

Marketing

Queen of Convergence: Sylvie Lalande has mastered content, networks, creativity and the Internet. Now she's the brains behind Bell's marketing strategy

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Sometimes-thankfully not often-you learn a lot about your employer when the lights go out. That's exactly what happened to Sylvie Lalande. Just months after she joined Bell Canada in Montreal, the Quebec ice storm of 1998 plowed through, plunging much of the province into darkness and putting the giant telephone utility on a disaster footing.

For Lalande, now Bell's chief communications officer, in charge of advertising, internal communications, public relations and promotions at the company, the darkness proved to be a real eye-opener. "I never realized how vastly deployed our infrastructure was," she recalls. "As a normal consumer you don't have to know these things."

Lalande marvels at how key employees worked, ate and slept on one floor of a building that was powered by a generator and, performing with shoestring means, usually managed to keep the phone lines working while everything else around them failed.

"The deep knowledge and understanding of Bell's employees at the time was key in (keeping) the city alive," she says. "It brought me where I had never been before, and it was quite the journey. To me, it was a trip to the heart of the company."

But while the ice storm taught Lalande a lot about Bell, clearly the company has a lot to learn from her. In hiring Lalande, Bell has obtained a rare breed-one of the few people who are comfortable with all facets of the communication world.

"The value of Sylvie-and the Bell people recognize it-is that she is someone who has mastered content, networks, creativity and the Internet," says Guy Crevier, publisher of the Montreal daily *La Presse*, who worked with Lalande at the TVA network, where he was vice-president of news. "There are few people who have succeeded in touching all of these areas."

Not only that, but she understands "convergence," the annoying buzzword that's constantly being bandied about in today's era of almost daily giant media acquisitions. "I know how this interactive stuff is made; I know what it takes," notes Lalande.

All of which comes in handy for a company like Bell that now does much more than it did in its old days as a stodgy phone monopoly. Along with controlling a vast hard-wired infrastructure in Quebec and Ontario, Bell Canada's myriad operations include a wireless service (Bell Mobility), the delivery of TV signals (through Bell ExpressVu) and an Internet foray with Sympatico and associated Web portals.

Lalande is now handling responsibilities that, prior to a streamlining of the corporate structure earlier this year, were divvied up among several Bell business divisions. "I'm not shy to say I'm willing to see my job change as often as the job needs to be changed in order to stay ahead of the competition," Lalande says of the restructuring aimed at making Bell more responsive. Her greatest challenge, she says, is staying ahead of the competition, integrating marketing communications for the growing number of services the company offers.

And the competition is fierce. Montreal cable company Vidéotron, and Lalande's former employer, has blasted Bell for its latest ExpressVu and Sympatico campaigns, both of which she oversaw. Vidéotron accuses Bell of false advertising and sheer dishonesty, while Lalande appears ready to play hardball.

"Do you have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" Videotron asks in full-page English ads, and "Ne pas tout dire, c'est un peu mentir" (Not giving the whole story is a bit of a lie) in full-page French ads.

Bell's French-language TV and print ads for Sympatico- featuring its popular Monsieur B character dressed as a stereotypical Eastern European peasant woman named Mamouchka- note that Internet cable service slows down when used by many people in the same neighbourhood. The print ads feature Mamouchka holding a "Niet" placard with the tag line: "Do like Mamouchka, don't share your Internet access with the whole neighborhood."

But Jean-Paul Galarneau, general manager of communications at Vidéotron, says cable is still faster even if people share the line. And ExpressVu ads are inaccurate because they imply you can't pick and choose the channels you want with cable- an option that is available with Videotron's digital service, Galarneau says.

"I don't want to criticize their way of doing things. I don't want them to criticize my way of doing things," responds Lalande. "We're both trying to establish the unique selling propositions of our respective technologies. We are in a battlefield here, and there is no doubt that we won't be shy to underline the benefits of our technology."

