

# Marketing

## **`Bee-mo' and Montreal: The Bank of Montreal/BMO's complicated relationship with its hometown**

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It looks like Montreal is not the bad two-times-four-letter word it used to be. The Montreal Expos may be leaving town at the end of the baseball season, but the Bank of Montreal has decided to keep Montreal in its name-sort of.

That's one of the take-home messages of the bank's recent decision to keep the Bank of Montreal name for its retail branches and use BMO Financial Group for everything else. That decision puts an end to years of rumours, which began after the first election of the separatist Parti Quebecois government in 1976, that nervous nelly bank executives were planning to dump the Montreal word that formed its name-a brand that was swiftly plunging in equity.

Flashback to the days after the 1995 Quebec referendum. In those doom and gloom days for federalists, it looked like the "Can a bank change?" campaign the Bank of Montreal had used years ago was becoming more like "Can a bank change its name?"

Rumours were flying that the bank was prepared to dump the name it had proudly held since 1821-complete for a long stretch with the city's coat of arms-and was toying with becoming First Canadian Bank instead. "The bank that soon may dare not speak its name," read newspaper headlines.

There was speculation the word Montreal in the bank's name might associate it with Quebec's political uncertainty-an unwelcome spectre in business. Publicly, the bank displayed pique at the public discussion of the name change, dismissing it as speculation and rumour-but not ruling out the possibility.

The bank admitted its Bank of Montreal name is not instantly recognized in the U.S., where, through units such as Harris Bankcorp, its share of business is increasing. (Of the group's total average assets of \$244 billion in the second quarter of 2002, \$76 billion were in the U.S.)

Back in the days of post-referendum questioning, there was also loose agreement the bank would eventually change its name but would likely wait until the unity debate was simmering and Quebec would be less sensitive to the change.

With the sovereignty movement in the doldrums, those days appear to have arrived. When the bank announced its name change-conveniently just before the July 1 holiday weekend-there was nary a peep from Quebec.

In explaining the name change, the bank said the BMO initials will link its member companies. "A unified brand identity supports our objective of attracting and retaining clients who want us to look after more of their financial services needs," noted Michael Beckerman, senior vice-president, corporate marketing.

And, in one of the greater moments of news release writing, the bank's release helpfully included the hint that BMO is "pronounced 'bee-mo.'" Interestingly, the release's French version did not include a similar pronunciation guide. No surprise, given that in the langue de Moliere it's pronounced "bay-mo,"

which is the equivalent of "baie-maux." That translates as Bay of Pains or Pains Bay. (We know bank service charges are getting out of hand, but this is ridiculous.)

Keeping the Montreal name for the bank's branches (with the inclusion of the BMO prefix) can be seen as a sign of confidence in a city that is clearly on the economic rebound. Or, in these days of increasing bank branch closures, cynics might see it as an indication of the declining importance that banks place on their retail business.

There's little doubt, however, that dumping the Montreal name would have had a negative impact on the bank's Quebec business, coming soon after the debut of "Profitez," its first francophone, Quebec-only campaign in 10 years.

As Nicolette Flemming, the bank's Toronto-based VP of corporate marketing noted in a column in Marketing (June 10, p. 15): "We were losing our 'connection' to the French market" in Quebec, where more than 60% of the financial services market is in the hands of the Mouvement Desjardins credit union and the National Bank. "Our commitment was to put the 'Montreal' spirit back in Bank of Montreal, especially among French-speaking Quebecers."

Created by Cossette Communication-Marketing in Montreal, the TV ads take a humorous bent. One, "La Noce" ("Wedding"), shows a father toasting his daughter at her wedding. Guests look dismayed when he announces he sincerely hopes they're enjoying themselves, because the whole shebang is setting him back \$28,400.

That ad went on to win a silver in the Television/Cinema-Services category at the Publicite Club de Montreal's 2002 Coqs d'or awards. And, while a five-year trend analysis demonstrated the bank's "share of voice" had been decreasing, new data show the campaign has helped the bank move closer to its target in Quebec, Flemming said.

Smart alecks might also be heaving a sigh of relief that the Bank of Montreal name is staying, given one of the bank's recent attempts at new names. Take Emfisys, the bank's financial and information systems division. Let's hope this is not the way those bankers at "Bee-mo" think emphasis is spelled.