

strategy™

bold
vision
brand
new
ideas

2026

MOV

MARKETERS
OF THE YEAR

The brand
builders
behind Rona,
TD, Loblaw,
Scotiabank,
Knix and
Coca-Cola



How new label
rules are reshaping
food marketing

Less noise.
More truth.

SPRING 2026 • \$6.95



**The
2026
AToMiC
Awards**

**The ideas
that shook the
status-quo.**

Let's celebrate.

March 26 > Toronto

<https://atomicawards.strategyonline.ca/>

**get
tickets**



Industry leaders explore how credibility, context and accountability are shifting as AI reshapes media.

8

Packaging meets policy

What Canada's new warning labels mean for brands – and how they might influence the way consumers choose.

14

Less noise. More truth.

Agency, brand and media leaders join our roundtable to discuss earning trust, navigating AI and redefining brand safety.

21

Marketers of the Year

Meet the brand leaders making major moves at Rona, TD, Loblaw, Scotiabank, Knix and Coca-Cola.

4 Editorial In an era of optimization, judgment – not certainty – is guiding leaders • **6 Upfront** An inside view of how brands are winning hearts through storytelling, mascots and radical transparency • **11 New Establishment** Meet the change-makers shifting culture and strategy from within • **74 Pet Valu turns 50** How emotion, community and everyday moments became the brand's most powerful growth engine • **78 Back Page** Rest easy...



ON THE COVER: Big decisions, bigger expectations and absolutely no margin for error. This year's Marketers of the Year aren't chasing trends – they're choosing when to move, when to wait and when to say no. At a time of infinite dashboards, AI copilots and always-on media, these leaders are proving that judgment still matters. With sharper instincts, steadier hands and a willingness to own the call, this year's honourees are reminding the industry of something that's become too easy to forget: the smartest moves still have a human touch.

THE INDIE LIST

Canada's new indie model is leaner, sharper and built to last.

SUPPLEMENT Page 55



EDITOR'S NOTE

The return of judgment

For the last decade or so, marketing has chased certainty. More data, more dashboards, more automation. The promise was clearer decisions at greater speed. Instead, we often get the opposite: too much signal, limited clarity. AI-generated insights arrive instantly. Performance metrics update in real time. Optimization is always on. Yet deciding what actually matters may have never been harder.

Across this issue, a pattern emerges. The most effective leaders aren't chasing perfect information or surrendering decisions to systems. They're exercising informed human judgment. That isn't resistance to data. It's the ability to weigh incomplete information, cultural context and long-term consequence all at the same time. It's knowing when to trust the model, when to challenge it and when to ignore it entirely.

You see it in leaders who choose restraint over acceleration, a thread that runs through this issue's Marketers of the Year. At Knix, rapid expansion hasn't translated into indiscriminate growth. Nicole Tapscott describes discipline – not speed – as the through line that keeps the brand coherent as it scales. Not every opportunity is pursued. Not every idea is ready for primetime.

At Coca-Cola Canada, Laura Cutsey operates inside one of the most data-rich marketing systems in the world, yet many of the year's biggest wins came from decisions that couldn't be automated. Choosing when to bend global platforms, when to localize and when to build from scratch took judgment rooted in Canadian nuance, not optimization logic.

At Rona, Catherine Laporte's decision to split English and French creative acknowledged a hard truth about the market: coherence doesn't come from uniformity. Cultural clarity required separate strategies, even when efficiency said otherwise.

For Mary MacIsaac and Loblaw, cultural agility isn't about reacting faster, but about recognizing which moments deserve action at all.

Even in financial services, leaders like Scotiabank's Laura Curtis Ferrera and TD's Maja Neable frame data as an input, not a substitute for human understanding. Storytelling choices – when to lean into emotion, when to simplify, when to hold back – remain intentional acts of judgment.

What's striking is how judgment often reveals itself through subtraction. Saying 'no' more often. Protecting coherence. Letting platforms breathe instead of always refreshing them. In a culture that rewards motion, restraint becomes a signal of clarity.

Turns out, at the end of the equation, humanity is still the through line – and the advantage.

Brendan Christie, guest editor, *strategy*

THE MOST
EFFECTIVE
LEADERS AREN'T
CHASING PERFECT
INFORMATION OR
SURRENDERING
DECISIONS TO
SYSTEMS. THEY'RE
EXERCISING
INFORMED HUMAN
JUDGMENT.

strategy

SPRING 2026 VOLUME 37, ISSUE 1
strategyonline.ca

PUBLISHER | LISA FAKTOR | lfaktor@brunico.com

GUEST EDITOR | BRENDAN CHRISTIE

ART DIRECTOR | TIM DAVIN | tdavin@brunico.com

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER | NEIL EWEN | newen@brunico.com

DIGITAL EDITOR | JONATHAN RUSSELL | jussell@brunico.com

STRATEGY DAILY NEWS EDITOR | LAURIE WILSON | lwilson@brunico.com

SENIOR REPORTER | CHRIS LOMBARDO | clombardo@brunico.com

REPORTER | ANDREA HERNANDEZ | ahernandez@brunico.com

CONTRIBUTORS | TY BURKE, CHELSEA CLARKE, JENNIFER HORN,

WILL NOVOSIEDLIK, JONATHAN RUSSELL, LAURIE WILSON

ACCOUNT MANAGER | CONIDON PINTO | cpinto@brunico.com

PRODUCER | MAHALET MENGISTU | mmengistu@brunico.com

CORPORATE

PRESIDENT & CEO | RUSSELL GOLDSTEIN | rgoldstein@brunico.com

SR EVP, CHIEF CONTENT OFFICER, BRUNICO | MARY MADDEVER | mmaddever@brunico.com

DIRECTOR, FINANCE & ADMINISTRATION | MICHELLE PLASKON | mplaskon@brunico.com

PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR & OPERATIONS SUPPORT | ADRIANA ORTIZ | aortiz@brunico.com