Lalande got her start in the communication biz while doing her BA in cultural studies at the Université du Québec à Montreal. A teacher who directed a Radio-Canada morning radio show arranged to give students air time on a weekly summer show called Tam Tam Tribal. That gave Lalande the radio bug, and led to her first job at the Montreal AM station CKAC, where she rose through the ranks, first writing ads for clients and eventually becoming a producer. By the time Lalande left the station seven years later, she was program director of the number-one AM station in town.

"I've always said that radio is probably the best school for anyone who wants to have a career in the media business," she says. But after seven years in radio, Lalande felt she had done everything and it was time for something else.

That something else turned out to be her own public relations consultancy, something Lalande originally didn't intend to launch. "I quickly realized that once you are known for something, people are calling you for what you are known for. I had to create my own little company in order to say, 'Hey, I can do things other than radio stuff.'"

Soon after, Roger Landry, then publisher of *La Presse*, hired her to handle events for the newspaper's centennial year in 1984. The two knew each other when Landry was the VP of marketing for the Montreal Expos and CKAC was the Expos' broadcaster. For the newspaper's birthday, Lalande arranged sponsorships, produced special themed supplements and introduced the personality-of-the-week column in the

paper-a tradition that continues today. Lalande's efforts were recognized as La Presse's celebrations were named event of the year by both the Canadian and Quebec public relation societies -a rare time the two have seen eye to eye. But, again, clients started pigeonholing her, and once more Lalande became restless.

Relief came in the form of a phone call from a headhunter about a position with Télé-Métropole (now the TVA network). "I was so thrilled by the challenge," says Lalande, who jumped at the opportunity to work for TV. Lalande was the first outside hire by new owner Andre Chagnon of Groupe Videotron of Montreal.

"I will always remember the looks of the guys that were there for many, many years seeing someone coming from not only the outside, but having been selected by the new owners," she says. "Sometimes I felt I was perceived as a spy, which I was not, obviously."

Soon after arriving, Lalande engineered a deal to sell more than 600 hours of Quebec-produced TV programming to networks in France that were seeking original French content, and not just dubbed American fare. "That was a huge breakthrough because it was very difficult to sell genuine Quebec-based products because of our charming accent," she says.

Former TVA colleague Serge Gouin, now vice-chairman of Salomon Smith Barney Canada in Montreal and a board member of Cossette Group, says Lalande was hired to rejuvenate the network, which had been banking on a successful but staid formula and had demographics that were older than what advertisers were seeking. When the VP of programming left just as the critical fall programming schedule was being pulled together, Lalande was asked to step in. She brought in several new programming concepts despite being in an organization that resisted her ideas, Gouin says.

"That's when Télé-Métropole really took a sharp turn for the better in terms of its programming content and its target market," he says. "I think that changed TVA forever and she was key in achieving that change."

By 1989, Lalande shifted to parent company Vidéotron, but kept her title of VP, research and development, programming. At Vidéotron, her focus became the new emerging interactive technologies that the cable company began to experiment with. A French company had developed a loyalty device for TV viewers-a calculator-size device that allowed viewers to collect electronic pinkie stamps and redeem them for catalogue items by watching TV shows. Dubbed Club Multi Points, the operation was a technological success, but the patient died when lead sponsor, grocer Steinberg, went bankrupt. In addition, the expertise was not there to build a strong catalogue, Lalande recalls.

Next, Lalande was put in charge of selling Vidéotron's Videoway technology, which allowed subscribers to select from multiple streams of programming. For example, instead of just watching a conventional hockey game broadcast, viewers equipped with a special remote control could tune in to a channel that kept the camera on Wayne Gretzky for the entire game, one that showed instant replays and another dedicated to statistics.

Videoway did the first interactive Celine Dion concert, broadcasting lyrics on a split-screen so karaoke-loving viewers could sing along. Viewers could play along with Jeopardy! and have their scores calculated. "We were creating content that didn't exist," she says.

Videoway brought Lalande to the U.K. 15 times a year for three years, where Vidéotron was buying franchises in a joint venture with Bell. Unlike Quebec, where everybody answered her calls, the Brits could barely pronounce Vidéotron and Lalande was a total unknown. She had to knock on doors, get the ears of people at organizations like the BBC, bring them into specially equipped rooms to demonstrate the technology and then convince them to provide the rights to alter original programming. "That was a huge task," says Lalande. "But it was fun."

