



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 brand strategy, marketing strategy, communication strategy, 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 across experiences, messages, and interactions over time. One of the core challenges in brand strategy is creating a brand that is both distinctive and resonant. Brands must find a distinctive way to be remembered. Positioning therefore involves identifying the 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 space a brand occupies in the mental landscape of its audience. Some brands become associated with reliability or safety, others with innovation, luxury, 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 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. While marketing often concentrates on consumer engagement and demand generation, communication strategy recognizes that organizations exist within complex cultural and social systems, and that reputation is a critical asset. 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 a critical asset. 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 a critical asset. 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 **Michael McDonald-Beraskow, Group Strategy Director at Leo Toronto**, about the evolving role of strategy today — from the value of frameworks and the importance of simplicity, to why great strategic thinking should ultimately feel effortless. We explored the dangers of over-intellectualizing the discipline, the role of human insight in an AI-driven industry, and why the best strategists aren't necessarily the smartest people in the room, but those who stay closest to people.*

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

A: I left school with an arts degree in history and political science, but I didn't have a clear career path. It was a different era compared to today. When I talk to students now, many of them already have a marketing specialization and a clear sense of the path they want to pursue. I didn't have that. I explored different directions like politics, marketing, PR and eventually started in a healthcare-focused area of PR because it was the opportunity available to me at the time. It was a very admin-heavy role, but once I was inside the organization, I was able to make a case for moving into more traditional PR work, which expanded my skills and gave me a better understanding of the industry.

That experience eventually allowed me to make the next move and in 2013, I joined Leo Burnett as a junior planner, initially focused exclusively on social media. My path into strategy wasn't a grand plan. It wasn't something I had mapped out from the beginning. It was more about gradually learning, being exposed to new opportunities, and growing from there.

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

A: I think frameworks are very helpful in providing the clarity we need. There can be a level of personal clarity — you might feel like you're disorganized, with a number of different thoughts, and a framework allows you to bring structure to them.

But, critically, I think frameworks allow all of us to speak the same language. At a very basic level, they help align everyone around what we're thinking, what we're trying to do, and what we're ultimately trying to create. I'm not personally married to any one framework in terms of how I do my work, but I do think they're an important device for articulating what we're working toward.

As long as a framework isn't created as a fixed pathway for thinking or doing things, I think it can be incredibly valuable. It allows us to structure the chaos to some degree.

So yes, I'm certainly positive about frameworks, but I think it's critical not to be absolute in how we apply or use them — especially if doing so comes at the sacrifice of a strong creative direction.

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

A: A lot of the time, we can overcomplicate the process — or, frankly, over-intellectualize it. I do this myself. Even when I'm working on briefs, I can sometimes intellectualize ideas too much, and in doing so, we risk diminishing the creative output at the end of the day. My biggest frustration is this tendency toward over-analysis.

Sometimes it's even retrospective analysis — looking back and trying to explain everything after the fact.

I think we can sometimes treat what we do too academically. When we're trying to align a client and inspire a creative team, it can actually be more effective to under-intellectualize things at times.

Ultimately, if we're strategists, we're supposed to be the voice of the consumer. Sometimes, when we apply too much rigor to what we're doing, we actually move further away from the people we're trying to impact.

There's a marketing figure I really admire, Allen Adamson, who has written a number of books I really like. I worked for him briefly on a project, and one thing he always emphasized was the importance of removing marketing hyperbole and stepping outside of the marketing bubble.

Even in the short time I spent hearing him talk about this, I found it to be such an important piece of rigor. I read about our industry all the time, but sometimes you can observe really profound things simply by going to a movie, sitting on a bus, or watching my kids.

It's those simple, everyday moments that help you think about how to articulate ideas outside the context of an office — in ways that feel colloquial, human, and grounded.

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

A: I think that a system can get in the way of people, and people can get in the way of a system. These two things should complement each other, but you always have to be aware of when one is starting to interfere with the other. To me, poor strategy is often similar to poor writing — whether it's a movie, a novel, or anything else. You can feel when the effort is showing. You can see someone trying too hard to do something: trying too hard to articulate an idea, trying too hard to be clever, trying too hard to be different.