CUSTOMER SUPPORT SUPERVISOR | CHRISTINE MCNALLEY | cmcnalley@brunico.com

HOW TO REACH US

Strategy, 366 Adelaide Street West, Suite 100, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5V 1R9
Tel: (416) 408-2300 or 1-888-BRUNICO (1-888-278-6426) Fax: (416) 408-0870
www.strategyonline.ca

CUSTOMER CARE

To order a subscription, visit strategyonline.ca/subscribe. To make a change to an existing subscription, please contact us by email: strategycustomercare@brunico.com.
Tel: (416) 408-2448 Fax: (416) 408-0249. 8799 Highway 89, Alliston, ON L9R 1V1.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

STRATEGY IS PUBLISHED THREE TIMES PER YEAR BY BRUNICO COMMUNICATIONS LTD.
In Canada: One year CA\$80.00 Two years CA\$144.00
(HST included. Registration #856051396 RT)
Single copy price in Canada is CA\$6.95. Please allow four weeks for new subscriptions and address changes.

COPYRIGHT AND TRADEMARK

STRATEGY and the tagline "Bold vision brand new ideas" are trademarks of Brunico Communications Ltd. All rights reserved. Nothing may be reproduced from STRATEGY in whole or in part without written permission. Reprint requests should be sent to rgoldstein@brunico.com. © 2026 Brunico Communications Ltd.

POSTMASTER NOTIFICATION

Canadian Postmaster, send undeliverables and address changes to:
Strategy, 8799 Highway 89, Alliston, ON L9R 1V1 strategycustomercare@brunico.com
U.S. Postmaster, send undeliverables and address changes to: Strategy PO BOX 1103
Niagara Falls NY 14304 Printed in Canada. Canada Post Agreement No. 40050265.
ISSN: 1187-4309.

Funded by the Government of Canada

Canada

**Canadian
media
covering
Canadian
media.**

MediaTM
IN CANADA

Sign up for your free trial

and stay connected with all the change
afoot across the Canadian media scene.

[**mediaincanada.com/subscribe**](http://mediaincanada.com/subscribe)



BRILLIANT!

MASCOTS ARE BACK By Chelsea Clarke

Marketing may be drowning in AI polish, but some brands think they've found the answer: inventing a weird little guy. Mascots are reappearing across categories, but not in a cereal-box throwback kind of way. Duolingo's owl has morphed into a chaotic internet gremlin. Hotels.com checked in its Bellboy. Mucinex unleashed Mr. Mucus (again). Even finance and QSR brands like Fig Financial and Jimmy the Greek have rolled out new characters.

"Mascots are antidotes to digital fatigue in an era when screens bombard us with identical AI-generated visuals lacking narrative depth," says Philippe Garneau, president and CCO at GWP Brand Engineering. "Research shows they boost brand recall. They deliver versatile, shareable characters that thrive across channels."



Today's mascots are considered long-term brand assets. In 2024, McCain's introduced potato-superfan Spud through its Toronto Blue Jays partnership. Spud was created with a backstory, a personality and, as of 2025, a growing "Spud Squad" – additional characters inspired by McCain Superfries products.

"Mascots are tailor-made for in-person events – people will wait in line for a fun photo they can share with their friends and family," says Matt Kohler, managing director, McCain Foods Canada.

But making it work requires more than dressing up a potato, according to Natalie Racz, creative director at Salt XC. "By spending the

time to establish [Spud's] foundation, it gives us a rich well to pull from across channels. From personality, motivations, recurring jokes, and even when and where Spud shows up, it all gives us room to expand."

Whether in-person or across digital channels, when brands embrace character-driven storytelling, mascots can be a cost-effective alternative to celebrity endorsements, "while building the emotional connections modern consumers increasingly crave," says Garneau.

Turns out, the mascot comeback isn't cute – it's brand math.

RESEARCH

RADICAL HONESTY AS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

For years, "authenticity" may have been marketing's most overused word. But, according to VML's *Future 100: 2026* report, it may also be becoming one of the few remaining sources of brand differentiation.

VML makes a blunt observation: trust is no longer assumed. Fewer than half of consumers (44%) trust brands to share accurate information – a decline driven by AI-generated content, political noise and a general sense that marketing has become too polished to be believable.

In that kind of an environment, neutrality isn't safety. It's suspicious.

What's emerging instead is what VML calls "brand bastions" – companies that proactively expose how



they work, what they believe and where they fall short. The examples aren't about lofty mission statements or performative values, they're operational. Consider Spotify tightening rules around AI-generated music; The Ordinary publishing plain-language explanations that challenge beauty myths; or Ryanair leaning into its limitations rather than pretending they don't exist.

It's a significant shift for Canadian marketers. In a market shaped by regulation, cultural skepticism and heightened scrutiny, trust is earned less through fancy positioning statements and more through real-world proof. Brands that get ahead of uncomfortable questions build resilience. Those that wait to be challenged lose control of the narrative.

More insights from *The Future 100: 2026* are available at vml.com/insight. **BC**



Above: Founded by sisters Mandy and Rebecca Wolfe, Mandy's blends heart-led hospitality with a glam-meets-boho aesthetic – and recently welcomed an Ottawa location into the family.



BRAND BUILDING

MANDY'S WINNING RECIPE

Mandy's began in a place that wasn't meant for restaurants at all: the back of a women's clothing boutique in Montreal. The healthy to-go salads were created by Mandy Wolfe, with the design of the space thanks to her sister Rebecca. The salads were delicious and the counter was a delight to frequent, adorned with sage green wallpaper and Wolfe family photos, but what kept people coming back was a feeling: Mandy's simply made them feel good. Not just from the food, but from the warmth, intention and personality woven into the tiny, joyful space. "At the core, it has always been heart," says Mandy. "Mandy's was never built as a business plan on paper. It was built by two sisters creating a place we loved."

