



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, including product development, 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, but a collection of these elements that work together to create a consistent and meaningful experience. This consistency is expressed across experiences, messages, and interactions over time. One of the central goals of brand strategy is to establish a brand’s 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 specific benefits and values that a brand offers, 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. Public relations 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, public relations 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 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 spoke with **Elliott Altilia, Group Strategy Director, Wieden+Kennedy**, about the state of strategy today — from the misconception of strategists as answer-holders, to the role of humility and collaboration, the limits of frameworks, and the importance of deeper, more considered thinking.*

Q: What was your path into strategy?

A: My path was pretty unconventional. I was deeply into kendo—I was on the national team at one point—so I was basically living in gyms. At the same time, I was playing in punk bands. It wasn’t exactly a straight line into advertising. I didn’t really know strategy was a job until I was already doing it—which I think is true for a lot of people.

I’d worked at Deloitte, but I didn’t come from a business background, so I wanted to build that foundation and get an MBA. I went to a business school in Montreal, but pretty quickly realized I didn’t want to be a consultant. In Montreal I met with one of their executives of Sid Lee who had a somewhat similar path. My only real exposure to marketing before that was working as a brand ambassador during my university years—so nothing that clearly pointed to strategy. But once I got into Sid Lee, it just clicked. It became obvious that it was the right fit. I’m naturally creative, but also quite analytical, so strategy felt like the perfect intersection of both—left brain and right brain working together.

Looking back, I really fell into it in a backwards way. And I think about that sometimes—because a few years earlier, when I was in Toronto, I had the chance to join an agency on the account side. If I’d taken that path, my career might have looked very different.

So, I’ve been lucky. I’m very much a product of my environment, and I happened to land in a place surrounded by incredibly smart people who mentored me. I feel really fortunate.

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

A: There are a lot of them. One is this idea that strategists have the answer. I don’t think that’s really true. There are a few, maybe one or two in my experience, who are almost savant-like—brilliant people who can crack briefs and land on insights very quickly, sometimes even working in isolation. But that’s the exception, not the rule. In most cases, strategy is less about “having the answer” and more about enabling good work. It’s about helping, facilitating, bringing clarity—being a speaker of truth, if you want to use the cliché. But fundamentally, strategists need to see themselves as enablers rather than owners of the work.

Because in the end, the output of the work—the creative, the effectiveness, the impact—is what matters. And that outcome is always a collective effort. Strategists work closely with creatives for sure, but also with many other parts of the agency that don’t necessarily sit in the traditional “flow” of a project.

The other frustration is ego. There’s sometimes an arrogance around strategists—or creatives, but strategists in particular—that I don’t have a lot of patience for. At the end of the day, we’re working in advertising. You’re not that important.

The idea of “superstar strategists” with massive egos doesn’t really resonate with me. The best strategists I’ve met, and worked with, are the most humble people. That’s something I really value and hope we can continue to foster.

The environments that work best are the ones where people are curious, willing to challenge things, not afraid to speak their mind, and excited by other smart people around them. That’s when the work gets better—and honestly, that’s when the job is fun.

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

A: Models and frameworks are very useful, particularly when you’re starting out. They help you think through problems, understand a strategic process, and bring structure to your thinking. In that sense, they’re great tools for learning.

But the idea that a model is going to *solve* your strategic problem is rather ambitious. They can become a bit of a crutch if you rely on them too heavily. Often, you’re better served by sitting with the problem, thinking more deeply, and really engaging with what’s in front of you.

Better briefs don’t come from running things through a framework—they come from being thoughtful about what you’re writing, identifying the real opportunity, and challenging existing category conventions.

It's about understanding where a brand's value actually sits, how that value is being used, whether it's being under-leveraged, and how it's being perceived versus how the brand wants it to be perceived. That level of clarity doesn't come from templates alone.

That said, it depends on the task. If you're trying to land a strong strategic idea that becomes a platform for great work, that requires a different kind of thinking. But if you're building a structured market plan for a client, frameworks can be really helpful—they can guide the conversation and bring order to complexity.

So, I wouldn't say frameworks are unnecessary. But I would say you rarely need them in a presentation-heavy way. If you do use one, it should be minimal—something that helps structure a conversation rather than replace thinking.

In fact, one of the most useful ways I've used frameworks in presentations is as an anchor slide. You shape it through discussion, so it becomes a logical structure for the story, particularly in brand or business strategy work. In that context, they're very helpful for guiding alignment.

But they won't necessarily get you to a better answer.

