

Marketing

A Vote For Bleue

Having rallied Quebecers behind Labatt's "fun" party, Jonathan Bleue is ready to take the stage again

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A mandatory three-day weekend. Bars that stay open until 4 a.m. Better muzak and candy dispensers on elevators. No taxes on "essential" goods like CDs. And a life full of fun, fun, fun, along with the creation of a Gross National Fun Product.

Those were among the election promises of fake Parti Bleue political leader Jonathan Bleue in a Quebec campaign that coincided exactly with last year's federal election campaign. It was all part of a marketing initiative by Labatt Brewery which succeeded in bringing new colour to the dated Labatt Bleue brand, instantly transforming it from beige to, well, blue. So successful was the 36-day marketing campaign that ended on election day June 28 – and was conducted entirely like a real election campaign – that it is set to return in a new guise.

"It was the right time in the company, it was the right time from a brand cycle standpoint, and market conditions allowed it," recalls Stéphane Duval, national marketing manager for Labatt Blue at Brasserie Labatt in Montreal. "It all came together. It was one of the biggest stunts ever here. And we needed it."

The campaign aimed at regaining a 1.5 point market share Labatt lost in Quebec in 2003, during a three-month strike that paralyzed the company. But it also aimed at shaking the dust off the Bleue brand. Every time Labatt did focus group research on Bleue, participants recalled two things – the brand's sponsorship of big-name events like Montreal's jazz and Just for Laughs festivals – and the "jeux de mots" campaign, based on local humour and visual puns. Problem is, the latter campaign had concluded five years earlier and there was little recall for more recent campaigns.

The fact Bleue was considered beige provided the springboard to take a risk and launch a campaign that was bound to be a source for at least some criticism, Duval says. Now nobody talks about "jeux de mots" and in research Labatt hears only about Parti Bleue, he says.

To change consumer behaviour, Duval, who has been with Labatt four years, knew a traditional beer campaign wouldn't create the needed "brew" haha. "When you look at beer marketing - and I don't want to oversimplify it - but you go down south to shoot two ads, you come back, you air them in May, you have a Christmas promotion and that's pretty much it."

The lightbulb flash for the idea of a political party for Bleue came from Duval and he took the concept to Bleue's agency BBDO Montreal. "I can't tell you 'I really kicked the agency's ass to come up with something different, and they did,'" but "they were very very creative on the way we got there."

BBDO Montreal put the concept together, hiring actor and radio DJ François Maranda as Jonathan Bleue. The "candidate" had several training sessions and was prepped by being peppered with about 200 questions he could expect to face during the campaign. (Sample question: "What do you think of Paul Martin?" Answer: "We think the guy does pretty well with two first names.") "We did not get caught at any point," Duval says.

A teaser campaign, news releases and early TV ads were created (the first showed Bleue walking across Canada with cheesy symbols of Canada like polar bears, flashing by). "We tried to copy the worst clichés" of political ads," says Martin Beauvais, executive vice-president, creative director of BBDO Montreal.

Everything from a campaign platform (on the theme “vote for fun”) to campaign bus (painted in blue, naturally) were readied, in concert with public relations firm HKDP, and a political war room was created at BBDO’s office. Also, as part of the advance work, the real political parties were warned the Parti Bleue campaign was coming. They were told the campaign was “not against politics, not against democracy,” Duval says, and, on the contrary, could raise awareness among youth that there was indeed an election going on.

Labatt and its agencies then waited on tenterhooks for the election call to be made. Fortunately, after a few false alarms, Prime Minister Martin participated perfectly by calling an election smack dab in the middle of prime beer marketing season.

As soon as the writ was dropped, Labatt, BBDO and HKDP operated not as a marketing department but as a political unit. They would assemble at 7 a.m. every morning at “party headquarters,” to field a one-hour conference call aimed at reviewing the previous day’s activities, discussing strategy for the new one and preparing daily TV and radio capsules.

Actual campaign events entered into the fray. For example, during the French-language leaders debate Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe asked how much was in the unemployment insurance fund, using the word “caisse” which can also be used to signify carton or pack. Says Morneau: “We did a news release saying “Jonathan Bleue knows there are always 12 or 24 in the caisse.” Radio show hosts followed such releases religiously and the campaign generated a tidal wave of media coverage.

