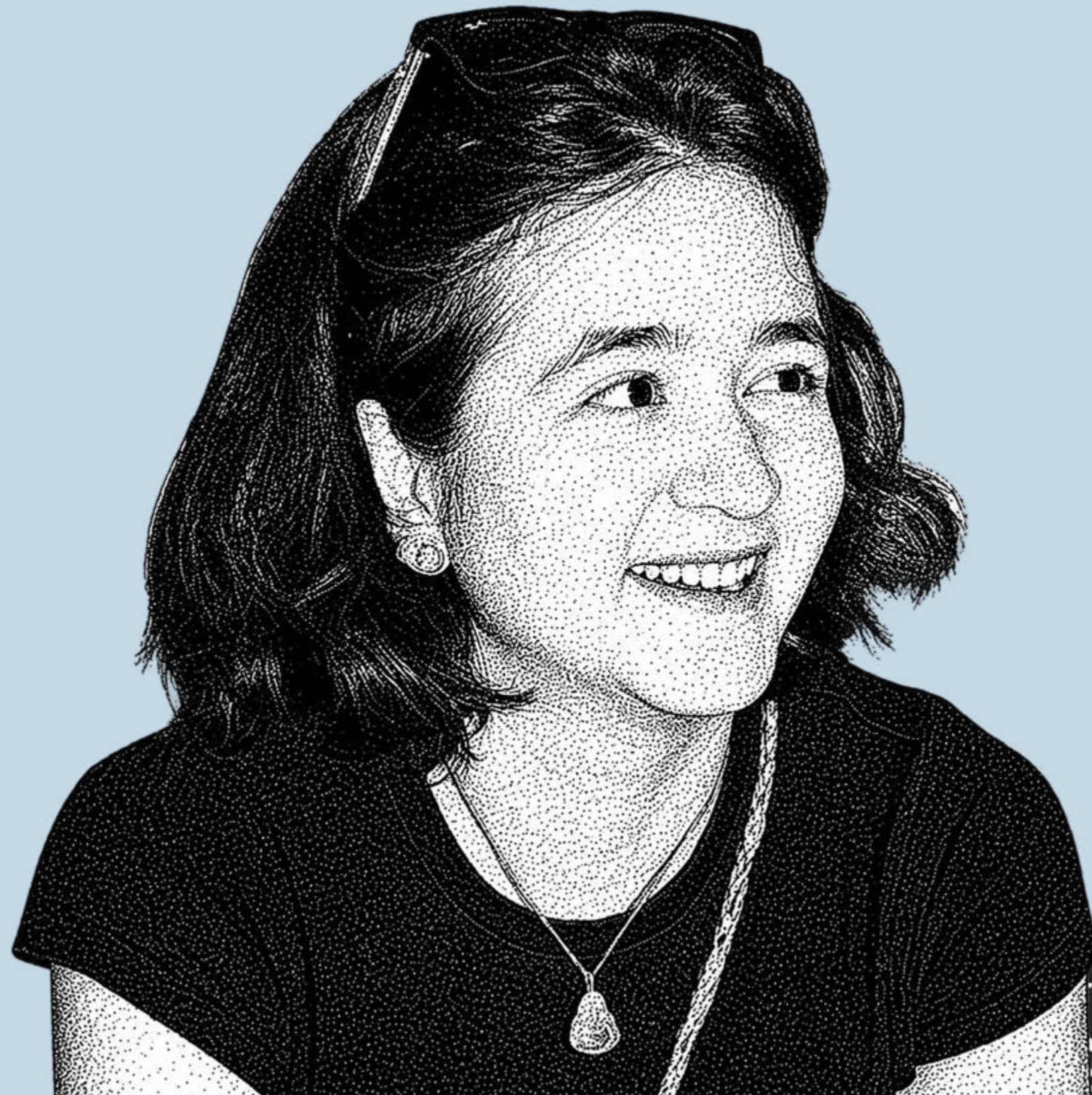


Becoming a Creative Strategist

What creative strategy is. What it demands. And how to master it.

Five years ago, nobody knew what a creative strategist was. Today, it's one of the most sought-after roles in performance marketing. It's also one of the least understood. This guide draws on perspectives from dozens of the field's sharpest practitioners to give you a clear picture of what creative strategy is, what it demands, and what it takes to excel at it.

“I heard the term creative strategist for the first time in my life. And when I heard it, it all just clicked — this is me.”



Naomi Peh Haeger's title changed every few months.

Content manager. Content production manager. Brand performance manager. Each one described part of her job and overlooked the rest. She was making content for brand and the growth teams, reporting to neither, moving between the raw intuition of creative and numerical specificity of performance without a title that was capable of describing both. She called it “an unhappy space.”

Naomi had studied design, including video editing and multidisciplinary design, but the market kept pulling her toward marketing. Her first job was social media manager at a food and drink startup. From there, she moved through DTC companies where her remit kept widening faster than any org chart could explain it.

When Spacegoods approached her about a creative strategist role, the job description felt less like a new opportunity than a correction. The role reported into growth, owned creative production, and used data as an anchor for creative decisions. It put a name to the thing she had been doing the whole time.

Creative strategy.

She took the job. By the time we spoke for her input on this guide, she had built a team of six and hired her own junior creative strategist.

She was also about to leave for Granola, an AI notetaker SaaS company. The role had come through a recruiter, and the job description could have described half a dozen different hires — video editor, content creator, something in between. But by the time she got into the room, she could tell what they actually needed.

What they were looking for was her.



What is a Creative Strategist?

“It’s the most coveted role in marketing at the moment.
And you kinda have to be born with it.”

The rarest combination in marketing

A creative strategist is equal parts analytical and creative. One side runs on data — metrics, performance signals, the logic underneath why something worked. The other runs on intuition for people: culture, language, emotion, what makes a specific claim land with a specific person at a specific moment. Most people have one or the other. The ones who have both are the people companies are fighting to hire right now.

“You could have the person who is very familiar with ad accounts and knows how direct response works. Or you have the other side — super creative, on trend, they just get the platform in real time. Ideally, you’ve got both sides of the brain really working in tandem.” — Ben Bolognini, VP of E-commerce, Archipelago

Motivated by measurable results

Creative strategy has one objective. Grow the business by helping the brand acquire more customers via paid channels. Everything else — the testing, the creator relationships, the platform knowledge — is in service of that. If you keep this at the forefront of your mind, the rest of the job falls into place. If you lose sight of it, you’ll likely spend a lot of time doing interesting work that’s hard to defend.

Amplified by AI

AI has removed the bottleneck between idea and execution — a creative strategist no longer has to wait for a designer, an editor, or a media buyer to action their thinking. Better yet, AI has unblocked them to really work at their full potential.

Consultant and marketing personality Dara Denney puts the structural shift plainly: “With the rise of AI, the lines are becoming blurred... who’s a media buyer, who’s a creative strategist, who does CRO.” The people who win in that blurring are high-agency. They are the people who can have an idea, bring it to life, and learn from it. The tools are table stakes. The judgment to use them well is not.

Comfortable with ambiguity

There’s no standard answer for where creative strategy sits in an organization. Some report to a growth lead, some to a CMO, some sit inside the creative team entirely. The role has moved well beyond the direct-to-consumer model where it was forged and is increasingly being found in SaaS and traditional CPG.