It's an easy tendency to fall into, but I think I spot poor strategy when people feel they need to showcase their effort. And I don't want to pretend this is something that only applies to others. I see it in my own work all the time. From a systems perspective, I see it when processes are designed to extract more from people than is necessary, or when they add layers of complexity simply to demonstrate additional effort. Sometimes the system itself becomes a way of showcasing work rather than creating better outcomes.

Ultimately, I think great strategy should feel effortless. When I can see the effort — when I can see the intent a little too clearly — that's usually when I know something isn't working.

The best systems I've seen are the ones that help people make things feel effortless. They encourage people to remove marketing hyperbole, step outside of the marketing bubble, and strip away unnecessary context or complexity. A good system should free people from the tendency to overwork an idea — because that's often what complicates strategy in the first place.

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

A: I think there are obvious indicators — if there's conflict, if there are visible points of friction — but again, it comes back to the earlier point about effort and exertion.

To me, one of the biggest signs is when a team isn't flowing. When people feel like they're constantly getting stuck, constantly running into obstacles, and allowing complexity to overtake them, they start to lose that sense of possibility — that ability to have a vision and see where things are going.

So, for me, it's about recognizing when a team feels like it's stuck in the mud. Whether it's a creative team, a strategy team, or an account team, if everyone is constantly weighed down by the complexity of the work, I would see that as a real indication that something isn't working.

How you address that depends on the people involved. I think you ultimately have to understand the individuals and their tendencies. What would have helped me overcome certain challenges would be different from what would help someone else.

It's almost like a personalized plan, because ultimately we're all human beings, and we each experience challenges differently. If someone is struggling, there's a reason behind that struggle — but the reason will vary from person to person.

So, to me, it's critical to understand the person first in order to understand why they're struggling, and then tailor the response accordingly.

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

A: The thing I always take issue with — and it goes back to my earlier points about complexity and being too much of an insider in the industry — is this idea that we're the smart people in the room. That we're the ones who are supposed to figure everything out because we're the experts.

Of course, part of our job is to provide clarity and create a clear path forward. But whenever I hear, "They're supposed to be the smart ones," I find myself pushing back.

Ironically, I think my career has progressed more when I've embraced not intelligence, but almost a form of simplicity — or what I jokingly call "stupidity." Not because we should lack intelligence, but because sometimes intelligence can add layers of complexity and density that actually get in the way of impact.

Sometimes the best thing we can do is remove the intelligence from a problem — simplify it, strip it back, and get closer to the human truth underneath.

I think our ability to solve problems doesn't come from being the smartest people in the room. It comes from being connected to people and understanding how they actually think and behave. That's not necessarily an exercise in intelligence. It's about instinct, simplicity, and empathy.

If you don't want people to overthink, you need to be willing to underthink a little. Personally, I've found much more success through underthinking than overthinking. Every time I overthink, I see the consequences — confusion on people's faces, a lack of excitement, a lack of connection. But when I simplify, I consistently find that people respond better.

I think there is a virtue to "stupidity." Obviously, that's an oversimplification, and I'm being intentionally provocative with the word, but I do think there's value in embracing the opposite of intellectual complexity. The most effective ideas feel effortless, not a showcase of how smart we are.

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: They certainly do. There's always going to be that element because one of the great things about awards is the incentive they create. If you've worked somewhere that doesn't submit for awards, you quickly realize the question becomes: what are you incentivizing against?

We all want to do great work, but if we want to break the mould—if we want to exceed precedent rather than simply meet it—we need something to measure ourselves against. Awards create that aspiration.

Of course, they're not perfect. There's always been controversy around awards, particularly when it comes to results. We've all seen examples where people exaggerate outcomes or make them appear more impactful than they really were. That's an inevitable risk when results become part of the criteria, and I understand the debate about whether they should be weighted so heavily.

