

Marketing

One Solitude: Leaders in Quebec's marketing community are worried it is in danger of becoming a creative backwater in an increasingly global advertising world

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As advertising agency staff and marketers prepare to gather May 31 at Montreal's Theatre Saint-Denis to salute the best in Quebec advertising creative at the annual Coq d'or awards, there's an intense debate within the marketing community over whether something is very wrong with much of the current product.

When it comes to advertising creative, many agency professionals-especially on the creative side-are wondering if "Quebec sait faire" (Quebec knows how), the old slogan of the 1960s and 1970s, still holds true. They're saying that creative in English Canada is vastly superior, and are tired of seeing Quebec whipped by the "Rest of Canada" at such prestigious venues as the International Advertising Festival in Cannes.

They say that Quebec has gone way overboard in placing its distinct culture and local-star system first and foremost in its advertising, that political correctness is rampant and that agencies and marketers are afraid to create campaigns that might rock the boat.

Others are saying vast change is needed and that it's time to put the province's famous "twin-bed" theory of marketing, which gave birth to modern advertising in the province, to sleep. With more and more campaigns going global, the fear is that Quebec creative will be cast aside, left only to handle regional or local accounts.

"I have the feeling we're in a very isolated little island that doesn't have any contact with the rest of the world or even the rest of the country," says Martin Beauvais, president of the advertising jury for this year's Coq d'or awards and vice-president, creative director of PNMD Communication in Montreal. "Somehow, we are trailing a million miles away from what is being done out there and what is being considered, be it in award shows or by clients, as being very brilliant and creative and effective advertising."

"We're really in deep shit," is the blunt message from Philippe Meunier, VP, creative director of Diesel Marketing in Montreal. For at least the last five years, Quebec advertising has been fear-driven, Meunier says, with agencies afraid of losing accounts, sales and market share, while clients fear displeasing their bosses. Research dictates decisions and agencies often hear: "I don't think we're ready for that," when any concept out of the ordinary is presented. The result is sheer mediocrity, he says.

Jean Gamache, VP, group creative director at Publicis Canada in Montreal, says English-Canadian creative has been outperforming Quebec for years. Part of the problem lies with Quebecers who are quick to complain to Advertising Standards

Canada about allegedly inappropriate ads. (Last year, 30% of the 1,143 complaints to the ASC came from Quebec, far in excess of its 24% proportion of the Canadian population.) "It's extremely difficult to do things here that disturb or shock a little bit" in advertising, Gamache says, despite the fact Quebecers are ready to accept just about anything when it comes to movies or TV shows. As a result, clients are extremely hesitant to shock or surprise consumers. "It's always the same story, but today in Quebec it's more difficult than ever," he adds.

Much of Quebec creative stems from the "twin bed" marketing theory of Jacques Bouchard, who founded the BCP agency and is dubbed the father of modern-day Quebec advertising. The theory goes that Quebec and English-Canadian ads can share the same room, but not the same bed-meaning that the strategy can be the same, but the creative has to be different.

Now, more people are saying it's time to throw the old twin beds onto the street and buy a new mattress. The concept of culture has been taken way overboard in Quebec, Meunier says. "Culture does not create ideas." What has happened is that "we're always focused on ourselves," he says. "When you're not open to the world, the result is tribalism instead of globalism."

But Yves Gougoux, chair and CEO of Publicis Canada in Montreal, says twin-bed marketing must remain alive-as long as it's used correctly. Quebec is undeniably different from English Canada, just as Toronto and Vancouver are different. However, the Quebec difference has to be dealt with intelligently, Gougoux says, and putting culture in the forefront when you're short of ideas is not enough. "Cultural differentiation is only an amplifier; it is not a brand-builder. You must work on ideas. Ideas build brands." Colleague Serge Rancourt, president and COO of Publicis, says culture alone can act as a barrier to protect markets, "and protectionism drives mediocrity. When the barriers are gone, you'd better be good. Today, the barriers are gone."

The rumblings about Quebec creative have been growing in recent years. Four years ago, Jacques Labelle, VP, creative director of Cossette Communication-Marketing in Montreal, wrote an article for Info Presse, Quebec's advertising and marketing magazine, on the theme that Quebec advertising is ill.

Lunchtime debates organized by the Publicite-Club de Montreal have also taken up the challenge. In March, Jean-Jacques Streliski, former president and chief creative officer of PNMD Communication, rang the alarm bells again in a strongly worded speech at the Prix Jacques-Bouchard, which celebrates good-quality French-language creative.

Now the Publicite-Club is in the midst of organizing an estates-general (a form of commission) on the state of Quebec's communications-marketing industry. Slated to be held in November, and backed by federal and provincial government funding, it will study everything from the challenges and threats posed by globalization and the Internet to the quality of creative and how advertisers view the Quebec market.

Roger Sirard, head of the Association of Canadian Advertisers' Montreal office and a board member of the Publicite-Club who has been organizing the estates-general (a new title is being sought), says it won't just be a one-shot event. "It will be the beginning of a process by which the advertising industry in Quebec will try to see where we stand, and if there are some options for development and progress." It will kick off with the results of a soon-to-be-conducted study that will show where Quebec's ad industry now stands, and go on from there.