Given the expertise she had developed with interactive technologies, Lalande was asked in 1994 to become CEO of the UBI consortium, overseeing the deployment of an ambitious interactive TV programming concept that was backed by Vidéotron, Loto-Québec, Hydro-Québec, Canada Post, National Bank and Hearst Corp. While the project seemed promising, along came the Internet, which blew away everything else in its path.

The dream of having real interactive television was five or 10 years too early, says Monique Lefebvre, a VP responsible for Quebec and Eastern Canada at Ericsson Communications in Montreal, who has known Lalande professionally for several years. "She had to swim a little bit like a salmon against the current, against the river and against the skepticism." Lefebvre says Lalande made the mistake of being too early with a technology that the public wasn't necessarily ready for. People trying to launch innovations in the high-tech field often err by looking into the future and forget to consider the present, explains Lefebvre.

Gouin says Lalande during the UBI period had the same weakness as many other people in the field "who look too far ahead, too quickly." Still, UBI was always considered an experimental project. And it provided valuable information to its backers, Gouin says.

In 1997, once again the phone rang, and this time it was Bell. After moving to Bell, Lalande was first placed in charge of communication for the Quebec market at Bell. She then became responsible for marketing, sales and advertising for Quebec, before being promoted to her current posting.

"I think she brings not only hands-on manager experience to Bell, but an entrepreneurial spirit. (Parent company) BCE is looking for fresh air of this type," says Lefebvre, who notes that few women are in Lalande's position in Canada's corporate world. "I think she's opening roads for other women in this area. She's absolutely the right person at the right time at the corporate level."

Manon Vennat, the headhunter who recommended Lalande to Bell, says Lalande has been able to bring to Bell a non-bureaucratic way of looking at things. "She was able to evolve things rather than create a revolution. And I think that's why she's been successful," says Vennat, chairman of executive search consultant Spencer Stuart in Montreal.

While Lalande previously had little experience working in English Canada (except some time spent in Edmonton, where Vidéotron had cable interests), she has compensated by building a strong team around her, Vennat says. And she's smart enough to know that you don't sell something in Quebec the same way you sell it in Ontario, Gouin notes.

With the huge range of products Bell offers, it faces the challenge to always be exceptionally consistent in its advertising, Lalande says. Ads have to be of good quality, "because the equity of the Bell brand deserves such quality," she says.

Bell closely monitors its own platform and those of its competitors, says Lalande, whether it's the continuing "Monsieur B" campaign in Quebec, or the recent "Talk, explore, do anything" campaign in Ontario. Results seem to be positive: In surveys last spring, Bell was cited as the most-noticed advertiser (all media) in Quebec, according to Impact Recherche of Montreal. In March, 34% of 302 Quebecers surveyed named Bell as their favourite TV advertiser.

"She listens to our recommendations and is willing to step back," explains Suzanne Sauvage, senior VP and general manager of the Bell group at Cossette Communication-Marketing in Montreal. "She has extremely good creative judgment and is fun to work with."

Outside of work, Lalande tries to stay close to Montreal's creative community. She does so, in part, by sitting on the boards of two Montreal theatres and the city's design institute, as well as on the boards of the Bell Broadcast and New Media Fund, the city's Chamber of Commerce and the Universite de Montreal.

Although Lalande divides her work week between Montreal, Toronto and Ottawa, where she oversees about 200 employees, she lives in the country, about 45 minutes outside of Montreal.

Lalande turns 50 in December, a month that will also mark the 10th anniversary of her marriage to Paul Baillargeon, who works for Paramount and is one of the musical composers for Star Trek: Voyager.

The two are very close to nature-so close that they have land on a salmon fishing river, Rivière Corneille, on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, near Natashquan. It's a 13-hour, two-day drive from Montreal, with the last stretch reachable only by boat. The two spend vacations and long weekends there, away from TVs, radios, fax machines and most of Bell's technological offerings.

"It's my way to be a balanced person," Lalande explains. "I deserved all the jobs I've had, because I've worked very hard. But you need to have a life."