



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 was not simply the result of 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 experiences, messages, and interactions over time. One of the core elements of brand strategy is positioning, which involves determining how a brand communicates and how a product or service is perceived. This process is not static; it evolves as a brand's audience and the market it operates in change. Brand strategy also involves understanding the competitive landscape in which a brand operates. It requires a deep understanding of human behavior, cultural dynamics, and the competitive landscape in which a brand operates. Closely related to 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, communication 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 through consistent and meaningful engagement with those systems. In this sense, strategic communication often involves identifying narratives that are authentic to an organization's values and resonant beyond the organization itself in order to gain traction.

We spoke with **Meredith Ferguson, Group Strategy Director at Zulu Alpha Kilo**, about the state of strategy today. We discussed the dangers of delegating thinking to AI, the untapped potential of strategy beyond advertising, and the growing importance of curiosity, taste, and original thinking.

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

A: I never planned to be in advertising, or in the corporate world at all. When I was younger I thought I'd be a chef. I went back to school in my 20s and started out my career as a librarian and archivist. I realized pretty quickly it wasn't my path. I've always loved writing, so I eventually landed in nonprofit communications. I happened to be at SickKids during the creation of the VS brand platform, which was my first real introduction to brand strategy. I watched VS completely transform fundraising as well as how it felt to work there, or to be part of the patient family community. It had so much power. I knew right then I wanted to do that kind of work, even if I wasn't sure yet what it meant. It also made me realize I'd been doing a smaller scale version of it all along. Over the next few years I made my way into client-side brand roles and figured out agency was where I really wanted to be. I'm naturally a bit of a provocateur and wanted to be somewhere that would be an asset. Plus my agency partners always seemed to be having more fun than I was. I'm grateful for my path. It made me extremely adaptable and good at navigating uncertainty, two things every strategist needs.

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

A: It depends how they're used. They can be helpful, but they can also be limiting. I use frameworks, but I don't build my entire practice around them. The trouble is when frameworks show up too early, and they shrink the thinking right when it should be opening up. In briefs they tend to make creatives tune out. They're most useful later, for a logic check, when I need to distill, or as a communication tool for a client presentation. The skill is knowing when to use one and when to toss it. Most importantly, they should never replace your own thinking or judgement. Frameworks are the rulebook of strategy - you learn the rules so you can break them intelligently.

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

A: It all comes back to the idea that the strategist has all the answers. One of our CSOs, Maxine Thomas, often says it's not our job to be the smartest person in the room, it's to be the best listener. Definitely advice worth taking. When we're doing it right, we're closer to journalists than academics. We realize we don't know the answer beyond maybe some initial hypotheses, then we ask the right questions, facilitate the right conversations, observe and experiment. We call bullshit when we need to. There's a misconception that there's one objective answer waiting to be found, and there isn't. Strategy is subjective. The work is sitting in the mess long enough to find an angle that actually moves people, which isn't always the same as the one that looks right on paper. There should always be co-creation with client, accounts, and especially creative. People should feel like they came along for the ride, because great thinking only goes anywhere when people trust you enough to follow it. Influence matters as much as insight. Intellectual humility matters a lot: being comfortable with ambiguity and with being wrong. Strong opinions, held loosely.

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

A: Bad strategy is usually overcomplicated: it sprawls in multiple directions, hides behind jargon and big words, or feels too abstract. Good strategy distills something complex into something that feels intuitive and simple, and it's decisive. And bad strategy also lacks a point of view. Sometimes that's a clarity problem, but more often it's a courage problem: confidence in your own thinking, or in putting forward something that goes against the grain. All of this can present like a people problem, but it's often a system problem: lack of time, resources, or proper mentorship, internal culture or dynamics.

Q: What indicates that a team isn't working well, and what would you change?

A: A team that's not working usually isn't connecting at a human level. There has to be unity, trust and a sense that people have each other's backs, and people need to be able to constructively disagree with each other. Advertising still romanticizes the solo creative genius, which is BS. Advertising is a team sport, across strategy, creative, accounts, production, the whole ecosystem.

Usually it traces back to a bigger culture issue from the top, which you may not control as a leader. But anyone can lead with their values and build the conditions for great work on their team: cross-functional, project-based, or departmental. Strategists occupy a leadership role whether or not they have the title, and we have more influence than we realize. Every project is a chance to build the kind of environment where creativity can thrive.

