because as tools make everything faster, expectations will shift—clients will expect speed above all else. But the ability to sit, think, and be inspired by the world—not just your screen—that’s essential. I can’t imagine a future where everything becomes synthetic and we lose that sense of magic. And I actually think that kind of human-driven creativity will become even more valuable.

**Q: So, how screwed are we from 1 to 10 with AI in the creative industry?**

**A:** I think we’re at a four.

**Q: Do awards risk outweighing real client value?**

**A:** Last year at Cannes, investigations into case studies opened a Pandora’s box—how much we exaggerate, how much we fabricate. Work that barely ran being presented as something massive. That’s on us. We’re talking to ourselves. And awarding ourselves. And the more we accept that, the more normal it becomes—because it generates attention, and that’s what gets awarded. We’re feeding the system ourselves.

I’ve worked at places that have perfected this—it’s almost a science. That’s why they consistently win. But not every client wants that. Clients want business results.

We’re already seeing the decline of the CMO role, with more influence moving to CFOs and CEOs—and they don’t care about Cannes. They care about shareholder value. So, the pendulum will swing back. If we want to stay relevant, we need to focus on business impact as much as creative excellence.

A brand is a business. We just haven’t done a good enough job proving that to leadership.

**Q: Was creative better before?**

**A:** In some ways, yes. Now we’re chasing reaction. We’re optimizing for immediacy—who can be the fastest, the most provocative. But that’s short-term thinking. We’re creating work for the reaction, not for the work itself. And that changes how we think.

Media consumption is faster, so campaigns feel shorter-lived. But I’d be curious to see how that holds up in long-term effectiveness. Creativity was stronger when we spent time solving problems—not reacting to trends.

**Q: What’s the weirdest perception of strategists?**

**A:** That we’re all nerds. Which... isn’t entirely wrong. We’re kind of weird. Strategists are like unicorns—we’re creative, but in a different way. I could never write a script or come up with a billboard idea. But writing, storytelling—that’s creative too. So yes, we might be nerds. But what’s wrong with that?

**Q: Final thoughts on the state of strategy today?**

**A:** With the rise of short-termism and the pressure to move quickly, we risk diluting our impact as strategists. We need to pause and ask: what is a brand strategy for, and why do we spend so much time crafting it and wanting it to feel like a North Star? We need to protect that. We need to work more closely with creatives again—focusing on ideas, not just opportunities for visibility. Not everything needs to be reactive. It needs to be meaningful for the brand. And I worry that we’re losing that.

At the same time, strategy needs to operate at a higher level. We need to engage not just CMOs, but the entire C-suite. We need to talk about our work in terms that resonate with business leaders. Because strategy today goes beyond briefs, beyond brand expression. It’s about the business of the brand. And that includes creativity. The more we operate at that intersection, the more valuable we become.