But whenever that conversation comes up, I also think about the alternative. What does the absence of awards look like? It's not the absence of standards, but it can become the absence of an external bar to measure ourselves against. Having worked in places that didn't participate in awards, I found that absence pretty glaring. Awards force us to think beyond our own opinions. They remind us to consider how other people—our peers, the industry, and ultimately audiences—respond to the work. If we only judge ourselves by our own expertise, that's probably not the healthiest way to move the industry forward.

Obviously, outright fabricating results is unacceptable, and we've all seen examples of that. But because the industry is aware of those behaviours, there's also a degree of self-policing. People question claims, scrutinize case studies, and can often separate a strong idea from an inflated submission.

For me, awards are valuable because they encourage us to push beyond the baseline. I just hope the industry continues to sharpen how it evaluates results. Business impact is fundamental to what we do, but it can also be difficult to demonstrate in the short term.

I'd love to see greater recognition of resonance—not just immediate commercial outcomes. If an idea genuinely resonates with people, that's already a meaningful measure of creative success. We're not trying to create work that shocks people for the sake of it. We're trying to create work that connects.

And yes, I like awards. I want to win them. It feels good to win them, and I go into work every day hoping to create something worthy of that recognition. But the goal isn't the award itself. The goal is to create work that resonates with people, and the award should just acknowledge that.

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

A: For me, it always comes back to the human aspect of what we do. At Leo Burnett, there's a strong emphasis on the Humankind Study, and this year was actually my first time attending it. I came away feeling incredibly inspired because the work is really about uncovering something true about people.

AI isn't designed to do that. It's an expert in precedent. By its nature, it's built to recognize and repeat patterns—not to disrupt them or create genuine novelty.

That's why I think it's so important to be aware of those patterns and to keep pushing beyond them. AI has an important role to play as an efficiency tool. It helps me generate ideas, explore possibilities, and work faster. But our measure of success should never be the speed at which we work or the volume of what we produce. It should be the originality and novelty of our thinking.

That's why something like the Humankind Study feels so important to me. In the middle of all this technological change, it's a reminder that our job is still to understand people first. That's ultimately where the best ideas come from.

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

A: I think we might be more screwed in the short term than in the long term. Right now, we have this tool that everyone is rushing to implement and use to find the efficiencies the market is demanding. Because of that, I think there will be some rash decision-making in the short term.

So maybe in the short term, we're at a five out of ten. But I've always believed in human ingenuity — our ability to challenge norms and push toward new ways of thinking. Because of that, I'm bullish on AI from a process, efficiency, and capability standpoint.

At the same time, I don't see it replacing the human touch. I think there's a strong incentive right now to find efficiencies, and some organizations will inevitably make decisions too quickly or overcorrect. But over the long term, once we better understand this tool, recognize its limitations, and learn how to use its strengths, I think we'll ultimately be better off.

We've seen this happen before. When social media first emerged, many agencies treated it as a completely separate discipline. They created dedicated social media rooms, with people monitoring live feeds and conversations, rather than integrating social thinking into the broader creative process. Looking back, that sometimes felt like an over-rotation.

I think AI is going through a similar phase. In the short term, there's always a risk of over-rotating — of chasing the technology rather than understanding its role. But over time, that will likely correct itself. Once we understand where AI adds value and where human thinking remains essential, I think the balance will become much clearer. So I'd probably move from a five out of ten concern today to something closer to an eight out of ten opportunity in the long term.

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

A: I think what's exciting is that we're seeing silos collapse. That creates disruption — in terms of our roles, the work we're doing, and even our expectations of what those roles are supposed to represent. A lot of that is being redefined.

But what I like about the collapse of those silos is that it creates new opportunities. The expectations of what I might be doing from one day to the next are changing, but the opportunity to build close relationships with creative teams remains the same — and arguably, it's becoming even more important.

Ultimately, success comes from understanding what creatives need. What do they need to do their best work? How can strategy help unlock that?

As silos continue to break down and we become more flexible in our definition of what strategy can be, I think there's a real opportunity to build stronger relationships with creative teams and have a greater impact on the work itself.

So yes, there's uncertainty. The role of strategy is changing, and what it represents from one day to the next isn't always clear. But at the same time, that change is bringing us closer to the output that matters most: the creative work.