Where you sit matters less than what you’re accountable to. Your job is to ensure the right ads get made. Keep your eyes on the revenue line and the org chart becomes a secondary question.



What a creative strategist is not

If you'd describe logging into an ad account as a form of personal suffering — if what you care about is the work for its own sake, the beauty of the ad, the elegance of the idea — this isn't for you. Creative that performs is rarely the most interesting or aesthetic ad in the account. The best creative strategists know when to divorce their personal taste and content preferences from what will generate revenue. This also isn't for the pure systems builder who wants to automate creativity at scale without exercising judgment on what gets made.

Here are a few roles that many first time creative strategists might confuse as their own based on their proximity to one another:

A creative strategist is not a creator

You don't need to be on camera. You need to understand why being on camera works for some products and some audiences — and brief a creator in a way that captures that specificity. Creator management appears in the majority of creative strategy job postings, but almost always as a secondary function. Your job is to direct the performance, not to give it.

A creative strategist is not a media buyer

You need to know your CPAs from your CACs. You need to understand that Advantage+ is making distribution decisions you used to make manually, and you need to read an ad account well enough to make decisions. But trafficking ads, managing bidding, building audiences — that's not your remit.

A creative strategist is not a designer nor video editor

You write the brief. Someone else makes the thing. Your job is to be specific enough that whoever makes it has a genuine hypothesis to test — not a vague direction to interpret. Your accountability isn't to a deliverable. It's to a result. The ad is someone else's deliverable. The outcome it drives is yours.



What nobody tells you before you start

“Most people come into creative strategy thinking their job is to be creative. To come up with the best ideas, write the best hooks, and produce the most compelling briefs. Then they spend their first year frustrated because none of that is what they're being measured against.

Your number one goal is to increase revenue. Everything else — the briefs, the hooks, the concepts, the creator relationships — is in service of that. The moment you lose sight of it, you've lost the plot.

The other thing that takes people too long to learn is that you don't get a gold star for the most interesting idea in the room. You get a gold star for growing the business. And more than half the time, that means doing the boring thing — the iteration, the format you've already proven, the angle that's been working for three months and still has more in the tank.

The pressure to chase net new ideas is real. It comes from clients, from agencies, from internal teams who want to feel like something is happening. Your job is often to push back on that pressure. To say *'this idea isn't dead yet. We haven't exhausted it.'* The best brands squeeze a learning until it is literally deceased — **like roadkill on the side of the road** — before they move on.

If that excites you — if the idea of tracing a direct line between what you make and what the business earns sounds like the best possible version of a creative career — then you're in the right place.”

— Dara Denney

A field still under construction

Creative strategy is young enough that practitioners are out ahead of the systems that should support them, and the experience of being a creative strategist is shaped by that gap as much as by anything in the job description.

It shows up first in the shape of the work. Performance channels never stop producing signal, briefs are always due, and there is always another iteration of what just worked. The role has the stopping point you create for it, not one the job hands you. Practitioners who last tend to build their own boundaries early. “At 6 p.m., no matter what, the laptop gets shut. I go for a walk,” says Alysha Boehm. “You need to be obsessed, but you also need to protect yourself.”

The same unbounded quality is what makes the curiosity bleed past working hours. Darcy Tennant’s boyfriend has stopped asking why she points her phone at strangers on public transit. “He’s always like, ‘Why are you taking a picture of that person?’ I’m like, ‘I’m not taking a picture of that person. I’m taking a picture of that ad.’” Both habits, the boundary and the obsession, are responses to a role that no organization has fully scoped.

Compensation reflects the same lag, though it is closing. Creative strategy has long been paid like a support function and operated like a revenue function. The clearest sign that the institutional system is catching up is where the budget is moving. “A lot of companies’ payroll budgets are shifting away from somebody who’s truly just a paid media buyer and way more towards a creative strategist,” says Connor Gross, who recruits for this role daily. “Those salaries continue to go up while media buyer salaries continue to decline.” Know what you’ve driven, treat it as a negotiating foundation, and don’t accept the older comp logic just because the title is new.

The community infrastructure is doing the same correction faster. Because no formal training pipeline existed, practitioners built their own. Motion’s Creative Strategy Bootcamp, Thumbstop, an active Slack community. The infrastructure for learning this role in isolation is gone. Use what’s there.

Leadership concentration runs the same way. Two women to every man at the practitioner level. Leadership doesn’t reflect that yet. The math on why that should change is direct: women control the majority of household spending, and the people making creative decisions about how to reach them should reflect that. Dara Denney has made closing that gap a professional mission. Joanna Wallace’s version is more immediate. “If you are a woman with any sort of visibility or credentials, be vocal, be a presence, stick your face out there. And support younger people. Give them the confidence to advocate for themselves.”

The field is being built around you. That can intimidate you, or it can excite you. But the future of creative strategy is yours to create.

Resources to Bookmark:

[Motion’s Creative Strategy Bootcamp](#) — Free, live, eight weeks. The closest thing the field currently has to a standard curriculum. Taught by practitioners, not academics.

[Thumbstop](#) — Motion’s weekly newsletter covering performance creative, ad formats, and what’s working across Meta, TikTok, and YouTube.

[Motion’s reports and guides](#) — The Benchmarks Report and the Creative Strategist Rising series are the most data-grounded resources available on how this role operates in practice.





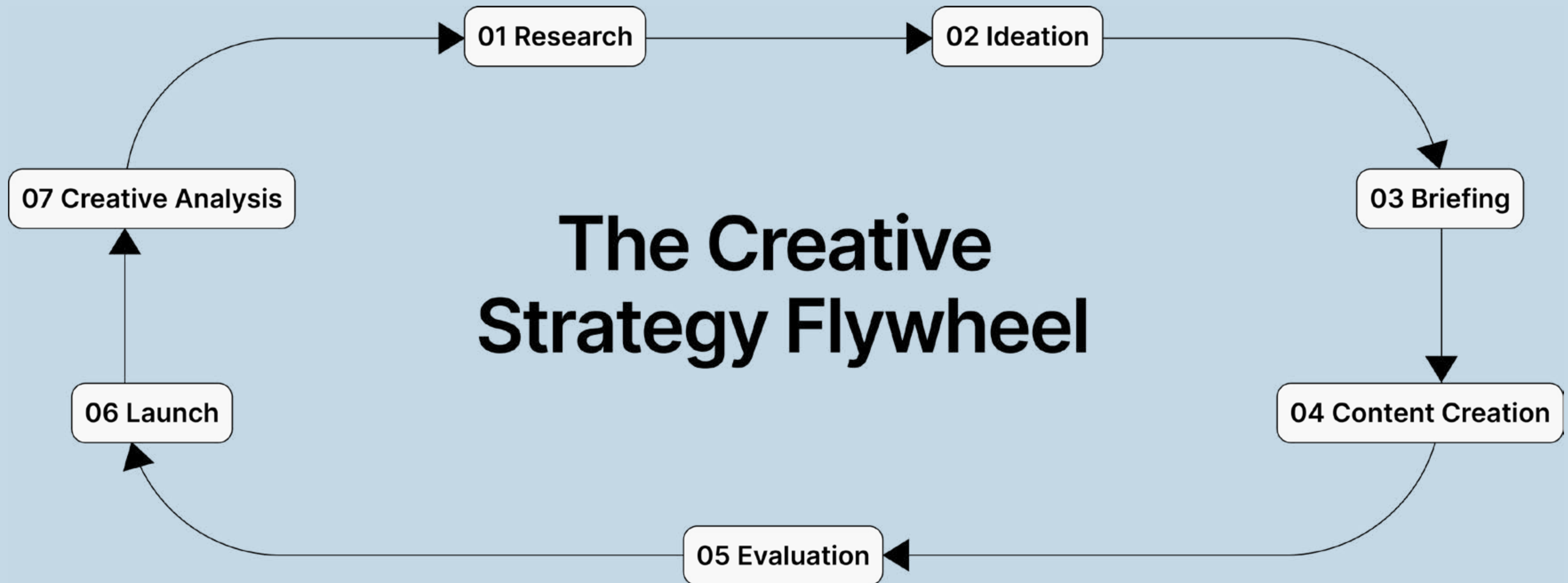
What does a creative strategist do?

