



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 arenas of organized activity. 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 strategy was not simply the work of a few executives, but a shared responsibility across the organization. Today, strategy encompasses 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. A brand's 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 consistently expressed set of experiences, messages, and interactions over time. One of the challenges in brand strategy is that brands must find a distinctive way to be remembered. Positioning therefore involves identifying the specific elements of a brand that set it apart from others in the same category. 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 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. In the realm of marketing, 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 **Rami Dudin, Head of Strategy at Courage**, about the evolving role of strategy today — from why frameworks should support ideas rather than shape them, to why the best strategies are often the simplest ones. We explored the power of human insight, the collaboration between strategists and creatives, and what AI can — and cannot — replace in strategic thinking.*

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

A: I moved to Canada as an international student in 2010 and started out studying journalism at Carleton University. After my first year, I switched to Communications and Media Studies. I took one advertising course and was hooked.

After graduating in Ottawa, I started applying to agencies. Through a connection, I landed an internship at BBDO. The only opening was in analytics—not exactly what I'd envisioned—but I took it anyway. I started as an intern, spent about two years in analytics, earned a full-time role after proving myself, and stayed at BBDO for another three years.

I always wanted to be a journalist. Advertising wasn't the same thing, but it felt adjacent. It still involved storytelling, communication and understanding people.

My mother is also a marketing professor, so marketing was always around me. Looking back, maybe that was a sign that this was where I was meant to end up.

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

A: I think frameworks are important because they create accountability. A client can't sign off on the strategy that's in your head, no matter how good it is. Frameworks and briefs give structure to ideas, making them something clients can review, approve, and share with their own stakeholders.

Frameworks are also useful tools for organization and inspiration, but I think their biggest value is creating alignment and documenting why certain decisions were made. Six months later, you can look back and understand the thinking behind the work.

That said, I don't think great strategy comes from frameworks. The best ideas usually emerge through conversations—between strategists, creatives, and clients. The framework captures the thinking; it doesn't generate it. The risk is when teams start shaping strategy to fit a framework instead of choosing the framework that best serves the strategy. Frameworks should be tools, not rules. The best agencies aren't afraid to step outside the template when a project calls for a different approach.

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

A: I think a lot of strategy comes down to distillation. One thing that bothers me is when strategies become too long and academic—filled with stats, research, and information where you feel like you learned a lot, but you still don't know what you're supposed to do with it.

I think many strategists believe their job is to research extensively and bring a lot of information to the table. And obviously research and analysis matter, but the hardest part is knowing what to take from all of that and distill it into something meaningful.

The best strategies tell you something and then explain the why behind it, without getting lost in research and academia. I think we sometimes love being academics, but strategy is ultimately about making complex things simple and getting everyone aligned.

Another thing I've learned is that strategy is not about being the person with all the answers. Earlier in my career, I felt like I had to convince people that my brief was the right one. But I've learned that it's shared accountability. The brief is only as good as the creative team's ability to work with it. If the creative team doesn't believe in it, there's no point forcing it. Some of the best work comes from conversations where creatives challenge the brief, bring a different perspective, and sometimes help rethink the strategy.

I think sometimes strategists feel like it's their brief, their idea, their moment. But the truth is, creatives are the ones who have to live with it, unpack it, and turn it into something. So I've learned not to shy away from those conversations and to let the creative team lead when it comes to creating the work.

Ultimately, I think a strategy is an elevator pitch. You should be able to explain what a brand is about in the time it takes to ride an elevator, and someone should understand it. If you need 70 slides to explain it, you probably won't be able to explain it in an ad either.

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

A: I think it's a system problem. I've worked with strategists who weren't very strong in one place, and then I've seen them somewhere else and thought, "Oh, wow, they're really good."

Strategists are only as good as the people around them and as clear as the problem they're trying to solve. I've written bad strategies myself, and when you look back, you can usually identify why it happened.

A lot of strategy comes down to the client relationship. The best relationships are the ones where the client is honest with you: what the real problem is, what the CEO thinks, who needs to be brought on board, and what the barriers are.

You need to understand both the brand problem and what I call the stakeholder problem—the optics, the language, and the framing that will help people understand and buy into the strategy. You can have the best strategy in the world, but if people don't understand it or see themselves in it, it can fall flat.