And I think that's especially true early in your career. Strategy is a role where most of your learning happens on the job, so frameworks help you get oriented. I certainly leaned on them early on. Over time, though, if you rely on them too much, they can become limiting—even if, in the beginning, they do accelerate your development.

Q: How do you spot poor strategy and is that a people problem or a system problem?

A: I would say it's probably a people problem.

One thing I've learned, especially being in places like Wieden+Kennedy, is just how important good people are. Every agency goes through different eras, and the best ones I've been part of—at any point in my career—have always been full of smart, compassionate, hard-working people. So, for the most part, especially in the kind of work we do here, people really are the difference-makers.

When strategy or work fails, there are of course external factors. It could be internal dynamics—relationships between strategy and creative, pressure, chaos on the client side. There are always things that influence the outcome.

But generally, when strategic work is poor, it's quite obvious. It often feels like not enough time was spent really thinking about it. And I don't mean "thinking" in a superficial sense—just sitting with the brief, challenging it, and pushing beyond the first obvious answer. So, what you get is not necessarily "instantaneous thought," but more considered thinking.

There's often a kind of universal agreement when something is powerful. You can feel it.

There's a lot of research that supports this idea—that emotion is what makes work stick. And that ultimately is the goal, whether you're building brands or even working in performance contexts. Of course, lower-funnel work and conversion-focused work are important too—but it's highly dependent on sustained investment. And when that investment disappears, so does its impact, almost in direct correlation.

When ideas or insights feel weak, it's often because there's no real tension in them. They're usually the ideas you arrive at in the first five minutes—the ones everyone else also gets to immediately.

A good strategy takes iteration. There's no shortcut. Sometimes ideas come quickly, but that's usually the result of the work that's already been done—research, understanding adjacent categories, building a real sense of the brand, and letting those inputs sit and collide in your mind over time.

So yes, systems and constraints matter, but I do think more often than not, the deciding factor is people. Because at the end of the day, even in more structured environments, we're still working in a discipline made up of people.

Q: What's the weirdest or most controversial perception about strategy?

A: I think there are a couple.

One is that the role of strategy is both overstated and understated at the same time.

On one hand, there are strategists who place a lot of weight on their role—almost as if the creative outcome is dependent on their strategic approach. That's not really true. You never fully know where a great creative idea is going to come from. To assume you do, as a strategist, is a bit arrogant.

Creative ideas can come from anywhere. In fact, some of the best ones often come from unexpected or adjacent places. The idea that a strategist can pre-determine the "right" creative solution is risky.

Where strategy is useful is in direction. You can define things like the audience you're trying to grow with, or the business outcome you're aiming for—whether that's increasing sales or shifting perception. That's the objective layer. But how do you actually communicate that? That's subjective. And it shouldn't be pre-decided in isolation. Thinking a strategist will already have the answer to what the creative expression is a bit misguided.

There's also this perception that strategists are the "smartest people in the room." Some are, but so are creatives. Intelligence isn't role-specific. Some of the smartest people I've worked with are creatives—who are highly strategic in their own right.

In fact, the best creatives are often deeply strategic. Depending on the type of work, they're just as capable of interpreting data, shaping narratives, and building communication systems. Likewise, strategists benefit from being more curious, more analytical, and more grounded in how the business actually works—but that doesn't make creatives any less capable of that same thinking.

The roles overlap much more than people admit.

And I've also seen it firsthand: some of the strongest senior account people I've worked with could easily have been excellent creative directors or strategists. Their thinking is that strong, that structured, that insightful. I think one of the biggest misconceptions is that strategy sits at the top of a hierarchy of intelligence or decision-making. It doesn't. It's one part of a much more interconnected system—and the best work always comes from that system working together, not from any single discipline owning the answer.

Q: To what extent do you think the pursuit of awards influences the products and services agencies create? And is there a risk it sometimes outweighs real client or consumer value?

A: My honest view is that awards are one of many ways to build an agency. And they do serve a purpose. They recognize the craft, effort, and creativity that goes into making good work—which, especially today, is harder than ever. Media budgets are tighter, opportunities for original work are fewer, and everything is more compressed. So, in that environment, it's still important that the industry acknowledges work that genuinely impacts a client's business. That recognition matters.

There is sometimes a temptation to optimize for what wins, or what looks good in a case study. But I do think most people are genuinely trying to be honest and keep the business outcome in mind. And in many cases, the ideas that win awards are also the ones that are genuinely effective.

Q: You mentioned tighter budgets. Are they forcing better ideas—or just different ways of judging creative work?