“We used to be the bridge between creative and data. Now those two things have completely collapsed into each other — and we’re responsible for more of both every single week.”

Ensuring the right ads get made

Your job is not to make ads. It's to ensure the right ads get made.

The creative strategy flywheel below — research, ideation, briefing, content creation, evaluation, launch, creative analysis, and back again — is the engine underneath everything you should do.



Research

The first step in the creative strategy process is understanding the product, your customer, and the competitive landscape. This is the foundation that everything else stands on. The best creative strategists have created processes for the deep work of review mining, persona development, and identifying what specific claim will land with which specific person. Mastering this first stage of the flywheel is what separates the best from the rest.

In practice, research means three things. First, customer pain-point mining: pull reviews, Reddit threads, and comment sections to find the exact phrases real people use to describe their pain, their hesitation, and the moment they decided to buy. Second, competitive analysis: use [Motion's Creative Research tool](#) to track what your competitors are actively testing. Third, brand intake: for any new brand or client, build a context document before anything else — what the product solves, who it's for, and what's already been tested.

“My whole strategy starts with research. And it needs to be done properly. Otherwise you're going to fail.” — Bobby Taslimi



Resource: [Research Done Right ft. Sarah Levinger](#) — a breakdown of Sarah's approach to customer research, including how to identify emotional drivers, where to find real customer language, and how to turn data into differentiated creative angles.

Ideation

The job here is generative but disciplined — developing hypotheses grounded in what the data and the research have actually told you. The most common failure at this stage is starting with what a competitor made rather than what your customer needs to hear.

In practice, a good ideation session moves from a customer insight to a messaging angle, then from that angle to a testable ad concept. A messaging angle isn't a hook or a headline — it's the underlying logic that makes an ad convert. “Natural and actually works.” “Razor companies are ripping you off.” Short, repeatable, and specific enough to test across multiple formats. Once you have an angle, develop at least three concepts against it before moving to a brief. The goal is to give yourself real options, not to fall in love with the first thing you think of.

“You should never just be copying what someone else did. How can you build on it — and does it actually work for your company? It's so easy to say ‘they've done this thing, we'll do the same.’ But what's actually setting you apart from them?” — Darcy Tennant




Resource: [Brainstorming with AI for performance advertising](#) — a practical walkthrough of how to use AI as an ideation partner without falling into the trap of generic outputs, built around Jeremy Utley's FIXIT methodology.

Briefing

A strong brief doesn't tell a creator or a creative what to make — it gives them a hypothesis to test. The instinct to over-specify is understandable: the more detail you add, the more control you feel. But control isn't the goal. Clarity is. A brief that explains 'why this message for this person right now' will always outperform one that just describes what to shoot. The message is what drives performance. Not the format, not the production value.

“You could make the worst-looking ad you've ever seen in your whole life. But if the message is so on-point and communicates well with your customer, that could be a top-performing ad. You can't do the vice versa. Messaging is primary.” — Alysha Boehm

 **Resource:** [Motion Creative Strategy Library](#) — frameworks for messaging angles, hook writing, creative mechanics, and visual formats. Use it as a reference when translating a research insight into a brief.

Brief quality checklist

A brief is ready to send when a thoughtful reader can answer all of the following without asking for clarification:

01. Who exactly is this for?

02. What is the one thing this creative needs them to feel?

03. What is the hypothesis?

04. What is the angle?

05. What has the data told us that makes this the right brief right now?

06. What is platform-specific about this brief?

07. What is non-negotiable about the execution?

08. Where should the creative person exercise their own judgment?

Content creation

The brief has left your hands. Now your job is to stay close without taking over. Content creation is the stage where someone else makes the thing — a designer, a video editor, a UGC creator, or an internal production team. Your role shifts from author to steward. You need to stay close enough to catch drift from the original hypothesis, hands-off enough to let the creative person actually bring something to it.

The most common misstep here isn't bad feedback — it's no feedback until it's too late. Reviewing a finished video and asking for fundamental changes is expensive, slow, and can be demoralizing for everyone involved. The better practice is a lightweight checkpoint earlier in the process: does the hook match the intent? Is the message landing in the opening seconds? A quick alignment on direction before finalizing production saves far more time than a revision round after.

How involved you get depends on the relationship and the brief. The gap between a great brief and a great ad is where most value gets lost — and it's where the creative strategist has to stay present.



Resource: [How to create winning, data-driven creator briefs](#) — a practical guide to writing data-backed creator briefs, including how to move beyond generic direction to specific, hypothesis-driven guidance that reduces revisions and improves performance. [differentiate creative angles.](#)

Evaluation

Evaluation begins before launch. A hypothesis without a pre-defined condition for success isn't a hypothesis — it's a guess. Before an ad goes live, you should be able to answer three questions: What does this need to do to be considered a pass? At what spend level will the data be meaningful? And what's the next move if it wins — and if it doesn't?

Josh Levine built a framework at ManyChat he calls hook, hold, and harvest: did the ad stop the scroll, did the message resonate, did it drive action? Each function has a corresponding metric. Together they tell you not just whether the ad worked, but where in the sequence it broke down — and that specificity is what makes the next round of ideation sharper.

Be wary of evaluating too early. Janae LeVander at Caraway runs initial tests at controlled volumes — typically 10 to 25 net new concepts followed by tighter iteration runs — specifically to generate a signal before committing spend. You want to know what the data is actually telling you, and that requires resisting the urge to call something dead before it's had a real opportunity to succeed.




Resource: [Key metrics for evaluating creative performance](#) — a breakdown of what each metric actually measures, when to call a test, and the minimum volume thresholds you need before the data means anything.