Since 2004, that foundation has shaped everything that followed. In just over two decades, Mandy's has now expanded to include 14 restaurants across Quebec and Ontario, a CPG line of salad dressings available in major retailers and two bestselling cookbooks.

Mandy's signature aesthetic is a glam-meets-boho blend, built

around gold accents, lush greenery, and Instagram-worthy details that make the space joyfully eclectic. "We have always cared deeply about the details, the people, the energy, the design and the offerings," Rebecca says.

Protecting those ingredients has been a main driver in why the brand's expansion over the last few years has been so successful. Spurred on by what Mandy describes as "the right moment, when our foundation finally matched our ambition," in 2025, Mandy's opened three new locations, including its first in Ottawa. But the brand is focused on sustainability, not speed. "We only open in markets that have a sense of community, where we know we can create the full Mandy's experience," Mandy says. "Speed is not the goal. The goal is staying true to our values, our culture and our quality."

That strategy has paid off, because for most of the brand's history, its customers have been the ones doing the marketing for it. "Honestly, our community built it," Mandy says. "Word of mouth, social media engagement and the emotional connection people have with the brand have been far more powerful than

any single campaign." Only recently have PR, collaborations and campaigns entered the picture, like its Golden Fork campaign in 2024, a three-week activation built with Sid Lee and Uber One that slipped surprise "golden forks" into select Uber Eats orders, giving lucky customers exclusive merch and discount codes.

This year, Mandy's has partnered with VIA Rail and teamed up with Tennis Canada as an official food partner at the National Bank Open. "If we can open the door wider for the next wave of creatives and founders," says Rebecca, "that feels like a very natural and exciting direction for the brand."

With more locations slated to open in 2026, including Vancouver and Calgary, the brand's goal is the same now as it was in the back of the boutique: create spaces people want to be in, and communities will form around them. "Storytelling will always be at the centre for us," Mandy says. "People crave connection, not just content. When you lead from that place, customers feel it." **CC**



Packaging r

WHAT CANADA'S NEW FRONT-OF-PACK WARNING LABELS MEAN



Study after study shows that a host of health risks are directly linked to the excessive consumption of ultra-processed foods.

What are ultra-processed foods (UPFs)?

Consider something like corn. Fresh off the cob, it's unprocessed. Canned or frozen, it's processed. In the form of a Dorito or a Frito, it's ultra-processed.

According to the most recent data from Statistics Canada and the US National Institutes of Health, 30% of men in Canada and 43% in the US are obese. Overall, 35.5% of Canadians and 64% of Americans are overweight.

How did they get that way? It's not just that they eat too much ultra-processed food – it's also about what's available to them on supermarket shelves.

A Northeastern University study found that ultra-processed foods now comprise a whopping 73% of the American food supply. In Canada, 75% of UPFs have added sugar. The average American adult gets over 60% of their daily calories from UPFs. For Canadians, it's between 45% and 48%.

Having that much ultra-processed food in your diet means increased exposure to a grocery list of diseases: a 31% higher risk of obesity and 37% higher odds of diabetes; a 60% higher risk of high blood pressure and a strong link to heart disease, stroke and cardiovascular mortality; increased

cancer risk, particularly colorectal cancer; links to depression, anxiety and irritable bowel syndrome; and links to systemic inflammation, oxidative stress and adverse changes to gut microbiome. In addition, ultra-processed foods tend to lack fibre and essential nutrients, so they add little value to your diet.

A big part of the problem is that UPF's are so addictive. They are designed that way. An article in *The Guardian* describes a study by Kevin Hall, a scientist at the UK's National Institutes of Health (NIH), in which he enlisted 20 healthy adult volunteers to eat either an ultra-processed or a minimally processed diet for two weeks, then switch to the other diet. He encouraged them to eat however much they wanted. He found that volunteers consumed 500 calories more each day when they were eating the ultra-processed diet – and their blood work showed elevated levels of hormones responsible for hunger.

To minimize the amount of ultra-processed food on your plate, the Canadian government has introduced front-of-pack (FOP) warning labels that zero in on levels of sugar, salt and saturated fat. Any product that exceeds 15% of your daily requirement of one or more of the "three Ss" must display the FOP warning. Conversely, if the product's salt, sugar and saturated fat levels fall below the 15% mark, no FOP labelling is required.

Canada has had mandatory nutritional panels on the back of food packaging since 2005. But the



meets policy

FOR CONSUMERS AND FOOD BRANDS BY WILL NOVOSEDLIK

negative stats cited above demonstrate that this has not been enough of a deterrent. While the Nutrition Facts table on the back provides detailed data, many consumers find it complex or time-consuming to read. The FOP symbol is prominently displayed in the upper right corner of the face panel in most cases, and is much simpler. Just two words: "High in" or "Élevé en." You can't miss it.

Although the deadline for mandatory labelling in Canada was January 1 of this year, this kind of labelling has been mandated in many other countries for years. Canada is rather late to the game, but this aligns it with over 40 countries, such as Chile and Mexico, that have seen measurable declines in the purchase of unhealthy foods following similar labeling mandates. Nonetheless, Canadian food companies were given three years to prepare for this, either by redesigning their packaging to accommodate the new warning label or by reformulating their products to fall within the 15% guideline, thus negating the need for the new label.

What do consumers think? When surveyed in recent research led by Dalhousie's Dr. Sylvain Charlebois, professor in the Faculty of Management and senior director, Agri-Food Analytics Lab, consumers were confused by the new label.