When I think about poor strategy, the giveaways are usually the length, the jargon, and how many layers there are. A good strategy is one where I can see a few slides and immediately understand the logic. Ideally, it takes you somewhere slightly unexpected, but still feels right.

For me, a big sign of a good strategy is comprehension. I think we're sometimes too obsessed with novelty. We want to come up with something no one has ever thought of before, but I think that's often the wrong approach.

I always say: tell the most obvious thing in the most interesting way. Don't try to say the most interesting thing.

The strongest strategies often start with a universal truth and then find a compelling way to articulate it. A strategy should open up possibilities, not narrow them. A great idea can be a great idea, but that doesn't necessarily make it a great strategy. If it feels like a thought starter rather than a platform, that's usually a warning sign.

Another test I use is: do I understand the human truth before I see the data? Unless it's something extremely specific, the strongest strategies usually start with something universal. You should be able to hear the insight and think, "I get that."

I also think we sometimes misunderstand differentiation. Competitors often talk about the same things because those things matter to consumers. The question isn't whether you can talk about the same benefit—it's whether you can talk about it in your own way.

And finally, consistency. I love consistency, but I think we sometimes take it too literally. A strong platform should give creatives something to build on year after year. It needs enough focus to be recognizable, but enough flexibility to keep creating. The problem is when consistency becomes "matching luggage." The best platforms don't limit creativity—they create a foundation for it.

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

A: I think communication is the biggest indicator.

To me, the best-functioning teams operate almost like a group chat. Strategists, creatives, account teams, and other key people are constantly talking, sharing perspectives, and solving problems together.

When I think about the best teams I've worked on, there's always been a core team. It doesn't mean the same five people are attached to an account forever, but on a project basis, there are people across disciplines who are truly in it together. They challenge each other and hold each other accountable.

If someone doesn't like the brief, that gets flagged early. If someone doesn't like the work, we talk about it. Those conversations need to happen before things become bigger problems.

I also think honesty is a huge part of it. People don't always love being direct. We soften feedback, put it in emails, or hide behind big words instead of saying, "I don't think this is working."

One thing I appreciate about Courage is that there's an environment where people are encouraged to be direct. You need thick skin—you need to be able to defend your work—but you also need to feel empowered to say what you actually think.

And when I say communication, I don't mean more emails or Slack messages. I mean real conversations. Come to the office, talk to people face-to-face, show them the work, and understand their perspective. A lot of problems get solved through those conversations.

Ultimately, I don't think low-performing teams are usually about bad people. If someone has been hired, they're probably smart and they want to do good work. Usually, it's the process that isn't working.

I always believe in fixing the process before blaming the people, because people flourish in good processes.

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

A: I think one of the biggest stereotypes is that strategists are nerds—introverts sitting behind a laptop with big glasses and headphones, buried in data.

Those people definitely exist, but honestly, most strategists I've worked with are extroverts. They're curious, they're creative.

Another stereotype is that the strategist is the person who walks into the room with the data. I don't really see the role that way. As you become more senior, you almost take on part of a creative director's role—not by commenting on colours or layouts, but by helping build the idea.

My job is to understand culture, understand the audience and understand the client, then help push an idea from good to great. Sometimes it's bringing something you've seen in culture. Sometimes it's connecting a different insight. It's much more than just presenting research.

I also don't like the idea that strategy and creativity are separate disciplines. Some of the best award-winning work I've seen has come from an account person or someone outside the creative department. Great ideas can come from anywhere.

One stereotype that is probably grounded in some truth is that strategists can be stubborn. We sometimes think that because we have the data, we have the only version of the truth.

The trick is knowing when to be stubborn and when to let go. You have to stand your ground on the things that really matter, but you also have to stay open to other possibilities. Sometimes the best thing you can do is say, "Okay, show me," and see where the idea goes.

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 the best work does both.

We've kind of been sucked into this "LinkedIn work" universe, where people think about how the work is going to look on LinkedIn or in a press release. And honestly, I don't have a problem with that. Awards create ambition.

They push all of us—clients, strategists and creatives—to aim higher instead of settling for mediocrity.

Where it becomes a problem is when you have a great idea that isn't solving the business problem.