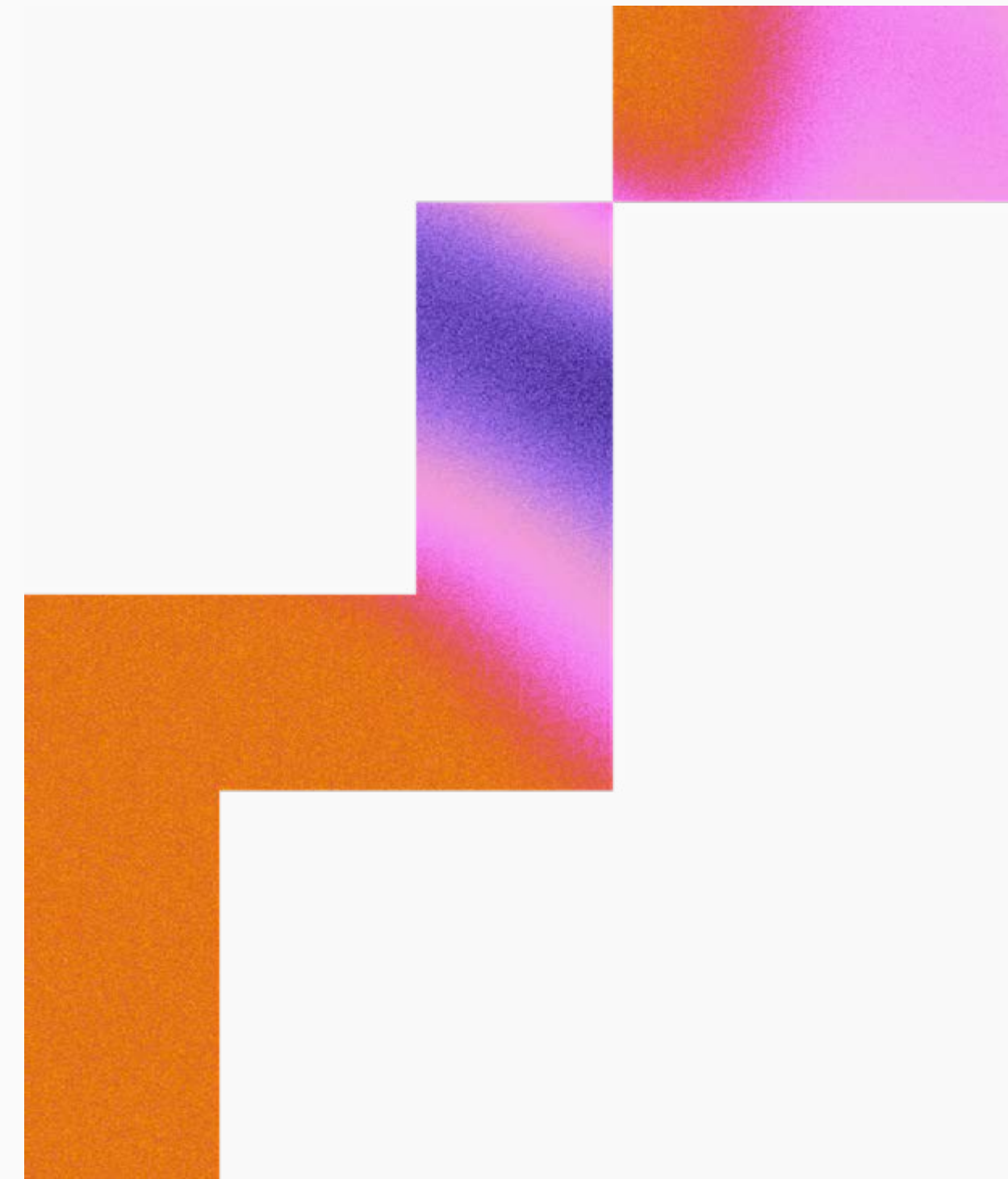
Creative analysis

This is the final step. Closing the loop — pulling results, identifying what the data is actually telling you, and feeding those findings back into the next round of research and ideation — is what separates creative strategy practice from creative production. Without this stage, the flywheel doesn't turn.

Creative analysis means going beyond reporting. Spend, CTR, CPA, and ROAS tell you what happened. The harder question is why it happened. Frame-by-frame video retention shows you where you lost them. Comparative reports show you whether it was the hook, the body, or the offer. [AI tagging](#) in Motion surfaces patterns across your whole account — which angles, formats, and personas are consistently winning — so your next round of ideation starts from evidence rather than instinct.

“Uncovering the nuggets of something you noticed, following that pattern, and diving into it — that's the value-add that makes you look good in front of clients. You're going beyond their requests to function as an extension of their team.” — Cate Wright

 **Resource:** [How to learn why an ad worked or failed](#) — a practical guide to moving from performance reporting into creative analysis, including how to use Motion's AI tagging and frame-by-frame video tools to diagnose what's actually happening in your account.



A week in the life of a creative strategist

Here's what a week in the life looks like for three creative strategists at different types and sizes of organization:



Sophia Beauvoir

Senior Creative Strategist · Ready Set · multi-client

■ Performance check
 ■ Meetings & syncs
 ■ Deep work

Monday – Thursday

9–9:30am
Performance check

Into Motion first thing. Check top clients for easy iteration wins and fast opportunities.

9:30am–1pm
Team & client meetings

Syncs with PMs, account managers, producers, editors. Align on what's due and when.

1–5pm
Deep work

Brief writing, ad review, competitor research, performance analysis, client decks for bigger creative swings.

Friday

9–9:30am
Performance check

Non-negotiable. Same ritual, even on the meeting-free day.

9:30am–5pm
Deep work (meeting-free)

Fridays are protected for focus. Full day of brief writing, research, ad review — no syncs on the calendar.



Josh Levine

Campaign & Creative Strategy Manager · Manychat
In-house · solo

■ Review & reporting
 ■ Meetings & syncs
 ■ Ops & catchup

Monday

Catchup + weekly planning

Intentionally light on meetings. Review what's open, set priorities, get oriented for the week.

Cross-functional syncs

Align with integrated, brand, media, and design leads. Sets the coordination layer for Tue–Thu.

Tuesday - Thursday

In-office · meeting-heavy

Back-to-back feedback loops, check-ins, and cross-functional reviews.

Feedback with dotted-line reports

Working sessions with media, designers, video — the people Josh doesn't manage directly but needs moving.

Reporting

Performance reporting runs through the middle of the week. Numbers to stakeholders while momentum is fresh.

Friday

Budget + reporting catchup

Close out budget tracking and any reporting threads still open. No loose ends heading into the weekend.

Close loops before weekend

Intentionally light on meetings again. Tie off anything that needs a closed loop before Monday.



Viti Videtta

Creative Strategy Lead · Happy Mammoth
In-house · cross functional

■ Performance check
 ■ Meetings & syncs
 ■ Deep work
 ■ Briefing
 ■ Strategy & planning
 ■ Ops & catchup
 ■ Review & reporting

Monday

Weekly team review

Full team: all ads, all results. Pull winners and learnings. Identify what to carry forward or kill.

Task distribution + iterations

Evaluate evergreen assets and campaigns. Assign work across the team. Kick off iteration requests.

Tuesday

Finish pending iterations

Close out any iteration requests still open from Monday before the week moves forward.

Prep business slides

Build the Wednesday creative review deck. Global view + regional breakdowns across all markets.

Wednesday

Global creative review

All departments in the room. Business discussed at the top line, then creative reviewed market by market.

Brief new concepts & angles

Post-meeting, Viti moves straight into briefing. New concepts, new angles — this is the main creative output day.

Thursday

Continue briefing

Finish new concept briefs started Wednesday. Focus on fresh territory, not iterations.

Marketing / brand alignment

Align with brand on what's coming in the next 2–3 months. Big shifts, upcoming campaigns.

Research · competitors · persona

Deep dives into angles, audience, and competitive landscape. Feeds next week's concepts.

Friday

Finalize new requests

Wrap up any outstanding briefs or new concept requests before the week closes.

Research + plan for next week

More research, then a light plan for the week ahead. Sets the team up to hit the ground on Monday.

