

Mick Mahoney &
Kevin Chesters

Why brand
strategy has
lost its way.

Destralegize

And how
creativity
will save it.

DESTRATEGISE

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Mick

For Rosalind –

Thank you for always telling me which trousers to wear.

Kevin

For Rosemary Chesters –

Who loved words but thankfully loved me more.

**Why brand
strategy has
lost its way.**

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Kevin Chesters**

**And how
creativity
will save it.**

B/S

Destiny

**Making the
simple complicated
is commonplace.**

**Making the complicated
simple, awesomely simple;
*that's creativity.***

Charles Mingus

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FOREWORD

When Kevin and Mick told me they were writing a book called *Destrategise*, I gave one big cheer. It is exactly what is needed, and exactly the right moment for it.

Over the past thirty years I have watched the advertising and communications industry tie itself in knots. In its effort to compete with management consultants, it reached for complexity as a proxy for value – more frameworks, more data, more layers of strategy – until the thing it was actually good at, the ability to cut through and say something that sticks, got buried. The industry now knows it needs to change. But knowing and doing are very different things, and too many agencies can be shackled to ways of working that belong to another era.

‘Only the clever simplify’

is a phrase I have used for years. Brutal simplicity and clarity are not the lazy option – they are the hardest thing to achieve, and they have the greatest impact. The problem is that simplicity is painful to reach. It requires you to make genuine choices, to throw things away, to resist the temptation to hedge. To ask yourself one more time: Can we simplify one more time? This book is a guide to doing exactly that.

I wish Kevin and Mick’s framework had existed when I needed it most. When my team faced the Herculean task of changing the name of Norwich Union to Aviva, we arrived at something very powerful as a brand purpose, but we could have got there faster. The same was true when we were redefining the purpose of Business in the Community, or when we were building the identity of the Queen’s Reading Room from scratch. Each time, the path to clarity was longer and more

circuitous than it needed to be. A rigorous but genuinely simple process – the kind this book provides – would have got us there faster and with more confidence.

Kevin and Mick are not advocating chaos. They are not asking you to abandon rigour or ignore evidence. What they are dismantling is the idea that complexity signals seriousness – that more words, more slides, more data lakes somehow mean better thinking. The best advertising has always been brutally simple. The legends of the industry knew this. What this book does is make that instinct into a process that anyone can follow.

The question of why now has a sharp answer. Communications specialists are navigating a world of GEO (generative engine optimisation) and the attendant consumer overload, review fatigue, and the relentless noise of social platforms. In that environment, the brands that cut through are the ones that know precisely what they stand for and can say it simply and memorably. *Destrategise* will not just help you find that position. It will help you embrace it.

Amanda Mackenzie OBE

Introduction

Wednesday 16 October 2015.

Everyone I asked had winced theatrically and said I wouldn't get on with Kev. And everyone Kev had spoken to was sure he wouldn't get on with me. In fact, most people predicted that it would be a path to perdition for both of us: me, the measured, no-nonsense, creative hardliner; and Kev, the loquacious, Tigger-on-speed strategist.

Everyone except Charlie Rudd, who had just been appointed CEO of Ogilvy London and wanted us both to join him as CCO and CSO respectively. I'd worked with Charlie at BBH for a number of years and we shared the creative belief system and work ethic that had served the agency so well. Charlie was certain that Kev and I were a perfect pairing. Unconvinced, I walked through the warm grey streets of a rainy Soho towards the Charlotte Street Hotel bar for the early evening drink that Charlie had arranged for Kev and me to thrash out our differences. I expected the worst.

Kev walked in, smiled his trademark snagged smile, sat down and without any formalities announced: 'You're going to like me ...' As I now know to be the norm, I wasn't given the opportunity to disagree. He continued, '... because I think strategy serves no other purpose than to get to the best work.'

Kev continued fire-hosing me with his views on brand strategy having lost itself in a black hole of smart-arsery, faux philosophy, needless complexity and chevrons. After about forty-five minutes, he paused for breath. I seized my moment. 'I agree,' I said. Before he could claim the next forty-five minutes, I added, 'I also hate briefs. My heart sinks when I'm given one of those dreary little documents from the "Ministry of Strategy". I hate propositions that read like endlines. I hate those little boxes all neatly filled out. And I especially hate thought starters that are half-baked first thoughts that narrow everyone's thinking rather than expand it. Most of all, I hate that baton-pass of strategy into creative: "There you go, creative person, colour my brilliant thinking in." You're obviously clever, Kev, so keep it simple. Any idiot can do complicated. You'll only ever interest or motivate me with simple. Simple tells me that you genuinely understand the issue. Never give me a brief and we'll get on fine.

