

Marketing

The Magnificent Seven?: Publicis Montreal's new M7 creative unit is promising big results fast. Not everyone is rooting for them

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Too many cooks spoil the broth, as the expression goes. But the new M7 creative team at Publicis in Montreal insists that's just not the case.

For M7, which puts seven creatives pretty much on an equal footing, "it's less soup and more sushi," jokes creative director Michel Beaudet. He says the team works and plays together, and operates in a democratic and "totally organic" fashion, all with the aim of making Publicis Montreal a creative force in the city. "In 12 to 18 months, people will know we're back," Beaudet says.

M7, which was originally a James Bond-ish code name, was formed last June after much of Publicis Montreal's creative team was sacked in one unceremonious swoop by Publicis Canada CEO and chair Yves Gougoux. Among the departures were VP creatives Jean Gamache and Steve Crawford. (The M7 move was accompanied by the return of Caroline Jarvis to Montreal after her very brief stint as creative director at Cossette's Grapheme-Koo division in Vancouver. At Publicis, Jarvis and her team of five creatives handle the L'Oreal Canada, Clud Med, Club Med World and Publicis WellCare accounts, leaving the rest to M7.)

Montreal's ad agency ranks had a field day with Gougoux gossip when Gougoux described the dramatic moves as "I've changed my wardrobe." Gougoux, however, said the sudden layoffs were necessary and were more humane than making cuts in dribs and drabs.

Gougoux also came under fire for saying that members of his new "wardrobe" had been responsible for most of the Coqs awarded by the Publicite Club de Montreal this year. In a letter published in the Quebec industry monthly InfoPresse, Stephane Charier, a copywriter with BBDO Montreal, noted that he may be bad at math, but four out of 65 Coqs doesn't equal most. "When you're good, Mr. Gougoux, you won't need to make up stories; it'll be known."

Not surprisingly, members of the M7 team rush to Gougoux's defence, calling their boss a real advertising man and a risk-taker unwilling to settle for the status quo-unlike most in the biz. In most shops, says M7er Jacqueline Zegray, there's the "asphalt factor," with agency presidents acting only as business people who are worried more about the state of their driveways than about creative product.

Certainly creative product and client losses were a concern at Publicis' Montreal shop and undoubtedly led Gougoux to create M7. While Marketing named Publicis Canada its Agency of the Year last year, it was largely on the strength of the revitalized Toronto office. Publicis Montreal had been losing major accounts like La Presse and the Metro grocery chain to Cossette.

M7's formation didn't do much to help Publicis hang on to the Molson Dry account for Quebec, which also went to Cossette two months after the big shakeup. But the days of drifting are over, M7 members vow. They cite "the power of seven," as a sign of their strength. Unlike traditional agencies where there are separate teams competing with one another for clients, the seven creative directors work together which, they say, is much more healthy. All have previously worked together or were-and still

are-friends. "It wasn't possible to create M7 without knowing everybody," says Beaudet, who, when hired, convinced Gougoux of the need to bring along "ma gang."

As part of the M7 process, all work is pinned up on walls in the open work space for all to see and critique. Creative decisions are often voted upon; rarely is there serious contention, they say. "It's nothing personal' is our motto," Beaudet notes. Everything is signed M7, which gives more force to their work, both within the agency and to clients.

"It's very motivating," Beaudet says, of what he calls the "crazy adventure." At many other shops, he says, there's plenty of talent but creatives get caught up in a heavy process that renders their work mechanical. There's too much pressure, and work is no longer fun. The result is burnout and a steady increase in the freelance ranks, says Beaudet, who was freelancing before joining M7.

Zegray adds there's a self-censoring process in effect at most agencies. "One person says take out the carrots, another says take out the peas. At the end, there's nothing left on the plate."

So far, the process is working, the M7ers say. "If it wasn't working, we'd know very quickly," notes Marcus Hildebrandt, another one of the seven. They point to the creation of the new illico brand and a major campaign for Videotron cable's interactive service in only four weeks as an example of what their teamwork can achieve.

On the new business side, Publicis Montreal has picked up the Le Chateau clothing chain and DIM Canada hosiery and lingerie firm accounts in recent weeks. A Quebec-only campaign for CIBC is in the works. It doesn't make up for the losses, but it's a start.

While it's too soon to say whether M7 will make Publicis Montreal a creative powerhouse, "it's been a fun ride so far," Hildebrandt says.