Daily

~2hrs every day: agency ad feedback + internal requests

Ongoing. Review agency output, give feedback. Handle internal creative requests as they come in. Runs across all five days regardless of what else is scheduled.

Who you work with, and how

The quality of your relationships — with media buyers, creative teams, creators, and clients — determines how much of your strategic thinking actually makes it into the work. Here's how to get it right.

Working with media buyers

The media buyer relationship is the most important one you have. It's also the most commonly mismanaged. You are recommending tests that take budget from their spend. Every recommendation is a negotiation, whether you treat it that way or not.

“When you're working with a media buyer, you have to understand that you're recommending tests that take dollars from their budget. That means every recommendation has to be earned. I start by giving them creative I know will make their budget perform. Once they trust that, the experimental asks get easier.” — Bobby Taslimi

Working with the creative team

The brief is your primary instrument here — specific enough that they have a genuine hypothesis to work from, loose enough that they can bring something to it. Less director, more shepherd. Set the direction, stay close enough to course-correct, make sure what comes back is faithful to the original thinking.

“The strategist is kind of a shepherd of the creative team — at the helm of what direction our concepts go every month, and QA-ing to make sure it's going in the right direction and close enough to brief that it's going to be effective.” — Cate Wright

Working with creators

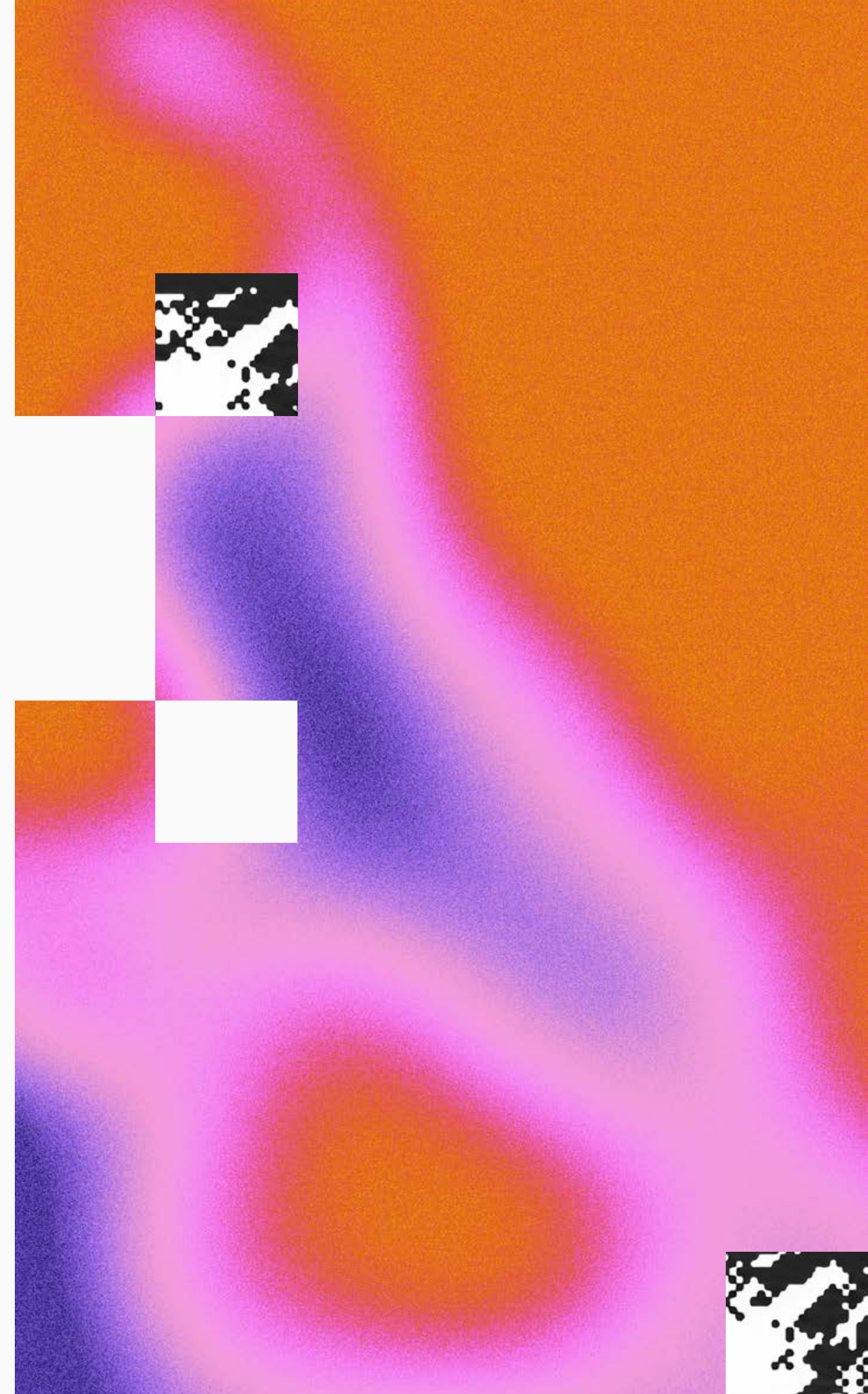
The brief you give a creator is different from the brief you give an internal team. It has to leave room for their voice while keeping the hypothesis intact. How prescriptive you are depends on how well they know the product — and how well you know them. New creator, unfamiliar product: script it. Established relationship, deep product knowledge: give them examples and get out of the way.

“Sometimes we provide scripted content, especially when using a creator as a paid actor who's unfamiliar with the product. For others, we give examples of past successful creative and guidance on style and length. The approach depends entirely on how well we know them and how well they know the product.” — Josh Levine

Working with clients

You are the only person in the room who can explain why the strategy is what it is, defend a recommendation under pressure, and translate data into a decision a non-creative strategist can act on. No one else can do that part for you. The best thing you can do is own it under pressure.

“Client-side communication is huge. Only the creative strategist can talk through the strategy in the way the client needs to hear it. You can't delegate that to an account manager or have an AI tool do it — even if an AI helped you build the strategy. That part is human.” — Sophia Beauvoir





What does it take to get better?

“The best creative strategists are obsessed.
Not interested. Not ambitious. Obsessed.”

Start with the fundamentals

Build your judgment

There's a difference between knowing what good looks like and knowing why it's good. The first can be learned by watching. The second requires doing it the slow way — building the instinct through repetition before there was ever a way to automate your thinking.

This matters now because the tools available to someone entering creative strategy today are extraordinary. You can generate a brief, a hook, a script, or a competitive analysis in minutes. The danger isn't that the tools are bad. It's that using them before you've built your underlying judgment means you can't evaluate what they give you. You become dependent on outputs you can't critique.

Study the classics

Several creative strategists — independently, without prompting — make a version of the same point: studying what worked before the algorithmic era is not nostalgic. It's foundational.

Technology changes quickly. Human psychology doesn't. The problems a great ad solves — attention, desire, belief, action — are the same problems a great ad solved in 1965. The platforms are different. The formats are different. The underlying mechanism is not.

“The themes are still true to how humans behave — it's not the pixels that drive performance, it's the message.”

— Ben Bolognini

Excel in your first year

Expect more ambiguity than the job description suggests

The job description rarely captures the full scope of what the role actually requires. Onboarding for creative strategists is, in most organizations, informal or nonexistent. Mentorship is often implicit — or absent. The most common first-year challenge isn't learning the tools. It's learning where to go when you have questions, and what questions to even ask.