Just read everything you can find that relates to the project, tell me what you think, and we'll take it from there, together.'

'Deal,' said Kev.

It turns out Charlie had spotted that Kev and I had one very important thing in common. We were united in our frustration with the escalating complexity and posturing of brand strategy and our belief that if strategists and creatives behaved more like a team than different disciplines, we could get to better strategic and creative answers faster, with less fuss. Ten years and hundreds of proofs of concept later, that is still exactly how we work. It took us several years to refine our thinking to its current point of ridiculous simplicity, and several more to codify it into the process you're about to read.

We both think it's time to call bullshit on the status quo of brand strategy and the contrived silo thinking that perpetuates it. Too many planners overcomplicate everything to look clever or to compensate for the fact that they aren't as clever as they think they should be. They plump up their insecure intellectual feathers, strut around quoting genuinely clever people and make their thinking so impenetrable that it's hard to tell if it's smart or bollocks until it's too late and it falls apart in your hands when you go to execute it. And don't get us started on what passes for insight most of the time.

Brand strategy can and should be simple, human and true. Admittedly, it has taken us collectively almost sixty years to hone our thinking to something this simple. But, as the saying goes,

'If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.'

Perhaps it has taken us this long to understand it well enough. Simplicity is always the right answer, especially in a world as fast and complex as the one we now find ourselves in. It's time to engage with strategy in a simple, organic way and bring it into a seamless dialogue with creative.

We call it **Destrategising**: the simplest way to get to an undeniable brand strategy with the fewest moving parts by meshing

strategic and creative brains from the outset. Everything a brand needs. Nothing it doesn't. Destrategise isn't a word you'll find in the dictionary. It's our common understanding of what we want to achieve every time we set off on a project to discover a brand's strategic North Star. It holds us to account. It insists that we trust our process and keep things relentlessly simple and so undeniably true that they will resonate immediately both inside and outside the organisation.

Now if you're reading this book, you're either a brand strategist or someone whose working life is impacted by brand strategy. Perhaps you're in an advertising or design agency seeking to stay up to date with new thinking. A creative leader frustrated by the way your agency delineates strategy. A planner trying to understand why you find your role frustrating or limiting. A marketeer keen to find new ideas that you can exploit to advance your brand. Or even a start-up founder looking for a simple process that will get you to a brand strategy yourself, because you're bootstrapping and can't afford an agency. Whatever your reason for picking up this book, you'll be aware that there is no shortage of perfectly serviceable manuals, processes and proprietary methodologies out there. Some work better than others, but most have been massively overengineered to impress the impressionable.

We're not suggesting that ours is the only one that works. But ours is simple, proven, creates an undeniable brand strategy and delivers organisational transformation with a seamlessly connected creative platform, ready for execution.

In fact, it's so simple that you need only answer three questions. They aren't always easy to answer, but the book will guide you through.

It's also a thoroughly enjoyable process because it relies on two smart people working with open minds in a common cause, both wanting the other to win. A fact that's fundamental to the success of any joint endeavour, but more on that later.

The hardest part, as for every brand strategy, is the consistent execution. Not because consistency is hard in itself, especially with a resonant brand North Star in place, but because it takes commitment to impress it across the disparate aspects of a client organisation.

This is not a typical book about brand strategy. The world really doesn't need another one. What makes it unique is that it is written by

a creative and a strategist who have worked as a team on some of the most iconic brands in the world. We expect it to be a polarising read and to divide opinion, but honestly, what's the point of going to the trouble of writing a book if it doesn't provoke debate and make us see the world in new ways? Other opinions are available.

We haven't worked together as a strategy team or as a creative team. We've worked together as a self-contained unit that is given a business problem and uses our combined strategic and creative skill to solve it and communicate it. It seems perfectly normal to us to work in this way, yet most people we work with still struggle to get their heads around it. They want to know who exactly does what. It's not a complicated premise; it just isn't the industry norm.

Received wisdom dictates that strategists think and creatives do, and that they all do it in silos. We think this time-honoured arrangement has passed its sell-by date and that the day of the creative team has passed. Is the traditional coupling of copywriter and art director still relevant in the new world of reduced budgets, timelines, attention spans, craft skills, increased innovation and fractional roles? Are the days of the insular strategic genius wrapping their head in cold towels to birth their opus behind us?