A: Good ideas, in general, are almost channel-agnostic. And in theory, they shouldn't depend on budget either—strong ideas should be able to transcend those constraints. In reality, though, certain conditions need to be aligned for that to happen. For example, in the non-profit space or cause-driven work, you often have stronger emotional permission from the outset. Clients are more open, there's often less commercial friction, and agencies may not even charge in the same way. So naturally, that changes the dynamic of what's possible. And if you look at how cases are structured in this industry—especially in this country—they often follow the same narrative: “no media spend, massive impact.” That's become the dominant framing, because so much of the work today is designed to live without large media investment. And while that's often true, it can also be a bit reductive in how work gets judged. It reflects where the industry is going, which is actually exciting in a way, because it forces us to develop stronger creative ideas that don't rely on scale alone. At the same time, if you're talking about brands that require consistent scale and daily or weekly impact, media absolutely plays a role. Those are different problems. Not everything can or should be judged through the same lens. There are a lot of variables at play.

Q: With all the change happening, especially around AI, what is one thing you want to protect in your scope of work?

A: It's a team sport. Even having someone to volley ideas back and forth with—whether it's another person, or even an AI tool or some kind of persona—changes how you think. Creativity is rarely a solo exercise.

On the production side, we're still figuring out where things will go. Some of the recent work using AI feels a bit uncanny—like it's almost there, but not quite real. It doesn't fully feel grounded yet.

At the same time, I think the industry is shifting quite fundamentally. A lot of the large holding companies are becoming more like technology-enabled media companies at scale. That was probably always going to happen, because they control so much of the media infrastructure where the money is.

Which means independent creative agencies are increasingly becoming places where ideas are generated—more upstream thinking, concept development, and creative direction—while execution and distribution are becoming more system-driven.

I also think the industry overall may become smaller. With programmatic, automation, and now AI integrated into media systems, large parts of what used to be manual or agency-driven will become more automated. Smaller agencies won't realistically compete in that space, and arguably don't want to.

What you'll likely see is a kind of split: idea-led shops on one side, and execution or systems-led players on the other. And they'll increasingly depend on each other in different ways.

That also means more partnerships—clients working with a broader mix of specialists, while also potentially building more internal capability themselves. But there will still be a need for independent creative thinking, especially when it comes to defining the ideas that sit upstream of all of that.

Q: How screwed are we from one to 10 with the AI in a creative industry?

A: It depends on where you sit, but I think we're fine. I'd say 5.

In a world of more automation and AI, there might even be a bit more value placed on human thinking and taste—and I actually think that's a good thing.

Things will definitely change quickly, and I could be wrong, but I don't see a scenario where we're all out of work. That said, parts of the industry—especially content production, music, and broader creative production—will look very different.

You can already see it happening. The cost and time it takes to produce certain types of content will drop dramatically. So, the way things get made, and who makes them, is going to shift.

But I don't think it's something to be scared of. The creative industries will evolve, and in some areas, execution will become more automated, but there will still be a need for ideas, direction, and taste.

So overall, I think we'll be fine—it'll just be a different version of the industry.

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

A: Honestly, I'm going to sound like an old man—but I do feel like there's a bit of a deficit, particularly in the Toronto or broader Canadian market. And I think it's relatively recent.

A lot of people left the industry. Some of my contemporaries, who were really strong strategists and thinkers, either moved on when the industry contracted or chose to pursue other paths. And in the wake of that, there hasn't really been a clear next generation that's fully emerged in the same way.

I also think the pandemic, remote work, and now hybrid work have all played a role. Combined with how the industry has changed more broadly, it's affected how certain skills are developed—especially early on. A lot of the organic learning that used to happen in offices is harder to replicate now.

I do think something has been lost in that transition.

That said, I think it's really important that we actively build that next generation of strategists. Given how the industry is evolving—more data-driven, more tech-enabled—it becomes even more important to have people who bring strong human judgment, curiosity, and taste into the process.

Because ultimately, those are the things that matter most. We need people who are hard-working, curious, low-ego, and genuinely want to be in this industry.

At the same time, strategy today is becoming more specialized. There's a lot more focus on things like social strategy, media planning, comms architecture, and performance thinking. All of that is crucial—but it also means strategy is made up of more technical tools than it used to be.

And because of that, there are fewer natural environments where people learn through osmosis. Less time in offices, fewer informal conversations, less hands-on apprenticeship-style learning. We have to be more intentional now about how we develop talent.

I think that also creates an opportunity. For people starting out—or even pivoting into strategy—there's a real chance to shape what the next version of the discipline looks like.

Ultimately, agencies are only as strong as their people. And right now, more than ever, I think the industry needs curious, motivated people who actually want to build things and be part of it.