Sophia Beauvoir traces her own foundations to her first agency role. “That’s where I really learned the basics of creative strategy — what metrics we’re looking at to determine an ad’s success. And that’s where I was client-facing for the first time.” For most creative strategists, the first year is less a curriculum than a process of discovery — figuring out what the job actually is by doing it.

Practice narrative structure

Most people enter creative strategy thinking the job is about ideas. It's not. It's about moving people — getting a stranger to stop, feel something, and act. That's a storytelling problem, and storytelling has structure.

Sarah Levinger has trained over a hundred creative strategists. The practitioners she sees pick up the role fastest aren't the ones with the most polished portfolios or the strongest writing credentials. They're often videographers. “They have to understand pacing, timing, direction — character work, development,” she says. The reason those skills transfer is that they're already storytelling skills. That's what the role runs on.

Whatever your background, this is the thing worth building deliberately. Learn how a story opens, what the middle has to do, and why the end has to land a specific way. That structure is what separates a brief that gets made into something exceptional from one that gets made into something forgettable.

Find a mentor

Sophia Beauvoir is blunt: “I would say try to find a place that is invested in teaching more junior strategists — because otherwise it's really hard. If every place is looking for three to five years' experience, that's a real barrier. Find somewhere that's willing to invest in younger employees.”

Most creative strategists who found a good mentor didn't land one by reaching out cold on LinkedIn. “I think it's probably proximity,” says Cate Wright. “Someone needs to see you, see the seed of potential, and be open to working with you. I never outright asked anyone to be my mentor — it's been bosses who took extra time. And maintaining those relationships after you leave — that's the part most people don't do well enough.”

The mentorship question is less “who should I ask?” and more “am I putting myself in proximity to the people doing the work I want to be doing?”

Learn to demonstrate business outcomes

The most common first-year mistake has nothing to do with creative instinct or strategic thinking. It's showing up without knowing what your work actually produced.

Connor Gross is unequivocal about it. “The most significant mistake candidates make is not knowing their performance numbers. A candidate who cannot speak to the performance of the assets they created will be disqualified most of the time — even as a freelance UGC creator.”

Dara Denney is also adamant that knowing your numbers is critical. “My biggest criticism of creative strategists who were never media buyers is that they aren't as in the weeds numbers-wise as they need to be,” she says.

Track everything from day one. The numbers are your negotiating currency, your proof of concept, and your fastest path to being taken seriously.



Doing good work isn't enough

The hardest thing I had to learn — and I learned it the wrong way — is that doing great work isn't enough. You have to make sure people know you're doing great work. That's not the same thing, and nobody tells you that early enough.

I've been invisible. I've been in situations where people above me were in rooms with the C-suite getting credit for work I was doing. When it came time to make cuts, if they don't know what you do, why would they keep you?

You have to find somebody above you who will champion you in the rooms you're not in. If that's your boss, great. If not, find somebody in the company who has their boss's ear and make sure they understand what you're producing.

And then you have to champion yourself. Come to your one-on-ones and your reviews armed with your achievements — written down, specific, in front of people. Track them yourself.

Everyone is self-absorbed. They don't think about you as much as you think about you. That's not a criticism. It's just true. If you're remote and nobody's watching you be a crazy intense person at your desk, you have to find another way to be seen. The work alone won't do it.

— Joanna Wallace

Metrics to know

These are the metrics that show up most consistently in creative strategy work — what they measure, and what they're actually useful for.

Hook rate — the percentage of people who watch past the first three seconds. A proxy for whether your opening grabbed attention. Low hook rate means the creative lost people before the message landed — usually a headline, visual, or first-line problem.

Hold rate — how long people stay with the ad relative to its total length, often expressed as a percentage or 25/50/75% completion milestones. Where people drop off tells you which part of the ad stopped working.

CTR (click-through rate) — the share of people who clicked after seeing the ad. Useful as a directional signal, less useful in isolation — a high CTR on a low-converting ad just means the promise and the product didn't match.

CPA (cost per acquisition) — what it cost to convert one customer. The metric that connects your creative decisions to business outcomes most directly. Know this number for every concept you brief.

CPM (cost per mille) — what you pay for every 1,000 impressions. CPM doesn't tell you whether anyone clicked or converted, but it's a useful signal for creative health: a rising CPM on a given ad often means the platform is working harder to find the right audience for it, which can indicate creative fatigue.

ROAS (return on ad spend) — revenue generated per dollar spent. The scoreboard metric. Useful for understanding which concepts are actually moving the business, not just generating activity.

Thumbstop rate — similar to hook rate, sometimes used interchangeably. Specifically measures how often someone paused their scroll on your ad. Platform-specific and less standardized than hook rate, but worth understanding if your team uses it.

From getting reps to designing systems with AI

At some point in a creative strategy career — usually around the senior level — the cognitive demands of the job change.

Early on, the work is about getting your reps. Writing better briefs. Reading data more accurately. Building intuition. That foundation takes time to build properly.

The mid-career shift is about scaling what you've learned. “What has separated me from others,” says Bobby Taslimi, “is having frameworks and systems — whereas junior and mid-level strategists don't have that. They're kind of chaotic.” Juniors often lack them. Seniors operate through them.

The strategists making that transition fastest right now are the ones building those systems with AI. Not chasing every new tool — but identifying the parts of the flywheel that are structured, repeatable, and information-dense — research pipelines, ideation frameworks, briefing templates — and building workflows that make those parts faster and more consistent. The strategists pulling ahead aren't prompting their way through individual tasks. They're constructing architectures that run across their entire practice.

The shift shows up in how creative strategists talk about their day-to-day. “I used to spend hours scrolling through Reddit threads to get customer insights,” says Darcy Tennant. “Now that's done for you. The nature of the role is no longer pulling the insights yourself — it's organizing and managing the tools. Which leaves more room to be creative.”

That reallocation of time is the point. AI doesn't make you a better strategist by doing the strategic thinking. It makes you better by returning time and bandwidth to the parts of the job


where your judgment is irreplaceable — deciding which angle is right for this brand at this moment, knowing whether the output is actually good, being able to walk a client through a recommendation in a way that earns trust.

“You're not managing a production timeline anymore,” says Audrey Madden. “You're building the architecture and systems behind what eventually gets made.”

