



We spoke with **Jeenal Patel, VP, Strategy at UM Canada**, about the evolving role of media strategy in an increasingly data-driven and AI-powered world. From the importance of understanding human behaviour and staying consumer-led, to balancing performance with long-term brand building, resisting the pull of platforms, and protecting curiosity and critical thinking, we explored what makes great strategy today.

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

A: I grew up in India, which is one of the most culturally rich and diverse countries in the world. You are surrounded by different languages, traditions, beliefs, and ways of living. Looking back, I think that environment fostered my curiosity about people. I was always fascinated by human behaviour. Why do trends catch on? Why do people feel drawn to certain things? Why does the same message resonate with one person but not another?

In fact, one of my earliest memories of this curiosity is sitting at home watching television with my family. There would often be an ad that everyone thought was confusing or did not make sense. For some reason, I would find myself explaining why I thought it worked, who it was speaking to, or what the rationale behind the message might be. Nobody asked me to do it. I just found it fascinating to analyze ads.

When I completed my MBA in Marketing, strategy was the career I was naturally drawn to. I began my journey as a creative strategist in India, later moved into content strategy for a streaming platform, and eventually immigrated to Canada, where I now work in media strategy.

What has been interesting is that, across these disciplines and across both the client and agency sides, the fundamentals of strategy have remained remarkably consistent. Whether it is creative, content, or media strategy, at the heart of them is the same pursuit: understanding what drives human behaviour and how brands can create meaningful connections with people.

That curiosity is what brought me into strategy, and it is what continues to keep me going every day.

Q: What's the weirdest or most controversial perception people have of media strategists?

A: I think one of the most common, and perhaps controversial, perceptions of media strategists is that we only have a role to play once the idea has been developed. The assumption is that once the message is set, media strategists step in and figure out where to place it.

The reality is quite different.

The best media strategists are not thinking about channels first. They are thinking about people first.

We are trying to understand how behaviours are changing, what is happening in culture, what is capturing attention, how people are participating in culture, and how they are consuming media. Once we understand that, we can start to identify how brands can show up meaningfully in those moments and in consumers' lives.

That's why I believe media strategists should be involved much earlier in the process. We are not just answering where a message should appear. We are business partners to our clients, helping them solve business problems through media.

The strongest work happens when media strategy is part of the conversation from the very beginning, not the very end. At that point, we are not simply optimizing a solution that has already been built. We are helping shape the solution itself.

Q: How do you balance performance metrics with long-term brand building in media planning?

A: I don't see performance and brand building as opposing forces. In fact, brand building impacts performance, and I think the best media strategies are the ones that successfully balance both.

As strategists, we absolutely need to keep an eye on the dashboard. We need to understand what's happening in real time. Are people engaging? Are they searching? Are they converting? Are we delivering against the business objectives we set out to achieve?

But at the same time, we need to have the vision to look beyond the dashboard and think about how we are future-proofing the brand.

Performance marketing is incredibly effective at driving immediate action. But long-term brand building is about creating something more enduring. It is about building familiarity, trust, distinctiveness, and mental availability so that consumers continue to choose your brand in the years to come.

The way I think about it is that performance helps us win today, while brand building helps ensure we can keep winning tomorrow.

Ultimately, the balance depends on the business challenge we are trying to solve. Some situations require a stronger focus on immediate return. Others require a greater investment in long-term brand equity. That said, I believe a strategist's role is to hold both perspectives at the same time.

Keep an eye on the dashboard, but have the vision to future-proof the brand.

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

A: One of my biggest frustrations is that our industry has become incredibly good at measuring activity, but not necessarily better at understanding people.

We have more data than ever before. We can track clicks, views, engagement, conversions, and countless other signals in real time. And that's incredibly valuable.

But sometimes I worry that, in our pursuit of optimization, we risk losing sight of the bigger question: why are people behaving the way they are in the first place?

The most important breakthroughs for brands rarely come from a dashboard alone. They come from understanding human motivations, cultural shifts, tensions, aspirations, and unmet needs.

I think there is a tendency today to prioritize what is immediately measurable over what is strategically meaningful.

The challenge is that not everything that drives growth shows up neatly in a weekly report.

For me, the role of strategy is to zoom out and connect the dots between business, culture, consumers, and media.

Data should absolutely inform our decisions, but it should not replace curiosity, judgment, and critical thinking.

The best strategy happens when we combine both: the precision of data and the depth of human understanding.

Q: To what extent does the pursuit of awards influence media strategy work—and is there a risk it pushes teams toward “case-study success” rather than real-world effectiveness?

A: I think awards play an important role in our industry. They celebrate great thinking, creativity, and effectiveness. They provide recognition for the teams behind the work and can inspire the industry to raise the bar.

That said, I don't believe awards should ever be the destination. They should be the byproduct.

The work should always start with a business problem. How do we help a brand grow? How do we change behaviour?

How do we solve the challenge the client has put in front of us?

Those are the questions that should guide the strategy.

The risk comes when teams start thinking about what will make a great case study before thinking about what will make a meaningful difference to the business. In my view, the best award-winning work is usually the work that was effective first and famous second, not the other way around.

If we want our brands to succeed in today's world, it is increasingly important that we stand against bland and create differentiation. That means constantly challenging ourselves to think differently, push boundaries, and bring more innovative solutions to our clients. But innovation for its own sake is not enough. It has to create value for the business.

