

## WHY A GOOD STRATEGY IS LIKE A GOOD MAP – LESSONS FROM THE WORLD OF CARTOGRAPHY

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### **Why a good strategy is like a good map – lessons from the world of cartography**

A Hungarian army patrol, after losing their way in a storm, faced certain death in the harsh wintry conditions of the Alps. Luckily, a soldier in the group found a map in a seldom-used pocket, and navigated them safely back to base. However, after perusing the map, their commanding officer stated: “This isn’t a map of the Alps. It’s a map of the Pyrenees.”

The map did its job – it may not have taken them down the shortest route, or even accurately reflected where they were, but it provided the two outcomes of a good strategy.

Stephen Cummings and David Wilson (the editors of *Images of Strategy*, Blackwell Publishing), propose that the quality of a strategy depends on two effects: orientation and animation – the ability to show people where they are relative to other things, and the capacity to allow them to make whatever moves are deemed necessary.

The qualities of a good strategy and a good map are synonymous:

- It clearly communicates its message to the reader – anyone should be able to follow it.
- It shows enough of the surrounding landscape to orientate yourself, but not so much that you are lost in the detail.
- It provides enough information to describe the route, pointing out the relevant landmarks along the way. There is no need to show every petrol station – only the ones where orientation is required (to turn left or right or be reassured you are going in the right direction).
- It shows an understanding of the terrain – knows your business. It points out dangers that are relevant and does not propose routes that are not viable/practical.
- It is objective – shows things as they are.
- The scale of the strategy relates to the job at hand. It does not look at reinventing the category or solving every conceivable problem on the shop floor. It is a clear map for a stated objective.
- It is a consistent and true representation – based on prudent use of data.
- It gives a sense of direction – without being prescriptive.
- Contrast and symbols are used creatively to help tell the story.
- Terrain is best viewed from above – it provides a helicopter view.



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Vision and Mission Statements are the large-scale maps guiding corporate endeavour. However, they are often so similar and unimaginative, with statements such as: 'provide superior returns for our shareholders' or 'empowering our employees to be their best'.

These tools of corporate passion, being so pedestrian and distant, can be found on the walls of organizations that do provide better returns for shareholders and do empower employees to do great things. So maybe it's not so much what's in the map as opposed to what the map allows people to do: orientate and animate.

### About the author

Sid Peimer is the Executive Director of the Cape Chamber of Commerce & Industry. His book *'The Clear Win: Pitching for new business – the strategies that work; the myths that don't'* can be found on Amazon [here](#)

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