"We surveyed Canadians six months ago," says Charlebois, "and we're surveying them again in March about these labels, asking them if they've seen it and if

so, do they understand it. And many Canadians don't have a clue. They actually don't see it."

But the professor goes on to say that even in the short time since January 1 there has been enough coverage in the media about it that people are beginning to notice. He believes that with

"The bottom line is we're addicted to sugar and sodium. This policy is needed to help change that."



- Dr. Sylvain Charlebois, Dalhousie University

exposure to these labels over time, consumers will associate them with good nutrition. Says Charlebois, “The bottom line is we’re addicted to sugar and sodium. This policy is needed to help change that.”

Jo-Ann McArthur, president of consultancy Nourish Food Marketing, agrees that consumers will adjust.

“I think the use of this labelling may start to cause consumers to further question how processed their products are,” says McArthur. “We’re seeing a real rise in discussions around this term, ‘ultra-processed’ foods.”

Lisa Papaloni, senior director of strategy, marketing and innovation North America at Aspire Bakeries, doesn’t see this as a challenge, but as an opportunity. “Canadians have demonstrated a sustained interest in healthy foods and this is an opportunity to help better inform their decisions,” says Papaloni. “It also creates an opportunity

to broaden the initiative and craft a strategy around developing healthier product options. These labels will drive consumer awareness, shift purchasing behaviour and present an advantage for some products when consumers compare them to other like-products.”

Which leads to the issue of reformulation. As Charlebois says, that was the whole point of the legislation. But it’s tricky. McArthur reminds us of the Campbell’s soup reformulation fiasco several years ago.

“If you remember Campbell’s soup when they went out ahead of everybody and reduced the sodium in their soups. They did a big campaign around that, and it failed. Consumers didn’t like the taste,” she recalls. “So, Campbell’s had to revert to its original recipe.”

Everyone interviewed for this article agreed that no matter how healthy the reformulated product is, people won’t pick it up if it doesn’t taste good.

McArthur makes the point that Canada’s three-year transitional period encouraged many of her clients to reformulate. “We had more than a two-year run-up to this, so most CPG clients took advantage of the lead time and reformulated. We also work with some big international ingredient suppliers. I know that there has been a whole reformulation wave and a lot of new

products that those companies have come out with to help product developers in their reformulation.”

It is more of a challenge for some than for others. Lesya Chapman, director of marketing and communications at Chapman’s Ice Cream, notes that this was a big project that continued to snowball.

“We looked at each product family and made design changes and updates at the same time,” she says. “We decided we did not need to re-engineer our recipes to comply. Our product quality and consistency remains the same. It is no surprise to the consumer that most ice cream products are higher in sugar and fat. This highlighted labelling can help them to incorporate their treats into their diet in a more informed way.”

At the retail level, the picture can be even more nuanced. “For products that require it, the FOP label has been applied. But not all products are equal,” says Loblaw senior director of product development, Nicolas Diard. “We have only had to reformulate less than 1% of our product line. And when you factor in something like our Blue Menu line, the rule is that all



“Canadians have demonstrated a sustained interest in healthy foods and this is an opportunity to help better inform their decisions.”

- Lisa Papaloni, Aspire Bakeries



“We had more than a two-year run-up to this, so most CPG clients took advantage of the lead time and reformulated.”

- Jo-Ann McArthur, Nourish Food Marketing

our presidential Blue Menu products won’t have FOP. If you go to a frozen single serving tray, you expect it to be high in salt. But not Blue Menu. So, I think it can help some consumers choose the healthier alternative.”

Julie Pacheco, VP, Loblaw Agency sees all this as a net positive. “I think it’s caused the vendor community to rethink. It’s pushed us to innovate. It has inspired us to have different conversations around the future of product development. It’s a great win for the Canadian consumer because they’re ultimately getting products with less sodium, less sugar and less fat in their daily diet.”



NEW ESTABLISHMENT

20 IN 26

MEDIA + BRAND

We don't need to tell you the industry is changing – you're living it. The pace is faster. The stakes are higher. The expectations placed on emerging leaders feel less like stepping stones and more like launch pads. And while transformation has become a buzzword, real change still comes down to individuals willing to raise their hands, rework the system and rethink the brief before anyone asks. This year's New Establishment turns its focus to rising talent already shaping the conversations around them. Early in their careers but confident in their impact, they're embedding new technologies without losing the human thread and building brands by listening more closely to culture. They don't just execute; they influence and help define what comes next.

BY JENNIFER HORN



**At Cairns Oneil,
Gabrielle Burge is
reshaping media
planning by working
where systems and
strategy meet**

Four years out of university, Gabrielle Burge already finds herself in rooms most planners don't reach until much later in their careers. The digital planner and AI strategist now plays a central role in new-business pitches at Cairns Oneil. She's part of senior-level strategy conversations. She's contributing to the systems that underpin how media planning gets done at the agency. And when leadership decided it needed a day-to-day planner at the centre of its efforts to integrate AI tools, Burge was the obvious choice.

That trajectory came from a willingness to raise her hand before she felt fully "ready," says Devon MacDonald, president and CEO of Cairns Oneil. "She has an unbiased but knowledgeable opinion about what to do. For someone with four years of experience, she knows a ton. And more importantly, she's curious. She's not scared to say, 'I don't know, but I'll figure it out.' That openness is what's made her successful."

After graduating from Wilfrid Laurier in 2021, Burge landed

in the media world as a digital coordinator for the agency, with one of her first contributions being work on a new-business pitch for the Royal Ontario Museum. It was her first major assignment at the agency, and she was chosen in part for her ability to bring a younger audience lens to a client focused on widening their target demographic. Burge played an important role in shaping the digital strategy that ultimately won the account.

