



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 no longer be achieved simply 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 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, images, and associations that surround them. 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; it is a collection of elements that consistently express 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 concepts in brand strategy is positioning, which involves identifying the specific space a brand occupies in the minds of its audience. Positioning is not a one-time exercise; it evolves as the brand and its market change. A brand's positioning must be distinctive and memorable, yet also resonant with the values and needs of its target audience. Brands must find a distinctive way to be remembered. Positioning therefore involves identifying the unique value proposition that sets a brand apart from its competitors. This process is often guided by a brand's core values and mission statement, which serve as the foundation for all strategic decisions. Brand strategy is not a linear process; it is an ongoing, iterative journey. As markets evolve and consumer preferences shift, brands must continually reassess their positioning and adjust their strategy accordingly. The ultimate goal of brand strategy is to create a brand that is not only successful in the marketplace but also meaningful and resonant with its audience. 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 **Erika Maginn, VP, Group Strategy Director at T&P Group**, about the state of strategy today – from the importance of collaboration and clear, single-minded thinking, to why the best strategic ideas often feel obvious in hindsight. We explored the value of storytelling in an AI-driven industry, the danger of overcomplicating strategy, and why curiosity and human insight still remain the discipline's greatest strengths.*

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

A: I started in account service before switching to strategy at a senior level. The account service experience was invaluable because it gave me exposure to important client conversations I wouldn't have necessarily been exposed to as a junior planner. I was able to understand the full picture of our clients' worlds early, and see how marketing and brand work was interconnected to other corporate initiatives and to the bottom line.

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

A: Frameworks are tools, and tools are handy when they are fit for purpose and used appropriately. I gravitate toward frameworks that help simplify the story I'm trying to tell, because it gives the audience something visual and familiar as a starting point. Frameworks make for great scaffolding, but it's what you put in them that counts.

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

A: One of my biggest frustrations is that strategy is often treated like an individual practice, when it's a better team sport. Relying on your own knowledge and point of view only gets you so far, but if you share your ideas early and often, you tap into more diverse perspectives. Also it's way more fun.

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

A: A client I greatly admire said, "if you're explaining, you're losing." That stuck with me, and applies to poor strategy. The funny thing about a great strategy is that it seems obvious and inevitable once you figure it out. It takes a lot of work to get there but when you crack it, people say things like, "of course!" or "I've felt exactly like that!" or "It's so simple!" Conversely, if you have to explain the punchline, or if you're getting puzzled or concerned, "I don't get it" reactions, you haven't nailed it. I would argue that poor strategy is both a people and a system problem (people are part of the system, after all).

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

A: The most common issues I see are:

- 1) Not enough time allocated to strategy upfront. If you take the time to ask clarifying questions, think through the problem and explore solutions at the beginning of a project, it saves time, money and sanity as the project progresses.
- 2) Poorly written (or non-existent) briefs to kick off the strategic project. A good brief is clear, single-minded, and directly linked to the business goal. Full stop.
- 3) Spending too much time on the backstory (how we got here) and not enough time on what we're going to do about it. Strategy should move brands and people forward.
- 4) Too many cooks in the kitchen.

If a team isn't working well, then I figure out the root cause (usually one or more things from the above list) and adjust accordingly.

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

A: That we're the only ones qualified to do the strategic thinking. I know a lot of great strategic thinkers across creative, design, account services, and other departments on both the agency and client side. Somewhere along the way, we stopped looking at strategy as a way of thinking everyone has access to, and made it into something only people with the word *strategy* or *planner* in their title are allowed to practice. Strategists get to play in that space more often but we all have better, tighter, business-building ideas when strategy comes from everyone.

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

A: Storytelling. AI can be a useful tool for strategists (and agency capabilities more broadly) but there is craft to storytelling. Right now AI is pretty bad at it, but even as it gets slightly better, storytelling isn't something we should outsource to an LLM. There's an alchemy that happens when you go from data to insight to idea, and no AI programming model is going to get you there as messily and imperfectly and passionately as an actual human being.

Q: How screwed are we from 1 to 10 with the AI in creative industry?

A: 5/10. Like any big shift in technology, it's going to displace a lot of practices and people, especially in these first few years. Unfortunately, there will be less juniors hired across all departments because AI will take over roles that can be automated. But technological advancements tend to also create new jobs and opportunities too. Back to my earlier point, I believe there will always be room in the industry for storytellers. We don't draw pictures on the walls of caves anymore, but we're still telling stories.

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

A: Cautiously optimistic. The advantage strategists have is that it's our job to be curious, to explore ideas, and ask 'what if?'. That mindset is imperative in this new era of advertising. I see a lot of smart, hard-working talent in the industry right now—the "AI natives" who are learning their craft alongside the tech—and as long as we continue to lead with curiosity and focus on human insights and ideas, I don't think strategy is going anywhere anytime soon.