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

A: I don't know if this is weird or controversial, but there's definitely an outsider quality to the role. Even when a strategist looks polished and corporate, they're usually never fully inside any one system: they're slightly outside of it, watching, translating, and reverse engineering the culture instead of just living in it. That distance is the advantage. Being an outsider is what lets you see clearly. So sure we're a bit weird. That's kind of the point.

Q: To what extent does the pursuit of awards influence what agencies create — and is there a risk it outweighs real client or consumer value?

A: Awards are important and also totally out of hand. The sheer volume, the fake case studies, the dog walkers have damaged the integrity of the whole system. It's not a risk that some agencies build around awards instead of client objectives, it's the reality.

As an industry we often confuse excellence with exceptionalism. They're completely different. Excellence is about the work: does this meet the highest bar of craft, and did it genuinely move people in a way that hit the client's objectives? Because we're not independent artists. We get to make work in exchange for it doing something that benefits our clients in the real world.

Exceptionalism is about comparison. It really only asks: are we better than everyone else in the room today? It doesn't lead to more effective work for real people, just more advertising for advertising people packaged cleverly for juries.

Still, awards are one of the best tools we have to protect and defend creativity, and I hope we find our way back to a healthier relationship with them.

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

A: My own thinking. It's a common anxiety in strategy, and it should be. Thinking is our whole job, and in a frictionless, algorithm-driven world it can feel like it's being taken from us, or like we gave it away without noticing. There's been a lot of conversation about taste lately. Taste is subjective, and it should be yours. It's not something you can just passively absorb by following all the right people online. It's built through tension, not comfort, so you have to go beyond the algorithm. Watch a show or film you wouldn't normally gravitate towards and figure out why people love it, and why you react the way you do. Read books that intimidate you. Listen to challenging music, and to albums the whole way through. Talk to someone you disagree with without trying to win. With practice you lean into curiosity and discernment over surface-level I-love-it-or-I-hate-it judgment, and build your own point of view and a bigger library to pull from.

It's the same threat whether it's AI, a framework, or the algorithm: anything you delegate your thinking to makes you think like everyone else. And sameness is death in this job. Our value is an original point of view: the weird angle, the dots nobody else connects, the thing nobody else noticed.

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

A: Honestly a 4, unless we decide to make it a 7 or 8. We're shaping the future of this industry every day through the decisions we make. We're not powerless. AI obviously has incredible potential, and at Zulu it's been a game changer for us in many ways already. Our CEO Mike Sutton saw the opportunity early and we've been implementing it thoughtfully across the agency.

I did a grad program in Culture and Technology - the one Marshall McLuhan founded at U of T - and the whole foundation of it was how technological and cultural shifts feed each other. People lose their shit every time, whether it was the written word, the printing press, or now AI. And every time it ends up being a catalyst for something new. The change is never what people predict. It always brings huge anxiety, but also opportunity for whoever understands the real value they offer in the middle of it.

That opportunity is in the product, but also in how agencies build their business models. The winners will be the ones who ask what unique value they bring within this context and reshape themselves around the answer, instead of blindly following what everyone else is doing.

Independents answer to their clients, team, and the work itself, not just shareholder value. That frees us to reinvent ourselves around what AI can do creatively, instead of just chasing efficiency. Agencies like Zulu who are seizing this opportunity are positioned well for the future.

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

A: Honestly, it's an exciting time to be in strategy.

AI is just one way the world is transforming. We're at a turning point where the structures and beliefs we took for granted are shifting and crumbling. It's scary, more so when I think about it as a parent, but it's also exciting, because we get to shape what comes next. When times are stable you inherit the rules. When everything's in flux you get to write them. And we're definitely in flux right now.

There's so much untapped value in what we do, inside an agency or not. Maybe it's because I didn't grow up in advertising, but I don't think of strategy as an identity or a role so much as a toolkit and an orientation toward the world. The things strategists are great at - critical and divergent thinking, creative problem solving, systems thinking, making clarity out of chaos - are the skills the world needs most right now, and they're transferable. So we can stretch them every day: what's a challenge a client faces that might not lead to traditional advertising, but that we could solve in an interesting way? And further out, how do we use the same toolkit at the problems that sit outside business entirely: environment, social polarization, food insecurity? Because we have a role to play there too.