But Gougoux questions the need for an event that he fears will be an exercise in navel-gazing and commiserating. "Collectively what are we going to tell each other? 'Oh, you're sick. I really feel bad for you.' Then go back home and say, 'What have we done? Nothing.'" He says the answer to the industry's woes doesn't lie in sitting around a table, but in hard work, developing consumer insights, investing in talent so that recruitment is not limited to poaching from one another, building brands and making sure that they're up to international standards. "C'mon, wake up guys. Open up, look at the real world, get going with it, be aggressive, be a winner and stop looking inwardly at your industry. Hit!"

Gougoux believes, with others, that Quebec's creatives have the talent to kick international (and not just English-Canadian) butt, but are not doing so at the moment. Indeed, Quebec has been smarting from losses at Cannes. "Canada 1, Quebec 0," read the headline in the September 2000 issue of Info Presse, in an article noting that Canada (meaning English Canada) won five Lions for television/cinema work at Cannes last year, while Quebec garnered but one nomination.

When it comes to Cannes-calibre work, both Gougoux and Beauvais say Quebec should be getting its inspiration from Brazil, which is making advertising that is both relevant to the local market and backed by strong ideas. "The point is, you have to make effective advertising for your market," Beauvais says, "but it doesn't mean that you suddenly stop looking at what other people are doing and stop being influenced by other people in other cultures."

On the Canadian scene, Meunier says the stereotype that French-Canadians are more funky than English-Canadians is no longer true, at least when it comes to advertising. "When I go to Vancouver and Toronto, I see much greater work on billboards."

On the agency side, Daniel Charron, vice-president, creative director of Republik in Montreal, says Montreal has nothing to compare to Taxi Advertising & Design in Toronto (formerly based in Montreal) and Rethink in Vancouver. "These are agencies that are going against the grain and are not following the typical way of doing things," he says. In Montreal, he says, most shops want to be "me-too agencies," following in the heels of Cossette or Publicis.

Quebec always talks about how different it is, says Charron. "But in the end, we're so different that we're trying to be the same." And the often-used solution of using Quebec stars as product spokespersons "is the easy way out. It totally disgusts me."

Charron says Quebec should be creating campaigns that cause Paris and New York to say "that's amazing." As it stands, Charron says he can count on one finger the Quebec campaigns of the last 25 years that would be of universal interest, namely the milk campaign created by PNMD Communication for the Federation des producteurs de lait du Quebec. "It doesn't say 'this was produced in Quebec.' It's simple, but it's brilliant. Apart from that, there's nothing that excites me."

However, others remain unconvinced there is a major problem in Quebec. "In any country of the world, there are very few good ads. I don't think we have more bad advertising or good advertising than anywhere else," says Michel Ostiguy, president of Bos in Montreal. And he notes ads for local or regional clients don't have to be exportable. "Le Journal de Montreal doesn't have to have a worldwide campaign. It doesn't even need to be accepted by Ste. Hyacinthe," a town about 50 kilometres from Montreal.

Francois Forget, VP, strategic planning at Cossette in Montreal, agrees that Bos' ``Vite-vite-vite" campaign for Le Journal de Montreal-a play on words on the newspaper's classified ad number 888-8888 is an example of a great ``culturally engaging" idea from Quebec that just would not work elsewhere.

Brigitte Mittelhammer, VP, client services at Tam-Tam\TBWA in Montreal, notes that creativity and effectiveness are not directly proportional to one another and that Quebec is far from alone in having advertising based on local values. ``Just because ads are addressed to a very small, closed market doesn't mean they stink," she says, adding: ``Spend an hour zapping American TV. It's disastrous what you see on the screen!"

Mittelhammer also invites those who say Quebec creative must be more global to put up or shut up. ``If people say our ideas must be more global, I invite them to develop them. What exactly are they doing to create campaigns that don't call upon spokespersons? I detest a bit people who complain, but don't do anything to change things."

Beauvais says he is already starting to see a change for the better, with a new crop of young people becoming influential and creating ideas that are of international calibre. ``Their references are not just Quebecois, but worldwide. They're not necessarily the ones that are going to vote Yes in the next referendum," he adds. ``They're going to vote I Don't Care." He cites the La Presse campaign by Cossette, which won a silver for best multi-media campaign at this year's Marketing Awards, and Bos' work for the Kebecson home-entertainment store as recent examples of solid work.

But, warns Beauvais: ``If the agencies don't start to wake up, our clients are going to start to say, `C'mon, you can't give me the same recipe again. I'm fed up with only meatballs and spaghetti.' "

Meunier, who says senior creative people are so fed up with the situation that they're going freelance en masse, says there should be one culture of advertising in Canada, with greater Quebec participation at national award shows like the Marketing Awards. And his message for what ails Quebec creative is direct: ``Let the creative create. Stop being fear-driven. Stop feeling that you're the only ones that exist on this planet."