Jonathan Bleue toured the province, putting his promises into action. In Quebec City, he gave 50 people \$100 each so they could take Friday off. Beer bottles were collected in some Montreal neighborhoods to help pay off the national debt. Old magazines were changed for new ones in a doctor’s waiting room. As part of his plank that “essential” products like CDs should be tax-free, he stood outside an HMV store on Ste. Catherine St. in downtown Montreal reimbursing people’s taxes on purchases for an hour-and-a-half. “To a public disillusioned about politics, politicians don’t keep their election promises. But Jonathan Bleue kept his election promises,” says Marie Morneau, vice-president, communications marketing and Internet, HKDP Communications and Public Affairs in Quebec City.

In keeping with a campaign targeted at 18-to-24 target market, Jonathan Bleue’s campaign bus made numerous pitstops at bars throughout the province, always accompanied by his three bouncy female “attachants de presse” (a play on words on “attaché de presse”) who posed for or took Polaroid pictures of bar patrons with Bleue and handed out “handshakes” (coupons for free Labatt Bleue).

“This guy walked into a bar, particularly in unsuspecting villages, and he was a folk hero,” says BBDO Montreal president Gregor Angus. “It was as if literally Mick Jagger was walking in the place.” One of the real strengths of the campaign was that it brought the brand to street-level, something that is probably the hardest challenge for a mature brand, he says.

Still, Parti Bleue faced criticism. Parti Québécois leader Bernard Landry said he found the marketing campaign irritating. The city of Montreal complained about illegal campaign posters, which were quickly removed. Quebec’s university student federation, the Fédération des étudiants universitaires du Québec, denounced the campaign, citing its lack of respect for the electoral process, and called for Labatt brands to be pulled from campus bars across Quebec. One small problem: It turned out Molson has exclusivity deals on most of the province’s campuses.

“We didn’t take too much (of the criticism) into consideration because the core target seemed to appreciate what we did,” Duval says.

Praise also came in from some unexpected quarters, like university academics, and there was no shortage of media attention, with coverage that included the front page of *La Presse*.

Throughout, a close watch had to be kept on Labatt’s corporate image, says PR specialist Morneau, but at no time was the panic button pressed. Says Duval: “Nothing really shook us to the point where we asked ‘are we doing the right thing here?’”

The campaign ended on election day with “victory” parties in Montreal , Quebec City and Gatineau, which aired live on the MusiquePlus election night show. By the time the fake posters were removed, the campaign had come in at \$4 million over its 36-day span – more than is spent on the brand for an entire year.

While Parti Bleue did not help Labatt regain all of its lost market share from the previous year’s strike, it stabilized the Bleue brand and brought youth back: 83% of the 18-24 target appreciated the campaign. And asked whether they would have voted for Jonathan Bleue if had been on the ballot, 30% said yes – not much less than the Liberal Party’s vote tally. Parti Bleue “was a marketers’ dream because we did everything we wanted to do. We went really the whole nine yards on it,” Duval says. Beauvais says Parti Bleue was probably the only unique beer campaign in Canada last year. “Other beers are girls on the beach and guys trying to shag them and this is totally different.”

Labatt also seemed pleased with its agency: It recently handed BBDO Montreal its entire Quebec account - including Budweiser, Bud Light, Wildcat, Lucky Lager, Labatt Ice, Labatt Extra Dry and Labatt 50 – ending an 18 year collaboration with Montreal agency PALM Publicité Marketing.

Jonathan Bleue returned at Christmas with a CD called *Réveillons Noël* containing revised holiday classics. For example, the traditional white Christmas became blue and a sleigh ride was transformed into a chase for a parking spot. It sold a few thousand copies with no advertising.

But that’s about to change with Jonathan Bleue returning in Phase II of the campaign. Duval says Jonathan Bleue has become a brand icon, and Labatt will take advantage of that by having the character return as a media star à la Oprah or Dr. Phil who hosts his own TV and radio show. The character will continue to be “the Greenpeace of fun,” but will instead use the media world to convey his message, Duval says. Once again he’ll appear on the street and in bars to promote his concept of fun.

A non-traditional media plan will be used and Jonathan Bleue will be leveraged to appear elsewhere, such as in the Labatt-sponsored Just for Laughs comedy festival. The campaign will end with a live TV show.

Last year’s campaign broke the mold of traditional beer marketing plans and consumers reacted positively to the risk Labatt Bleue took in behaving differently as a brand, Duval says. The challenge now is to behave that way more often in the next few years to reap the full potential. Although last year’s campaign was a good first step, a big stunt has to be sustained for at least three or four years since beer brands have long life cycles, he says. “There’s a lot of work still to do on Bleue, but we shook up the foundations a bit.”