After the win, Burge helped plan, execute and report on campaigns tied to the ROM's major exhibitions. One of the most visible outcomes was a first-of-its-kind angled 3D out-of-home execution for the museum's shark exhibition, designed so that, from the right vantage point, the shark appeared to lunge toward passersby.

And for SickKids Foundation, she helped introduce a more holistic media strategy during the organization's 150th anniversary, moving away from siloed, competing campaigns toward a more unified approach. She was also part of the team that capitalized on a cultural moment during the 2025 MLB World Series, using Reddit media placements to promote a tongue-in-cheek film featuring Ryan Reynolds and Freddie Freeman.

Burge has since pushed beyond the boundaries of a traditional planning role. Last year, she stepped into a newly defined AI strategy position at the agency, splitting her time between digital planning and determining how artificial intelligence is integrated into Cairns Oneil's work flows. The mandate was clear: use AI to reduce busy work, not override thinking.

"AI is only as good as the questions you ask," says Burge. "It should challenge human thinking, not replace it."

Working in a team of six, she's aiming to introduce tools that automate traffic sheets, streamline reporting and free planners from the kind of operational drag that keeps them buried in spreadsheets. The goal, she says, is to give teams more time to focus on strategy and creativity.

Her dual perspective (part-planner, part-technologist) is why MacDonald wanted her embedded in the agency's AI team. "We needed someone who actually does the work every day," he says. "Someone who understands what planners and buyers need and can help design systems around that reality."

"[My role] gives me the best of both worlds," adds Burge. "It allows me to lean into that techie side, because we know that advertising is a fast-paced industry and evolution is key. It also plays really well into my role as engineer [and being able to] use AI intentionally and responsibly, not just efficiently."

Four years into her career, it's clear that Burge – who was also recently named as one of the Emerging Women in Tech & Media of the Year by the CMDC – is only just getting started.

As long as Jackie Wark has been with IKEA, the director of marketing communications has had the dream of being an architect behind advertising made for Quebecers, by Quebecers. For Wark, it was an 11-year ambition made reality in 2025 when the retailer released “Ih, Ké, Ah” – a play-on-words campaign that did more than simply tweak the language in a script or lay down a track by a French-Canadian musician.

That’s not to say the retailer had ignored Quebec altogether. Before Wark’s tenure began in 2014, IKEA had been weaving itself into conversations around Montreal’s annual “Moving Day” rite. But “Ih, Ké, Ah” marked a shift, representing the first piece of work that truly reflects local life beyond a single cultural moment, says IKEA Canada head of marketing Jonelle Ricketts.

“[Jackie] really wanted to get out of the [Moving Day window], because it was just getting so crowded and it was really hard to stand out during that period,” adds Ricketts. “A lot of the work that we’ve been getting recognized for lately has been a result of her being in the driver’s seat of many of those things.”

Working with Rethink in Montreal, Wark and her team built the 2025 campaign around a deceptively simple yet distinctly Québécois insight: people in the province often use the exclamations “Ih,” “Ké” and “Ah” – sounds that, when strung together, echo the IKEA name. In a series of 15-second spots, each exclamation anchors a familiar at-home moment: a problem (for example, a toddler throwing – and breaking – a ceramic plate of food), a simple IKEA fix (purchasing a plastic plate made for kiddos) and the feeling of relief that follows (when the plate survives the fall).

Wark calls the move into Quebec a “calculated risk” grounded in research. “We had to convince the powers that be to set aside money to be able to do the work. But Jackie really championed that,” says Ricketts. The result was a swift spike in brand metrics that made the risk worth it.

What did take some time was Wark finding her footing in her current role, which she stepped into late 2023, and define what she wanted the brand – and her leadership style – to look like. Once settled in, she leaned into IKEA’s values of “simplicity” and “togetherness” in how she sets up work processes. Both Wark and Ricketts believe the approach has helped the team produce work with a surer hand – the kind that feels unmistakably IKEA – including campaigns like “U Up?,” “Sleep Talkers” and “Actually, It’s IKEA.”

“There’s a lot that [Jackie’s] done in terms of how we work with our agency partners to ensure that they are more entrenched with our business, and even more so, feeling like they’re an extension of our team,” explains Ricketts. “We collaborate with a lot of cross-functional partners. There were processes in place that everyone could agree weren’t working well, and so she worked closely with different teams to figure out how to make things better.”

For instance, “Togetherness Thursdays” was instituted by Wark and her team as a way to spend time with agency partners like Rethink in shared working sessions – sometimes meeting, sometimes quietly working – creating space to talk through challenges as they come up or dig into them through workshops.

“It feels like we’re really at an all-time high with our partner relationships,” adds Ricketts. “And that’s when you get the best work out of everyone. You have to put in that time and effort, and you also have to talk about difficult things and find solutions together. And Jackie absolutely does that in a really incredible way.”

At IKEA Canada,
Jackie Wark has
helped make
local relevance a
long-term strategy





Less noise. More truth.

As AI fuels misinformation and skepticism, marketers are rethinking trust, brand safety and the renewed value of credible news environments

MODERATED BY **MARY MADDEVER**

Trust has always been part of the marketing equation. But in a media environment shaped by AI automation, platform fragmentation and accelerated decision-making, trust has become harder to assume – and easier to lose.

As audiences encounter a growing mix of human- and machine-generated content, brands are being forced to re-examine long-held assumptions about credibility, context and control. Questions that once felt secondary – where to show up, who to align with, how to define “brand safe” – are now shaping media strategy, creative decisions and internal accountability

at the highest levels. Amid AI hallucinations, misinformation and deepening skepticism, how do brands earn credibility – and does trusted news matter more than ever?