Ultimately, the question I always come back to is simple: did the work solve the problem it was meant to solve in a unique and differentiated way?

If the answer is yes, and the work goes on to earn industry recognition, that's wonderful. But the impact on the business must come first.

Q: Where do you think media strategy gets most distorted today—platform algorithms, client demands, or measurement systems? (Or may be something else)

A: I think when focus gets diluted, strategy gets distorted.

Whether it's chasing too many objectives at once, the tendency to be everywhere, do everything, and measure everything, or optimizing for metrics simply because they are easy to track, we can sometimes lose sight of what really matters and what truly creates impact.

Strategy is ultimately about making choices. Not every metric matters equally, and not every channel deserves a role in the plan.

One of the biggest risks today is confusing what is measurable with what is valuable. Some of the most important drivers of long-term growth, such as trust, relevance, distinctiveness, and cultural connection, are often much harder to measure than clicks or impressions.

For me, the role of strategy is to bring focus back into the conversation. What is the most important problem we are trying to solve? Where can we create the greatest impact?

Because strategy is not about doing more things. It is about making better choices.

Q: How do platforms like Google, Meta, and TikTok influence the way media strategy is developed today, and how do strategists in turn adapt or shape how those platforms are used?

A: Platforms like Google, Meta, TikTok, and others provide us with incredible amounts of data, powerful targeting capabilities, real-time feedback, and a much deeper understanding of consumer behaviour than we have ever had before.

Those capabilities make them incredibly valuable partners.

At the same time, I think the role of a strategist is to remain platform-informed without becoming platform-led. Every platform has its own strengths, its own algorithms, and naturally, its own perspective on what success looks like. But our job is to take a step back and start with a different question: is this the right solution for our brand, and will it unlock growth?

Platforms provide powerful tools and signals, but they should help inform the strategy, not dictate it.

The best strategies are not built around platforms. They are built around consumers and their behaviours, and then brought to life through the right platforms.

Q: With AI reshaping the industry, what's the one thing in strategy you would want to protect?

A: This is probably one of the questions that keeps me awake at night.

And there are two things, not just one, that I would want to protect at all costs in the AI era: Curiosity and Critical thinking.

Curiosity is what drives strategy. AI is an incredible tool for helping us find answers, but the questions still need to come from us. The quality of the output will always depend on the quality of the questions we ask. If we lose our curiosity about people, culture, behaviour, and business challenges, we risk becoming operators rather than strategists. The second is critical thinking. To me, critical thinking is a strategist's armour. AI can provide information, generate ideas, and offer recommendations, but it cannot make judgments on our behalf. It cannot decide what is right for a specific brand, a specific business challenge, or a specific cultural moment.

As AI continues to flood us with more information and more possibilities, the ability to evaluate, challenge, connect the dots, and make sound judgments will become even more important.

So while I am incredibly optimistic about AI, I think we need to be careful about what we delegate to it. We should absolutely delegate certain tasks. We should never delegate thinking.

Q: On a scale from 1 to 10, how "screwed" is the creative and media industry because of AI?

A: I tend to see the glass as half full, so I definitely don't think the industry is doomed.

But I am also a realist. AI is absolutely going to transform how we work. Some roles will change significantly. Certain tasks that used to take hours will take minutes. Some skills will become less valuable, while others will become much more important.

So, I don't think it's business as usual. But I also don't think AI is the biggest threat facing our industry. Mediocrity is. If everyone has access to the same tools, the same models, and the same information, then average work becomes very easy to produce. What will differentiate people and organizations is not access to AI. It is how they apply human intelligence alongside it. That's the antidote to mediocrity.

AI can help us process information, generate options, and improve efficiency. Human intelligence is what helps us exercise judgment, creativity, empathy, intuition, and critical thinking.

I think the fast path to sameness, or even blandness, is becoming overly dependent on AI. To thrive, the industry will need to learn how to combine AI with human intelligence in ways that create better outcomes for brands and businesses.

So yes, AI will create disruption. It will force all of us to learn new skills and rethink how we work. But I actually see that as an opportunity. The industry has always evolved. This is simply the next evolution.

Q: If you look at where media is going—from broadcast TV and OOH to programmatic targeting and AI-driven search and discovery—how do you think the media mix will actually change? Will the next 10 years be as disruptive as the last 10?

A: I think ten years is probably too long a timeline to make specific predictions about the media mix. The reality is that the media landscape is evolving so quickly that we are seeing meaningful shifts every six months.

What is interesting to me is that I don't think the next evolution of media will be defined by new channels alone.

I think it will be defined by how people discover information and make decisions.

The media mix has always evolved in response to changes in consumer behaviour. The way we search has changed. The way we use and depend on social media has changed. And now AI is beginning to change it again.

We are seeing shifts in how people discover brands, how they seek recommendations, how they engage with communities, how they evaluate options, how they consume entertainment, and ultimately how they move through the path to purchase.

That's why I don't think the real story is whether the media mix will change. It absolutely will.

The more important question is: how will discovery and decision-making change?

The media mix will simply evolve to reflect those changes.

As strategists, our job is not to predict the next channel. It is to understand how human behaviour is evolving and ensure that brands remain present wherever discovery, influence, and decision-making are happening.

Because channels will evolve. Human behaviour is the signal we should be paying attention to.