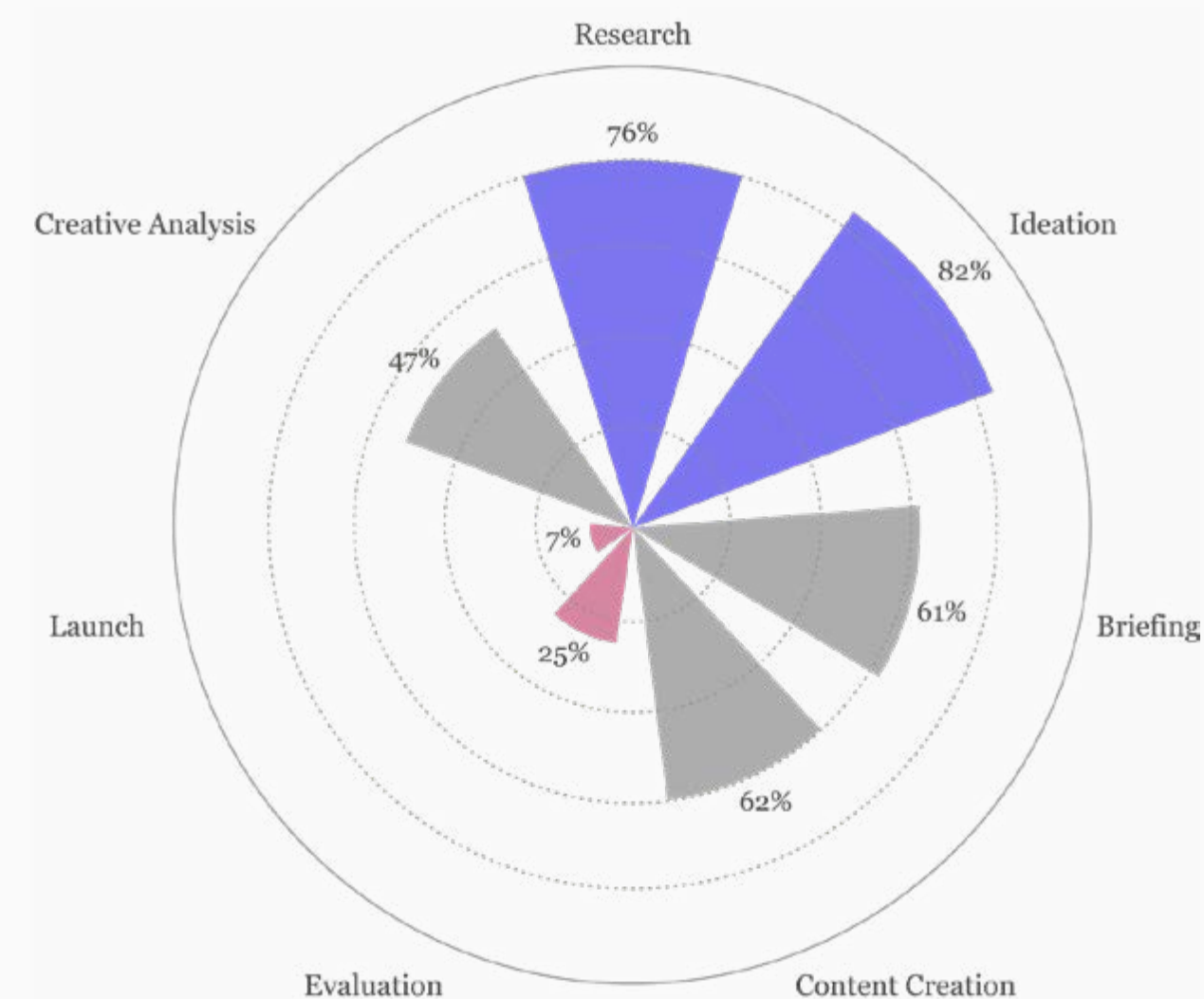
The risk runs the other way too. “Using AI to automate redundant tasks — daily ad analysis, report generation — provides significant value,” says Farooq Umer. “But over-relying on AI for copywriting produces content that quickly becomes white noise. Undifferentiated AI-generated copy becomes invisible.”

Viti Videtta draws the same line at the ideation stage. “I don't see AI with fresh ideas. It can combine stuff and give you quick brainstorming. But criteria and judgment are another step.”

The practical test for any AI workflow you're building is whether it frees you up to exercise more judgment, or whether it's quietly replacing it. The first makes you better. The second makes you easier to replace.

 **Resource:** [Winners, Losers, and the New AI Divide in Creative Strategy](#) — a deep dive into how the best practitioners are building real AI workflows across the creative strategy flywheel, with specific systems from top creative strategists.

AI Adoption on the Creative Strategy Flywheel



Where can my career go from here?

Creative strategy is young enough that nobody has a fifteen-year arc to point to. The paths ahead are being cut in real time — which means the career you build in creative strategy will look different from the one that came before you, and different again from the one that comes after.

More than half of creative strategists plan to stay long-term. The identity has taken hold even where the credential hasn't fully arrived. The senior layer of the market — director-level roles, head-of-strategy functions — is growing but still thin relative to the volume of mid-level practitioners. The people building senior credibility now are ahead of a hiring wave.

Four paths have emerged clearly enough to be treated as real roads ahead of each and every creative strategist. What's striking is how evenly the field is split across them — brand and creative leadership is the most common career ambition, but only by a narrow margin. Deeper specialization, independence, and growth leadership are all close behind.

Creative strategy isn't converging on a single trajectory. It's branching.

The Growth Leader

This one is for performance-driven creative strategists who want to own the whole acquisition machine — head of growth, CMO, VP of marketing. They're drawn to the scoreboard and see creative strategy as the foundation for a broader marketing leadership career.

The gap most practitioners face on this path is financial and media fluency. “The media side is probably where most strategists should be skilling up,” says Cate Wright. “most can run tests and understand how to traffic things — but how to predict volume and profit margins, that's usually missing.”

The Creative Leader

The creative lead pipeline is for brand-oriented practitioners who want to bring long-term thinking and craft into the function. They usually head towards creative director, head of brand, VP of creative.

Getting there means expanding beyond direct-response thinking into full-funnel reasoning. “Strategists who want to move into broader brand management need to dedicate more time to understanding consumer buying behavior and the full purchase funnel,” says Connor Gross. “When you're focused strictly on performance, you're at the bottom of the funnel. Expanding your influence requires understanding what happens above it.”

The Elite Specialist

The most underrated path — going deeper and more senior in creative strategy itself without pivoting to management, or an adjacent function. Direct accountability to your own work, depth over breadth, nobody else's output to carry.

“Creative strategy is kind of its own quest,” says Cate Wright. “You could stay in an agency and get progressively more senior. The challenge is where's the ceiling — because it's relatively new.” The practitioners building out the senior IC track right now are doing the definitional work of what it looks like for the people behind them.

The Independent

Freelancers, agency founders, consultants who see creative strategy as the foundation for building their own thing. The appeal is breadth: working across multiple verticals and multiple clients builds a pattern library that in-house roles can't replicate.

“A freelance creative strategist working with different brands across multiple verticals gains the market knowledge and insight that someone working within a single vertical cannot achieve,” says Farooq Umer. “I think every strategist should be building their own projects,” adds Bobby Taslimi. “You don't need to scale to seven figures. But the experience teaches you things about the business owner's mentality that you can't get any other way.”

The deeper argument for this path is structural. Dara Denney makes it plain: “The best creative strategists are going to own their own businesses. They're going to be consultants working with multiple brands. A \$300K in-house salary is not going to be enough for them — because they know that the right creative operating system or the right creative is going to drive millions. Why would someone work in-house for that rate when they know how impactful their work is?” The compensation math on in-house roles will eventually stop working for the top performers. “Brands and agencies are going to have to really rework their incentive structure for the best,” Dara adds, “or they're going to be forced to engage with more consultancy types and people that have their attention spread across a big book of business.”



Don't wait for permission to say you're a creative strategist

Up until early 2026, Menno Mitrovic's job title was online and innovation specialist. Even he thought it sounded like someone had given up on being precise.

He was managing community events across multiple student housing residences in the Netherlands and responsible for the social media channels across residences in the Netherlands and Spain. He built WhatsApp groups, designed a points system, traded small rewards for content, and briefed outside influencers. He also received a calendar of yearly promotional campaigns and taught himself to translate those messages into organic posts and paid ads, learning the rules of the medium as he went. Within nine months, the system he'd built was pulling more than 2 million organic views across all platforms.

