

You Can't Prompt Your Way to Human Truth



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I fear we're losing some of the soul of strategy. We sit at desks, behind screens, within four walls, typing questions into AI tools and search bars for insights about humans.

It's all become a little too optimized in the name of speed and efficiency. A little too stuck inside the same tabs: trend reports, social listening dashboards, AI summaries, competitive audits, Reddit scans, search behavior, syndicated research, prompt after prompt after prompt. All useful. I use them, too. But too often, they become the whole process. We end up talking to ourselves and talking to machines.

But culture does not happen in data alone. **It happens in the weird, messy, inconsistent, emotionally loaded reality of people living their lives.** It happens in what people say when they're not being asked to "respond as a consumer." It happens in the self-deprecating joke someone makes before they tell a vulnerable truth. It happens in the story they tell twice without realizing it. It happens in what they avoid, what they overshare, who they become around their friends, and what they're trying very hard not to say out loud.

That is where true culture, true strategy, true insight lives. Not just in prompts. Not just in decks. Not just in trend reports. **In real people. In the real world. Touching grass.**

As a strategist with a Master's in Psychology, I care deeply about how people think, what matters to them, and how cultivating real moments of human connection can make a positive impact—whether that's at scale or one-on-one.

So now, a few nights a week, you can find me running a different kind of field research behind a bar in a little tourist town. Pouring drinks. Making small talk. Reading body language. Listening to vacation stories, break-up stories, work stories, "we just needed to get out of town" stories, and the tiny emotional tells that reveal so much more than a research respondent trying to sound rational.

Because people tell their bartenders everything. One study found that **55% of bartenders said patrons shared problems with them often, and 73% said simply listening was one of their main responses.**(1) People open up in wild ways when they're not sitting in a focus group with a two-way mirror. Not filling out a survey. Not trying to say the "right" thing. Just people being people in an environment that offers just enough distraction to make honesty feel safer.

Bartenders are therapists figuratively—and sometimes literally. The person making your drink might spend her days helping people process trauma. The person sitting at the bar might be a CEO, a caregiver, a recently divorced parent, a burned-out nurse, a real estate developer, a retired teacher, a woman on her

first solo trip, a man pretending he's fine, a couple trying to reconnect, or someone who just wants to be around other humans for an hour.

This is the part research so often flattens.

We turn people into segments. We turn motivations into bullet points. We turn cultural tension into a slide title. We turn lived experience into a neat little insight statement that sounds smart in a room.

But people do not live in neat little insight statements. They're enigmas, contradicting themselves. They want individuality and community. They want wellness and fries. They want the permission to just get the damn burger.

And if you want to build work that actually connects, you have to be close enough to notice the current of what's happening underneath it all. That does not happen by outsourcing your curiosity to a machine.

To be clear, I use AI. It is incredibly useful for patterning, pressure-testing, organizing inputs, accelerating thought, and making sense of a messy cultural landscape.

But AI is not a substitute for being there.

AI can summarize what people have already said. It cannot feel the silence before someone says the thing they actually mean. It can identify patterns. It cannot tell you why silence is discomfort for some and safety for others. It can help us move faster. It cannot replace the human connection of holding space for someone.

That is the muscle strategists and creatives need to protect right now. Not because the tools are bad. But because relying on them in isolation is. The temptation is to believe that because we can access more information than ever, we understand people better than ever. In actuality, we understand the digital better. We understand signals better. We understand statistics better.

But human truth is not always posted. Sometimes it is overheard. Sometimes it is implied. Sometimes it is in the way someone lights up when they talk about their kid. Sometimes it is in the drink they order because they think they should order an IPA, even though they hate the taste of hops.

This is why field research matters. And I don't mean field research only as a formal methodology, although that has its place. I mean as being a person in the world. Talking to strangers. Learning new skills. Taking a new way home. Learning a new skill. Asking follow-up questions. Going to the places your audience actually spends time. Watching what people do when no one is asking them to explain themselves. Getting immersed in the texture of real life. **Because if your job is to understand people, you cannot spend all your time trying to do that from behind a screen.**

The best strategists I know are not just analytical. **They are porous. They let the world in.** They ask questions not to prove a hunch, but because they're curious. That is where connection is cultivated.

Because the best insights do not come from acting like a machine. **They come from remembering you are not one.**