The conversation brought together senior leaders from across Canada’s media, agency and brand landscape, including **Michael Bispo**, director of media effectiveness and planning at Ontario Lottery and Gaming, **Cathy Collier**, CEO of OMD, **Brian Cuddy**, SVP, digital at Plus Company, **Saverio D’Angelo**, director of digital marketing at Conair, **Andrea Hunt**, president and CEO of the Association of Canadian Advertisers, **Robert Jenkyn**, president of Horizon Media, **Gautham Pingali**, chief media officer at WPP Media, and **Krista Webster**, president and CEO of Veritas.



This conversation has been edited and condensed for length and clarity.

Before we get into channels, formats or tactics, I want to start with the bigger issue. Audiences are more skeptical than ever. They're questioning what they see, what they read and who they trust. How is this erosion of certainty changing the way you think about trust, and how is it affecting where and how you put your messages out?

Michael Bispo: For us, trust is critical because of the business we're in – and we're working with taxpayer dollars. We absolutely put trust at a very high value. One of the things that we're investing a lot of time in is transitioning from pushing out messages to having conversations in order to build that trust. [We're doing that] primarily through

social and the customer experience that we own through our channels, through our website and our app.

Cathy Collier: AI is a double-edged sword for consumers. While AI slop generates a lot of distrust, [tools] like ChatGPT have the highest level of trust. Next to people, AI is people's most trusted source. I think it's interesting that we can have content that's not trusted, but sources that are based on AI are trusted.

That tension between the system and the output feels central right now. Where does trust break down most clearly?

Saverio D'Angelo: For one of the brands that we manage, Cuisinart, we ran a campaign for Mother's Day and Father's Day last year. We hired an agency to create AI content for us – and the feedback we received when

we posted it was not good. Everyone was commenting: AI? AI? They kept calling out the AI. What we're trying to do now is have the same tone, the same message throughout our platform, so it's all uniform. That builds consumer trust, knowing that it's authentic and consistent.

What does that shift tell us about how media strategy is changing right now?

Gautham Pingali: I think as we go through the cycle, trust from a consumer or individual standpoint, is going to be harder to earn. And, as marketers, we've got a very interesting challenge, both from a content and a media perspective. What we're learning is that curation is becoming a lot more important and working a lot better, in comparison to doing a lot of en masse. AI can allow you to hyper-personalize at scale and make it mass.

Top, left to right: Andrea Hunt, president and CEO of the ACA; Gautham Pingali, chief media officer at WPP Media; Cathy Collier, CEO of OMD; Robert Jenkyn, president of Horizon Media; Saverio D'Angelo, director of digital marketing at Conair; Brian Cuddy, SVP, digital at Plus Company; Krista Webster, president and CEO of Veritas; and Michael Bispo, director of media effectiveness and planning at OLG.



AI can help you do better curation, whether it's with content creators or with media platforms, and create a more unique experience. Let's see if that's true in six months.

- Gautham Pingali

And it can also help you do better curation, whether it's with content creators or with media platforms, and create a more unique experience. Let's see if that's true in six months.

Robert Jenkyn: For brand safety, you're using things like keyword lists, whitelists, site lists. You're trying to validate human activity versus bots. People are using ChatGPT and Gemini as search, and those lines are blurring. But when it comes to things like images and content, that's where trust can be broken if it's not given the human touch. I think customers and audiences want the human touch. They want that validation, even if the data to reach them was generated by AI.

The future of brand safety, in particular, is going to be about context. So, it's not enough to land on a trusted news source. It's not enough to have the ad be created by a human. I think it's going to be another layer: Is the content I'm landing on generated by humans? Is it trustworthy? Is it just AI slop as usual?

Collier: Brand safety is evolving. For the last 10 years, it was all about adjacency – where are you going to show up next to? And now, it's much more about accuracy. Are you in an environment filled with lies? And that is really what the concern is, versus being beside some news that might be disconcerting.

If brand safety is shifting from adjacency to accuracy, how does that change how you think about trust, context and where brands show up?

Krista Webster: I think that the idea of trust – which will come back to brand safety – has always been something that we all need to grapple

with, making sure what we're putting out there is authentic. But I think it's because, innately – whether it was through social, digital or in the olden days when you were doing word-of-mouth programs – it does come down to the human touch. It comes down to the authenticity of the “who,” and the who is going to matter more than ever, even if that ends up not being a real person.

For us, the vetting process has always been very rigorous. AI actually helps us do even more of that, which is important in terms of brand safety. But it's also the recognition that people, at the end of the day, love human interest stories. They want to be a part of it. And credibility is such a huge part of that, and that's not gone away. That's not new.

I think we're all guilty of saying we're storytellers. PR adopted that, quite frankly, because we wanted to be at the table competing with creative agencies. But we did ourselves a disservice as an industry by saying that. I'm now espousing to my teams and clients that in

an age where there is so much information and disinformation, we should be calling ourselves 'truth-tellers.' It's really about finding trust.

Jenkyn: I think there's a renaissance for context as well. You could just spray and pray impressions and, on some level, it works. But as a brand builder, you're only as good as the company you keep, and I think there's something to be said about being a little more... curating more of the brand, where you land.

We've talked a lot about instinct and experience. Let's ground this in evidence.

Brian, what does the latest *News Effectiveness Study* – conducted by Vox Labs, Cossette/Plus Company and Google News – tell us about trust, context and media performance at home?

Brian Cuddy: In two phases of research, the main finding of the first phase was the amount of trust the publisher has with consumers matters, in terms of how much brand lift is achieved. So, the higher the trust with a specific publication, the higher the brand lift associated with that publication. It's a 25% lift in brand rating for highly trusted brands and a 60% decrease in brand rating for untrustworthy environments versus highly trusted environments.