He was also burning out. The parts of the job that drained him were crowding out the parts he was good at.

Then Menno saw a video. Oren John was explaining what a creative strategist was. Menno had never heard the term before.

"Ah," he remembered thinking. "This is me."

He found one open vacancy in the Netherlands. It had been live for four months. He applied anyway. And out of 200 applicants, he got the job.

Nobody gave Menno permission. A title he'd never heard gave credence to something he'd already been doing for years — and he took it.

There's a common pattern among all of the creative strategists we spoke with for this guide. Naomi Peh Haeger switched from job description after job description that kept getting her scope of work wrong, until one day she was sitting in an interview telling a hiring manager what what they were looking for was a creative strategist. It's Darcy Tennant — who studied philosophy, fell into a generalist marketing role, and kept pulling at questions nobody else around her was asking until she found herself overseeing creative strategy at Huel. It's Sophia Beauvoir, who didn't know creative strategy existed until a friend mentioned it straight out of college, and has since worked across some of the most demanding performance accounts in the industry.

None of them waited for permission to be called a creative strategist. None of them arrived with the perfect credentials. They arrived with instincts — and then moved on them.

You might also have these instincts. You wouldn't have made it this far into this guide if you didn't.

Companies all over the world are currently looking for exactly what you have. You don't need a different background. You don't need more experience.

You don't need someone to hand you the title before you start acting like it's yours.

You just need to begin.

“It was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made in my whole life — just recognizing this is what I am and this what I want to do.”

Appendix

About the people in this guide

The practitioners quoted throughout this guide are creative strategists, agency leaders, recruiters, and hiring managers at the top of their craft. They represent the full spectrum of the field — agency and in-house, junior and senior, DTC and B2B, freelance, full-time, and beyond.

Dara Denney — Marketing personality and Performance Creative Consultant. Previously a senior creative strategist and current agency operator, Dara is one of the most recognized voices in performance creative strategy. She started her career in humanitarian work before finding her way into advertising, and has since built a consultancy and one of the biggest followings in marketing more broadly.

Joanna Wallace — Independent creative strategy consultant. Previously built the creative strategy function from scratch at Rickhouse before joining HexClad, where she became one of the most vocal advocates for creative strategists' autonomy and brand integrity in the same breath.

Cate Wright — Senior Director of Creative Strategy, Monks. Seven years in digital performance creative, including a stint at Meta before moving agency-side. She manages a team of senior strategists while keeping her own client accounts — a deliberate choice to stay close to the work.

Sophia Beauvoir — Senior Creative Strategist, Ready Set. Came to creative strategy through a friend's recommendation straight out of college. Has since held positions at Common Thread Collective and TubeScience before landing at Ready Set, where she leads strategy across a broad portfolio of performance brands.

Viti Videtta — Creative Strategy Lead, Happy Mammoth. One of the few practitioners in this guide who came from a traditional advertising agency background — copywriter, creative director, then performance creative strategist. Now leads a team producing over 100 assets a week across three regional markets.

Darcy Tennant — Senior Creative Strategist, Heights. Studied philosophy before falling into a generalist marketing role and discovering performance creative strategy. Has worked in-house at brands like Huel, preferring the investment and agility that comes from being close to the product.

Bobby Taslimi — Founder, 316 Interactive. Built his career at the intersection of paid social and creative strategy, starting with affiliate marketing before going independent. Brings an entrepreneur's lens to the role — thinks every creative strategist should be building their own projects on the side.

Ben Bolognini — VP of E-commerce, Archipelago. Oversees performance creative across a portfolio of DTC apparel brands including OluKai and Roark. Represents the hiring manager's perspective — someone who has spent time on both sides of the professional relationship.

Janae LeVander — Senior Manager, Performance Creative, Caraway. Transitioned from media buying when she realized her instincts were pulling her toward creative strategy and analysis rather than campaign management. Leads creative strategy and a UGC program at one of DTC's most design-conscious brands.

Josh Levine — Campaign and Creative Strategy Manager, Manychat. Built the creative strategy function at Manychat as a team of one. Came to in-house creative strategy after agency and partnerships roles, bringing a cross-functional discipline that shapes how he thinks about the creative program.

Connor Gross — Founder, Constant Hire. Runs a recruiting agency specializing in DTC and e-commerce brands, where creative strategy is the single most sought after role. Brings a labor market perspective that few practitioners have — he sees the hiring side of this field more clearly than almost anyone.

Farooq Umer — Founder, Fifth Dimension. Started as a video editor and motion designer before moving through performance creative into agency ownership. Built an agency that integrates creative strategy, production, and media buying under one roof — his argument being that the separation between those functions was always artificial.

Sarah Levinger — Founder, Tether Insights. Trains creative strategists full-time. The only person in this guide whose entire professional focus is on building the infrastructure that the field currently lacks. Her frameworks — including the four psychological dimensions and hypothesis-first testing — represent the most rigorous practitioner-developed methodology in the corpus.

Motion mentors

Alysha Boehm — Creative Strategist, Motion. Alysha came to creative strategy through graphic design, with an early role at a DTC brand where seeing performance data behind her own creative work changed how she thought about both. She now sits at the intersection of creative strategy and product at Motion.

Audrey Madden — Creative Strategist, Motion. Studied English and comparative literature before finding her way into performance marketing through a series of roles at DTC brands including Huel. One of the early practitioners who brought brand strategy thinking into a performance creative context. Now at Motion, where her focus has shifted toward the systems and architecture layer of creative strategy

About the data

Original interviews — The primary research for this guide was conducted through dozens of original interviews with creative strategists, agency leaders, recruiters, and hiring managers across DTC, B2B, SaaS, CPG, agency, and in-house contexts. Interviews were conducted via video call, recorded, and transcribed. All direct quotes were reviewed and approved by interviewees prior to publication.

Prior interview archive — Alongside the original interviews, we audited 24 transcripts from Motion's prior interview series — including the Creative Strategist Rising guide, AI Reality Report interviews, Creative Trends 2025 conversations, and Thumbstop editorial interviews. This archive provided background context and informed the questions we brought to the 2026 interviews, though direct quotes from it are not used in the guide.

State of Creative Strategy Survey — This survey was distributed to practitioners working in or adjacent to creative strategy — including Motion's community, bootcamp alumni, newsletter subscribers, and broader network. It covers role and career path, ownership and time allocation, compensation, AI integration, identity and orientation, and demographics. As of writing, this survey remains open and ongoing; the data referenced in this guide reflects a final pull conducted on April 27, 2026.

LinkedIn job postings dataset — To understand how creative strategy is defined at the hiring level, we scraped over 1,000 LinkedIn job postings tagged with creative strategy-adjacent titles and ran them through a structured analysis covering title distribution, skills requirements, seniority levels, and industry spread. This dataset is live and ongoing; the figures cited in this guide reflect a final pull conducted on April, 2026.

Motion's AI Reality Report — A standalone survey focused on AI adoption across performance creative workflows. Fielded to practitioners across Motion's community and beyond, it covers which stages of the creative flywheel are AI-assisted, practitioner confidence in AI tools, team structure changes driven by AI, and attitudes toward AI's impact on the field. Data referenced in this guide is from the January 2026 dataset.

