



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 domain of military leaders but a critical skill for success in commerce, 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, memories, and associations the brand evokes in the minds of consumers. 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 consistent elements—values, promises, and experiences—that are consistently expressed across experiences, messages, and interactions over time. One of the challenges brands face is that, because people are exposed to thousands of messages every day, brands must find a distinctive way to be remembered. Positioning therefore involves identifying the specific 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 about how a brand communicates and behaves 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. In this sense, marketing strategy is closely related to 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 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 **Jason Last, Partner, Strategy at Conflict**, about what makes a great strategist — from embracing ambiguity and turning it into clarity, to bringing a distinctive perspective and finding the story a brand is uniquely positioned to tell. We explored the role of creativity, intuition and narrative in strategic thinking, how strategists develop their own style, and why differentiation is at the heart of meaningful brand strategy.*

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

A: I studied English Literature in university and had no real understanding of ad agency roles at the time. I enjoyed advertising from the outside—I watched commercials closely—but I didn’t have a clear plan to enter the industry. I thought I’d become a novelist or maybe an academic.

Through a connection, I was introduced to John St., which at the time was a relatively young agency. They were looking for a summer strategy intern—something they hadn’t done before. My background ended up being a fit, especially because the agency placed strong emphasis on the creative side of planning.

I was in a band for many years and I studied creative writing, so I was always drawn to creative expression. And brand strategy clicked immediately. It felt very natural.

What I had studied—taking something widely discussed and bringing a fresh perspective to it—translated directly. That’s essentially what brand strategy is: taking something often commoditized and reframing it in a way that makes it more interesting, more distinct than it inherently is.

There was also a strong connection between critical thinking in academia and applying that thinking in a commercial context. That was my way in.

Q: Does anything still surprise you about strategy?

A: Probably just the consistency with which strategy ideas emerge from ambiguity.

At the start of a project, especially a positioning project, there’s often complete ambiguity. You genuinely don’t know where it’s going. And then, a few weeks later, things fall into place.

If you’re not comfortable with that ambiguity at the beginning, this probably isn’t the right field for you. That uncertainty is the constant of the job. Your role is to bring clarity to it.

Q: What do you look for when hiring strategists?

A: I look for people with interesting life or educational experiences, and more importantly, the ability to articulate what they took from those experiences.

The job is about filtering inputs and deciding what matters. So I want to see if someone can tell a story about their own life. If they can do that, they can do it for a brand.

Then there’s creativity. Not necessarily raw talent, but comfort with the creative process. Are they curious? Can they collaborate with creatives? Can they help spark ideas, not just generate them?

And finally, narrative instinct. Strategy is storytelling. If you can’t build a narrative, it’s going to be difficult.

Q: Can that be taught?

A: Some of it, yes. Some of it, no.

You can teach comfort with ambiguity. You can teach creative problem-solving frameworks. You can teach how to collaborate.

But intuition, empathy, the ability to notice things—those are harder to teach.

To me, insight and intuition are closely related. An insight is essentially a view from inside. It’s about seeing something beneath the surface, making a connection others haven’t.

And that often comes from who you are, not just what you’ve learned.

Q: What’s the weirdest perception of strategists?

A: I think there can sometimes be a perception that strategists are in a competition with creatives for personal glory. I could see how that perception could arise if there’s a high ego/insecurity dynamic among the individuals tasked with working together, or if the agency culture celebrates individual accomplishments more than team accomplishments. I’ve never experienced that myself, but I wouldn’t be surprised if that perception is out there, as there’s no shortage of egos in the industry.

Q: How much of strategy is performance versus rigor?

A: Both matter.

You need to take people on a journey. You're often asking them to change direction, which is uncomfortable. So how you present matters.

But performance alone won't carry a weak idea. The foundation has to be solid—logic, structure, narrative. The goal is to build a story that feels almost inevitable. Where agreeing with it feels like the only logical conclusion. Different strategists have different presentation styles. Some are more theatrical, others more understated. The key is to find what's authentic to you.

Q: How does a strategist develop their style?

A: It evolves.

Early on, it's easy to think there's one "right" style—usually your boss's. But over time, you start picking up elements from different people and shaping your own.

Your baseline is already there—your tone, your body language, your natural presence. Some people are quiet and composed, others are high-energy and expressive.

The goal is not to change that, but to work with it and refine it.

Q: What defines a lazy strategy?

A: Usually it could apply to any brand in the category. There's no specific connection to the brand, no logical context that gives the brand you're working on a specific license to lean into the narrative more effectively than others in the category.

Strategy is supposed to move a brand away from commoditization. If it reinforces it, it's not doing its job.

Q: How do you define strategy?

A: Brand strategy is about helping a brand identify and tell the best story it has access to.

So it's about setting a direction for a brand that is both true and differentiating.

Because without difference, there's no chance of affinity. And without affinity, there's no chance of loyalty.

I think everything else—audience understanding, segmentation, research—is in service of that outcome.

Q: What would agencies and clients miss if strategy disappeared?

A: A good strategist brings a level of clarity and conviction that helps people believe in and feel excited about the direction in which they're heading.

They can speak the language of both business and creativity, and that bridge is not always easy to replicate.

I think anyone can think strategically. It's not limited to a title. Great creatives and account people always have a very natural instinct for strategic ideas, but it's helpful having someone who has a lot of experience leading clients through a strategic process. It can make the creative leap feel a lot less unnerving for some people.

Q: What's an overlooked opportunity for strategists today?

A: Probably just developing a perspective on the world and not being afraid to bring it to your work.

We're in a moment where there's a lot of uncertainty—especially with AI. But ultimately, outputs will only be as strong as the inputs.

And perspective is the one thing that's truly yours.

Even when you're analyzing an audience, your interpretation is filtered through your own experiences. So the more aware you are of what you bring to the table, the more valuable you become.

If you're not really bringing your specific perspective to the work, I think you're probably more easily replaceable than if you are.

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

A: I think it'll be a very different experience for different people. If you're someone who has developed a fresh perspective and that people look to for ideas, direction, and vision, I think you'll be fine. At least until some humanoid robot can occupy the literal chair you sit in without anyone knowing it.

Q: Do awards risk outweighing real client value?

A: I think if a client is paying you to help them achieve a business outcome, and your approach to the work – your mindset – revolves in any way around coming up with a solution that you can enter into an advertising award show for your own personal benefit, then that's pretty problematic, to state the obvious. That's what's known as a "conflict of interest."

If, on the other hand, an agency does something that creates a major positive business impact for a client, and then afterwards says, “hey, let’s enter this into this or that award show,” then I think that seems innocent enough to me, even if I question the utility of it. Awards definitely have different meaning and value to different people. But ultimately it comes down to the purity of the work and the mindset when creating it. Awards should be an after-thought (if even an ever-thought) but unfortunately they don’t seem to be in a lot of instances, and I think some ridicule is justified when agencies take advantage of clients for personal gain.

Q: What advice would you give your younger self?

A: Two things.

First, it takes time—12 to 18 months—to really understand the job. So don’t panic early on.

Second, it’s a marathon.

Advertising is mostly small frustrations, with occasional moments where everything clicks. You don’t control outcomes as much as you think you do. Things change constantly.

You have to get comfortable with that.

Your role is to move things forward, even incrementally. Not to control every outcome.

And if you can accept that, you’ll last.