So, there's a [significant] gap between an untrustworthy environment and a trustworthy environment in terms of brand lift. These trustworthy environments produce a greater brand impact and thus justify a higher CPM – something we call the trust premium.

And the type of news did not really matter in terms of lift. There wasn't really a discernible change between hard news and soft news in terms of brand effect, which has also been found in other studies. And, of course, local matters, especially in Quebec. Local publications had a 16-point premium, and in Quebec, even higher. But the thing I thought was most interesting was this AI paradox.

The study found that people who have existing high levels of trust in AI highly trust the information that's returned by AI interfaces like chatbots, whereas people who don't trust AI value that same information within the same context at a much lower level. This gap is the widest of any information context we examined.

It's an interesting moment for Canada. The KPMG study last year placed us sixth lowest in global ranking for trust in AI information. What is the

opportunity for brands to really harness that? Because it's going to make or break usage of those tools.

So, that trust gap isn't evenly distributed.

Pingali: It also probably has to do with demographics. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the median age of Canada is 40, and AI adoption is being driven by a younger population.

publishers as part of our everyday for every campaign. We're going to continue doing so. And we're looking to grow that because we believe, when it comes to democracy, our responsibility and nation building, a strong media ecosystem is part of that. Investing and helping to grow a strong Canadian media ecosystem is absolutely critical, and something that we're really leaning into.



The future of brand safety, in particular, is going to be about context. Is the content I'm landing on generated by humans? Is it trustworthy? Is it just AI slop as usual?

- Robert Jenkyn

For me, that's actually a very scary thing that you're saying, because older people are probably able to make out the difference between, 'oh, that sounds nonsensical, there's something wrong with that,' versus, it might be the first source of information for a young person, and their first experience with that content, and it's not entirely accurate. That automatically becomes gospel truth, and that's a scary situation to be in.

How do you think about news investment?

Bispo: We've never strayed away from news. Actually, we invest quite a bit of money in local

So, where does trust collide with performance pressure?

Andrea Hunt: All of this is a challenge from a brand standpoint. When you're talking to your CFO, they value predictability, stability, certainty. So, at least from a brand context, it's a whole new area of uncertainty



When you talk about media, AI has enabled something really beautiful. Now, a news release written the right way, AI-enabled, with credible third-party sources, from a search standpoint, will go to the top.

- Krista Webster

and challenge that you need to fight through before you're selling your plan. There are information hurdles. There's that validity hurdle. The notion of transparency and trust with all stakeholders is step one, before you even get into traditional marketing, which is a whole new set of needs to solve.

When you look at it from a bottom up, global-led domestic buy, you end up with a very different media decision than if it were made by models that sit outside of Canadian borders.

So, just asking the questions, you can always change the inputs, but you must be curious and deliberate, so that you're informed on what is coming back and not [accepting] a more standard answer that's less nuanced.

Bispo: One of the things we're doing is leaning into how we measure all of the media

that we're purchasing. We're getting clear about the value we expect to see from it and demonstrating the value of trusted media sources or different types of media placements, so that we can prove that value to our business.

You can't have a double standard of what 'brand safe' means where you're applying one set of standards against news and something different against social. That's where it all becomes inconsistent.

So, what needs to change if trust is going to remain a meaningful currency?

Collier: Overall, moving off cruise control by having a rich measurement framework that forces you to examine every aspect. And, at the same time, treating creative – because media is creative, creative is creative – as the craft it is. The two combined will allow us to make leapfrogs in this very complicated world.

Cuddy: I feel a part of it is just – I don't want to be unquotable – but less bullshit. Just doing what's right and being smarter at what we do. I think we all know what to do, whether it's consulting the supply chain, or leaning into trusted environments and executing wider. I want to encourage our teams to be smarter and feel the impact more.

Webster: I'm fully committed to embracing AI at all levels, but taking it to a full-throttle approach. That means testing and learning in a way that actually allows the teams to have the time to do that. And being open to exploration again, which brings hits and misses.

From an earned-media standpoint, I'm also going to embrace the news release again. When you talk about media, AI has enabled something really beautiful. Now, a news release written the right way, AI-enabled, with credible third-party sources, from a search standpoint, will go to the top. Press conferences are going to come back for the same reason.

Some of the old-school tools that we all forgot about are important. So, I'm going to be an ambassador for the old school that's new school.

Jenkyn: Did someone say no bullshit? It's really to push the creative boundaries. And also to push our creative partners, because some of them will try to do one-off creative, try to do something that goes beyond the ask, that goes beyond what's expected. Nine times out of 10, it will be turned down for one reason or another, budget, whether we sold it through or whether it's considered a great idea, but at least we're always pitching that idea.

Every client says, 'I want more innovation,' but every client has a different definition of what innovation is. For some, it's first to market. For others, it's technological innovation. So, I think if we can actually start pitching things that are different, unique – no matter how big or small – those things will make everything better. 🍷

THE FUTURE OF NEWS ISN'T SOMETHING WE PREDICT.

It's something we help shape.

In a media environment shaped by misinformation and changing audience behaviour, trust has never mattered more. That's why Globe Media Group proudly partners with *strategy* to support roundtable discussions – bringing industry leaders together to examine the future of news, evolving audiences and how context and credible journalism work together to earn trust.

Because the future of news happens when trust and insight guide the conversation.

Scan to read the Future of News Canada report.



Where ambition meets influence.



GLOBE MEDIA GROUP

strategy

The great _____ north.

Canada is great when Canada is inclusive.

Please help us make Canada's advertising and marketing industry look and sound more like Canada. From the top down. Sign the Call for Equity, become a member, volunteer or donate to POCAM at wearepocam.ca.



