

Marketing

Can Quebec cut it at Cannes?: What it would take to make the province a winner at the Olympics of the ad business

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For years, Quebec creative work has struck out at the International Festival of Advertising in Cannes, the big enchilada of the ad award world. Zip, nada, zero have been the award totals for the province.

The Rest of Canada has seen its fair share of disappointments at Cannes over the years, but creatives from English Canada do return home year in, year out with more than a tan.

So what will it take for Quebec to win at Cannes? And should the province even bother trying?

That's what a coffee-fuelled audience that trudged into a theatre at 8 a.m. for the Publicite Club de Montreal's first debate of the fall season, set out to find. The short answers: lots, and most definitely. Now for the longer answers.

Participating in Cannes is like taking part in the Olympics, says Philippe Meunier, vice-president and creative director at Diesel Marketing in Montreal (see profile on p. 20). As it operates at international standards with the bars set high, it's a vital tool for creatives to measure the quality of their work. "I like being judged by people from other countries."

Going to Cannes for a week is like taking a university course instead of a correspondence course, says Paulette Arsenault, executive VP and creative director at PALM Publicite Marketing in Montreal. It's a transforming experience, says Arsenault, one of the Canadian judges at Cannes this year. Problem is, there can be a post-Cannes letdown when festival-goers return home to clients who need to be convinced to do more than the same old stuff.

Statistics were presented showing that only 14% (69 of 483) of Canadian entries at Cannes this year were from Quebec, far below the province's proportion of the country's population (about 24%).

Given Canada's size, Meunier says, the country had an impressive success rate at Cannes this year, measured by the number of ads that were shortlisted. Now if only Quebec could boost its participation and come up to par with the rest of Canada, Canada's overall success rate at Cannes would be much higher. More Quebec pieces must be submitted, he says.

Perhaps the only Quebec-based marketer to attend this year's show said going to Cannes represents an opportunity for marketers to see what's being done elsewhere. In an era of worldwide competition, big-name marketers must measure themselves against the whole world and not just the local market, said Rene Carier, vice-president of marketing at Brasserie Labatt, in a clip shown during the debate taken from an interview conducted in Cannes.

Arsenault noted that ads in English are very much favoured at the international advertising festival. The key to success, therefore, is "don't do ads in French," she said, somewhat sarcastically. "English dominates in the juries."

But the debate did not become a language whine-athon, and mention was made that while English is not exactly the official language of Brazil, the country has become an international ad awards show powerhouse. Besides, Meunier says, Quebec agencies can easily ensure their ads perform better by recording at the outset versions in both French and English.

After being shown a reel of award-winning ads from this year's event, panelists wondered whether sex and violence are what's needed to win. Does it take only outlandish stuff-like ads featuring fornicating dogs and vibrators-to woo the juries? asked moderator Richard Martineau, a columnist for the Montreal-based marketing/advertising magazine Info Presse.

No, not really-good ideas are the most important thing, says Belgian visitor Michel Mergaerts, co-founder and former president of Kuadratura Bruxelles. He gave the example of a winning Bic shaver ad, in which a girl mistakes her soft-skinned father for her mother when he kisses her goodbye before leaving for work in the morning.

The common denominator in most winning ads at Cannes is humour, panelists agreed. After the audience was shown a reel of winning ads from the last three PCM Coq d'or awards, Meunier noted that people laughed often at examples of Cannes winners from 2000 to 2002, but were silent for their Quebec counterparts. ``We're not humorous enough." (Of course, many had already seen the Quebec ads frequently but were likely seeing the Cannes winners for the first time.)

Often what wins in Cannes are simple ideas, Meunier says. ``Good ideas don't have borders." But that's tougher than it sounds, because clients and agencies in Quebec are afraid to take chances. From the start, creatives should not be afraid to do things differently instead of engaging in self-censorship and clients should not jump to remove ads every time there's a complaint.

And what does the videotaped marketer think is needed for Quebec to win at Cannes? Quality standards and training have to be raised, Carier said, and there needs to be more preparation and understanding of the rules-both formal and informal.