For me, the goal has always been both: create work that drives the business and create work that people are proud of. If we're consistently doing the hard-working, business-driving work for a client, I'm also comfortable saying, "Here's an idea that's going to put you on the map as a marketer." Awards don't just benefit the people who walk on stage—they create momentum for the client, for the agency and for the brand.

It's a bit like music. You want to make the album everyone listens to, but you also want to win a Grammy. I don't think those things have to be mutually exclusive.

Winning awards also attracts talent. Great creatives want to work on ambitious brands. People want to be part of teams that are doing exciting work.

That said, I actually like the direction the industry is moving. Cannes now requires much stronger proof of business impact, and I think that's a good thing. We got there because, unfortunately, there were cases where people exaggerated results. The expectation today is that great creative work has to demonstrate real impact. I also think clients share responsibility. If an agency is pushing work that's purely for awards and not right for the business, the client should say no. The best award-winning work only happens when both the agency and the client believe in it.

At the end of the day, different people are motivated by different things. Some marketers want to build an award-winning career. Others simply want to build the business and go home to their families. Neither is wrong. But ideally, you shouldn't have to choose between creative ambition and business results. The best work delivers both.

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

A: I'm not against AI. What I don't like is starting with AI.

For me, the creative process begins with a blank piece of paper. That's the part I want to protect. I always want to start with a blank canvas and let my own thinking be the first thing on the page.

As someone whose first language is Arabic, I often know exactly what I want to say, but I can't always articulate it perfectly in English. That's where AI is incredibly useful. I can give it a rough idea, and together we sharpen it into something much clearer.

What I want to preserve is that first stab at the brief. It shouldn't come from AI—it should come from you. It should be your opinion, your instinct, your stream of consciousness. Even if it's messy, get it out first.

Then bring in AI to organize it, sharpen it and make it stronger.

The thing I worry about is that AI can become a shortcut for curiosity. Instead of exploring, questioning and making connections yourself, it's very easy to ask AI for the answer.

That's why I always like to start on my own. Once I know what I think, I'm happy to let AI help me express it better.

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

A: I don't know if we're screwed. It's hard to predict the future.

What I can say is that I've been in plenty of client meetings where the conversation is, "How can we use AI so we can pay the agency less?" That's always a difficult frame because it naturally puts agencies in a position where they're trying to protect their scope.

I think what's more likely is that AI will take over certain parts of the process. Production is an obvious example. If we're creating hundreds of performance marketing assets, generating different versions, or building stimuli for testing, AI is going to be fantastic. It can save weeks of work.

Where I still struggle to see AI replacing people is in authoring the big idea. Maybe I'll feel differently in five years, but clients still want someone to be accountable. They want to look at their agency and say, "You're the strategic partner. Help us figure this out."

That's what agencies ultimately provide. It's not just execution—it's judgment and accountability.

I also don't think agencies should spend all their energy trying to protect themselves from AI. We need to be proactive. Clients are going to ask about it whether we like it or not, and the worst response is to pretend it doesn't exist.

So my view is pretty pragmatic. AI is already transforming execution, and I think it'll continue to do that. But when it comes to judgment, accountability, and shaping the big strategic idea, I still believe people will matter most.

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

A: I think strategy is changing.

We have less time than we used to. Strategy is becoming less of an autonomous discipline where you disappear for two weeks and come back with the answer. It's becoming less academic and much more collaborative.

That doesn't mean everything changes. There are still things we need to protect: what makes a real insight, what creates meaningful tension, and having a clear point of view. Those are the red lines for me.

But I'm much more comfortable moving quickly. I'm comfortable not taking two weeks to write a brief. I'm comfortable revisiting a strategy after a conversation with the creative team, or even backtracking from a creative idea if it leads us somewhere better.

To me, the new rule for strategy is: don't be stubborn. Don't be rigid. Be fluid. Be easy to work with.

People want to move faster, and if strategy becomes something that slows the process down instead of making it better, it's easy for teams to work around it the next time.

Our role is to show our value in a way that feels dynamic—helping the process rather than complicating it.

The days of the strategist disappearing into a room, thinking in isolation, and coming back with all the answers—I think those days are either numbered or already over.