



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 domains. 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 applications within organizations, including branding, 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. 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 elements that consistently express its values and personality. One of the key elements of brand strategy is positioning, which involves identifying the unique space a brand occupies 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, 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 purposes. 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 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 spoke with **Elyssa Seidman, Group Strategy Director at Zulu Alpha Kilo**, about the state of strategy today – from how it’s often confused with objectives to the quiet insecurity behind the role, the tension between clarity in the brief and creative freedom, and the often-overlooked creative side of strategists.

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

A: I feel like my path was quite unique because I went straight into strategy, which doesn’t happen for most people.

I was in business school, just trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I thought I was interested in marketing. I didn’t fully understand the industry at the time, but I thought that’s where the creative work was happening—I liked Super Bowl ads, that kind of thing... Through networking, I was introduced to the head of strategy at Publicis, and it led to an internship—and that was it.

I went back the following summer and then joined full-time. I consider myself incredibly lucky. At the time, everyone around me was very senior—there weren’t junior strategists, and strategy itself still felt relatively new in Canada compared to markets like the UK. So, I was learning by being surrounded by experienced people from day one.

Even after that first internship, I was still exploring other paths. I interviewed the client side, but it became clear pretty quickly that it wasn’t the right fit. Once I’d experienced agency life, I’d kind of fallen in love with it. There’s something about the energy of agencies—especially when you’re starting out. I remember sitting in the lobby, just watching people move with purpose, the pace, the atmosphere—it felt dynamic and exciting. And I remember thinking, “This is where I want to be.”

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

A: I think frameworks are a really helpful starting point—especially when you’re not quite sure how to approach a problem.

Even something as classic as the 4Cs is a good place to begin. In many ways, it’s where you should start unless you already know exactly what you’re looking for. Frameworks give you structure and a way into the problem.

There’s also a tendency in agencies to dismiss certain frameworks like 4C as too basic or “obvious,” in favor of proprietary methods. But those are often just variations of the same underlying thinking.

What frameworks do particularly well is remove the intimidation of a blank page. Starting from nothing can feel overwhelming, but if you give yourself a simple structure—even just four boxes—you suddenly have something to work with. It turns an open-ended problem into something more manageable. I see frameworks as a helpful starting point. But once you move into actually solving the problem—figuring out the story you want to tell—they can start to become limiting.

They’re useful, until they’re not.

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

A: I don’t have many complaints, to be honest.

The one thing I don’t love is when strategy ends up being the product. To me, strategy should always be in service of creative. That’s part of what I enjoy about being at Zulu—we’re a very creative-forward agency, and everything we do is ultimately aimed at making great work.

There have been times in my career where I’ve worked on strategy-focused projects without much creative involvement. And sometimes that’s necessary, or that’s what the client needs. But the goal should always be to do *something* with it.

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

A: A lot of people confuse strategy with objectives. “We want to win” isn’t a strategy. It’s a business goal. The real question is: how do we win? That’s where strategy begins—and that’s the hard part.

Cause of a poor strategy can vary. Sometimes no one slows down long enough to challenge the strategy.

Sometimes it’s habit. Sometimes it’s time pressure. Things move forward before the thinking is fully formed.

Some creative directors don’t like when strategy gets too specific or answers a challenge too prescriptively—especially if the client falls in love with that strategy. Then they feel like they can’t do their job fully. They feel handcuffed to the strategy.

I think strategists like to come up with memorable, sticky strategies. Sometimes they're too memorable and sticky for creative lanes, and we're asked to pull it back. Which is fine. I don't feel personal about the words.

At the end of the day, strategy needs to inspire great creative work, and that's what determines if it's good or not.

Q: What indicates that a team is not working well and what would you change if you saw that happening?

A: I've been very fortunate to work with incredible strategists. I haven't really worked on a dysfunctional team. I did have one dysfunctional leadership team at one point in my career, where leadership was very fear-based. But the team camaraderie itself was incredible.