Everything moves on. In fact, the creative team was itself a coming together of two departments in the early 1960s. In those days the copy department would write a line that would be sent up to the art department to have a picture added. That was until **Bill Bernbach** of **Doyle Dane Bernbach** said, 'Wouldn't it be better if they came up with the words and pictures together?' The purists said it would never work, that it was heresy, against the natural order. But it did work, and it quickly became the norm because it was appropriate to the time and the increasing sophistication of brand communications. Planning didn't become a thing until almost ten years later, when it was introduced by **Stanley Pollitt** of **Boase Massimi Pollitt**. Its original purpose was to further brands' understanding of consumers through research. It took another ten to twenty years (depending on the country) to develop into the role we'd recognise today. So planning and creative working together began in earnest about forty-five years ago. It was a profoundly different world from the one we are in now, unrecognisable in terms of media and timings.

The last ten years have catapulted us forward yet again. Few things have stayed the same, yet the almost fifty-year-old paradigm of copywriter/art director and planner is still intact – and creaking under the weight of its slow, disconnected, friction-filled interaction.

Of course, traditionalists and purists, and the miserable old gits who bemoan the passing of the good old days when everything was better (it wasn't), will say that our coupling is the end of days, but it really isn't. It works. And it makes sense of the times we are in. It's time to **Destrategise** the world of strategy.

**Mick Mahoney (& Kevin Chesters),
London, 16 October 2026**

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK.

We've split the book into two sections, Principles and Practicals. We did so for two simple reasons. No matter how brilliant a process is, it will fail if the conditions aren't in place to support it and the reasoning for it is not understood.

BOOK 1:

THE PRINCIPLES focuses on the forces that can affect your ability to develop a brilliant brand strategy. It will give you clear rationales for challenging the norms of strategic and creative behaviour and encourage you to deviate from them. In this section we examine why the world – the business world in particular – puts complexity on a pedestal, and how this has forced strategy in an unnecessarily ornate direction. We look at why simplicity is such an undervalued commodity and why we shy away from it; how cognitive diversity promotes faster and more interesting problem-solving; why a strict adherence to process is stunting your ability to think laterally and in fresh ways; and why ambiguity will be your friend if you're brave enough to embrace it.

BOOK 2:

THE PRACTICALS focuses on how to deliver a simple yet utterly undeniable brand North Star, and what to do with it once you have it. We walk you through the three-part process, giving examples to make it as simple and replicable as possible.

The marketing landscape has fundamentally changed, and the number of channels, the pace of output and the expectations on teams are all *hugely different* from even five years ago. Yet it surprises me that many businesses are still running the same processes.

Visha Kudhail

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BOOK 1

My Precious
Princess

Chapter 1

Complexity Bias vs the Simplicity Principle.

Why are brand strategy and the process of developing brand strategy so complicated these days? Well, how long have you got? Even the reasons for this creeping impenetrability are complicated, or at least multifaceted. In some cases, we're not even conscious that it's happening, or that we're complicit in the problem. You'll no doubt rail against some of what you're about to read, which is why you'll see plenty of scientific studies backing up our points. We'll do our best to simplify it and explain.

'There seems to be some perverse human characteristic that likes to make easy things difficult.'

Warren Buffett

BUFFETT
1984

We're both constantly fascinated not just by what people do, but also by why they do it. What are the factors driving their behaviour? Are they biological, sociological or physiological?

In this case, why has brand strategy become so verbose and needlessly complicated? There are several reasons.

The first is sociological. Humans are prone to a heuristic known as the **Seductive Allure Effect**, sometimes referred to as the **Smart-Sounding Effect**. People associate long words, jargon or over-complex explanations with increased intelligence or credibility, even when the additional information is irrelevant.

People who use complex language and long, rarely used words are often intimidating. Many do it with the intention of being so, for reasons ranging from hubris to insecurity. A study conducted at Princeton University by the cognitive psychologist **Daniel M. Oppenheimer** revealed that readers rated authors using unnecessary complexity as less intelligent once the manipulation was revealed. Initially, however, they had rated them all as more intelligent.

Brand strategists, if they're being honest, will admit to leveraging the benefits of the Seductive Allure Effect when the need arises. They are also usually encouraged by their agency,

WEISBERG ET AL.
2008; HOPKINS,
WEISBERG &
TAYLOR 2016

OPPENHEIMER
2006

BRAND STRATEGY has lost its way. It has become unnecessarily complicated, over-intellectualised, siloed, self-important, process-driven and a barrier to creativity. Everything it shouldn't be. Brand strategy should serve no purpose other than to simplify the complex, make clear the road ahead and enable transformative creative thinking.

It's time to call BS on the modern world of brand strategy. It's time to **DESTRATEGISE**.

DESTRATEGISE is how to build an **undeniable brand strategy** by answering three questions.

DESTRATEGISE is a **ruthlessly simple** process that encourages more innovative thinking.

DESTRATEGISE is a **radical reset** of the relationship between strategy and creative.

DESTRATEGISE is focused on getting to **great output**.

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