What I learned from that experience is to be very unbothered. I'm not intimidated; I'm not nervous; I'm not scared—really, ever.

Another thing I took from it is how to spot red flags in interviews. I can see them very clearly now. I even notice them in client teams—when there's a leader people are afraid of. And that helps me understand how to work with the team in a way that gives them what they need to succeed.

Strategists are in this interesting position where we're allowed to say things that might be controversial. The account team is often focused on making sure everyone feels comfortable and heard. But strategists can step in and say, "Sorry, I'm just the strategist here—but I'm trying to understand this. Help me understand."

That gives us permission to say the thing that maybe no one else feels safe to say. Often, we can act as a voice of reason—or a reality check that's needed.

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

A: Everyone says strategists are smart. And I think all my colleagues and peers are very, very smart. But at the same time they're pretty insecure. We all think the other strategists are smarter than us, and there's a constant fear of letting the agency down—that maybe we're not as smart as everyone thinks we are.

It's a kind of quiet insecurity that sits underneath the role. We're all, in a way, intimidated by each other or may be afraid that we won't come up with the answer. Often the creatives I work with are the best strategists, they are so good at putting ideas into words.

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: I think work that is award-winning is generally also work that gets noticed by people, because it's interesting or different.

But I don't think the opposite is always true. You can absolutely do good work that meets objectives and gets noticed, but isn't interesting enough to win awards. You can get the results you need with a tried-and-true formula, but that's not necessarily what makes a brand stand out.

For us at Zulu, we're a creative agency and we believe in fighting sameness. We always aspire to do work that is industry-leading, that sets the standard, that is being recognized; and awards are one measure of that.

And I think that's pretty clear to our clients as well. Typically, the clients who choose to work with us—and you can see this with other independents too—are brands that are excited about doing industry-leading work.

I think for people like me who truly love creative, we're always going to aspire to do award worthy work, whether it wins or not.

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

Conversations.

A: We're all using ChatGPT or Claude, and we all love it. It's incredibly helpful—a great brainstorm partner. But just because it's a great partner doesn't mean it should be *the* partner.

I still get more value from meeting with peers who aren't working on the same project and just bouncing ideas around with them. Everyone's busy, so it's nice to have AI do that initial exercise—but it's still far more valuable, and far more interesting, to talk to a person.

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

A: I don't think we're screwed creatively. The State of the world is maybe a different story with AI, but creatively... At least at the moment, AI's not very creative. It's trying its best to predict what you are expecting, trying to understand what you are looking for, and it wants to give that to you. Which is the opposite of what we're trying to do with creative, especially when we look at industry leading creative. It should be surprising and different. And AI's not doing that.

Q: What are your final thoughts on the state of strategy right now?

A: The state of strategy comes down to the people: I think strategists are both over and underestimated at the same time. They're supposed to be the smartest people in the room, but they're not really expected to be creative. What I see in my own community of strategists is that everyone is doing something interesting outside of work. I don't think people saw that coming.

One of my peers is developing board games and is working with a publisher and gaining real momentum and another does woodworking outside of strategy. You'd probably expect creatives to have these kinds of extracurriculars, but strategists?

I've started a brand as well. It's been really fun, because I'm using what I've learned in strategy, but it's so much more than that. I don't think people expect strategists to really put themselves out there or take these kinds of creative risks.

My brand is Tallow Studio—natural stone home accessories. It feels so random. Like, "oh, you're a strategist, you work in CPG, non-profit, finance, and now you're doing design, inventory ordering, warehousing..."

It's totally unexpected. But I think it's becoming more and more common to see strategists have these different creative outlets. We're not just smart people who make charts. We're bringing what we learn in strategy into other things too.

Even with my own brand, I'm still doing strategy—writing the brand, trying to maintain consistency. It's only been a year, but you realize you get bored of things quickly because you see them every day. And then you want to change things.

That's what I always tell my clients: you're bored of it because you're used to it, but your audience may not have even seen it once. So, stick to your story. Tell it in a new and surprising way, but keep telling that same story.