2026

MARKETERS OF THE YEAR

THIS YEAR'S MARKETERS OF THE YEAR SHARE A COMMON TRAIT: they know that growth without clarity is just noise. Whether navigating ownership upheaval, expanding across borders or modernizing global systems, each managed to pair ambition with discipline, proving that brand building today requires both creative courage and operational rigour. **Catherine Laporte** reset Rona, splitting strategy across two markets to reignite brand love in Quebec and break through in English Canada. At TD, **Maja Neable** embraced marketing's dual nature to connect with Canadians. **Mary MacIsaac** at Loblaw showed how cultural agility and customer obsession can reshape a portfolio. **Laura Curtis Ferrera** proved that empathy and measurement aren't opposing forces, uniting storytelling and performance to drive growth at Scotiabank. At Knix, **Nicole Tapscott** scaled boldly, ensuring every expansion remained rooted in mission. And **Laura Cutsey** at Coca-Cola Canada demonstrated how to operate inside a global machine while building brands that feel local. These leaders remind us that modern marketing isn't about choosing between art and science, local and global, speed and strategy. It's about orchestrating it all with intention.

A vibrant image of the Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights) in shades of green and blue, set against a dark night sky with visible stars. The lights appear as flowing, ethereal curtains of light.

CANADA'S MOST BRILLIANT NORTHERN LIGHT

**CONGRATULATIONS
CATHERINE!**

From your partners
at ARISTID

We enable Catherine and her team
to bring their ideas to market
at the speed of automation.

RONA  **x ARiSTiD**
Retail technology

Reigniting a national brand

As Rona rebuilds after years of ownership upheaval, **Catherine Laporte** is separating strategy by culture to win in both Quebec and English Canada

BY LAURIE WILSON

Few Canadian retail brands have experienced as much upheaval in the past decade as Rona.

It began in 2016, when Lowe's bought the Quebec-based home reno brand. Seven years later, Lowe's exited Canada entirely, selling Rona and its other Canadian operations to Sycamore Partners. That led to the reestablishment of Rona as its main Canadian brand as former Lowe's stores were converted to the Rona banner.

For Rona's marketing team, the reset created both urgency and opportunity. Having been established in Quebec in 1939 as Les Marchands en Quincaillerie before changing names in 1960, Rona had already accrued some serious street cred with French-speaking Canada over 87 years. But not so in English-speaking Canada, where Home Depot dominates the major DIY markets in Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta. Layer on renewed US tariff threats from President Donald Trump in early 2025 and a surge in pro-Canada sentiment, and the stakes only grew.

The question became clear: how could Rona protect its leadership in Quebec while finally breaking through in English-speaking Canada?

That challenge now sits squarely with Catherine Laporte.

In Quebec, Rona has the top market share, with 43% top-of-mind awareness, whereas its top competitor, Home Depot, has 33%, Laporte points out. In English Canada, that number is much more divided, with Home Depot dominating at 66% top-of-mind awareness. The imbalance is clearly reflected in



Rona's footprint: half of its 400 stores are in Quebec alone.

To help turn the tide in English-speaking Canada, Laporte was promoted to the role of chief marketing and digital officer in July 2025, having joined the home reno company in 2018 as VP of e-commerce.

Laporte tells *strategy* that when the American company acquired Rona 10 years ago, "we lost a love of love and a lot of trust" among French-speaking Canadians. "And strategically, the Lowe's company just didn't invest as much within the Rona brand."

“Lowe’s was much stronger in English Canada than Rona was,” she adds. “Realizing these starting points, and with the acquisition from Sycamore in 2023, it gave us the means to go and reignite and relaunch the Rona brand. That’s a key piece.”

Reigniting the brand also required structural change – starting with agency relationships. Courage became Rona’s English-language AOR in late 2024. Sid Lee remained lead creative agency for Rona Quebec. (Both agencies have offices in Toronto and Montreal.) Replacing Starcom, Cossette Media was named Rona’s AOR in November 2024, and led all media strategy, buying and planning across digital and traditional channels for the Rona and Rona+ banners. Headquartered

“That unlocked a thinking of the country and the customer in a different way.”

It also helped reestablish brand love. “It’s always the analogy we use: it’s like you’re in a long-term relationship and you stop buying chocolate and champagne and going on dates with your partner. We just restarted that, in a way that was speaking culturally to the customers,” Laporte says, adding, “They connected with it.”

But rebuilding connection across two distinct cultural markets required discipline. Rather than forcing a unified platform, Rona clarified agency mandates and sharpened focus, Laporte explains. “I like when things are clear and I know where I’m going,” she says. “So, I wanted to make sure we weren’t [disjointed].”

In Quebec, the strategy leaned into cultural specificity. In English Canada, Courage went back to fundamentals – clearly defining the target audience and tailoring the message accordingly. “It’s kind of like marketing 101,” Laporte says. “But it’s fascinating how, if you do it properly, you start seeing progress.”

Audience definition became the foundation. In this case, that meant finding a way to appeal to professionals and DIYers simultaneously. The guidance on how to target both ends of the home-reno spectrum came from a 2024 work, Rona’s “Builder on a Mission,” a creative platform led by Sid Lee that united pros and DIYers on a shared love of home improvement and construction. The platform reflected a broader shift toward emotional storytelling over functional demos.

“There’s strength in being culturally relevant and going



Above: Rona’s “Make It Right. Make It Rona” campaign used a literal half-ass to show the cost of cutting corners, injecting humour into what is often a beige category. **Right:** Rona’s “DIYctionary” embraced Quebec’s Frenglish, transforming its website into a culturally fluent search tool that rebuilt local trust.



in Quebec City, Cossette also has a national presence, with offices in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and Halifax.

The arrangement formalized a dual-market approach that acknowledged Canada’s cultural realities and ushered in a new era for the brand, with the launch of two new creative works in 2025: “Mike chez Rona,” a twist on the popular song “My Sharona” that targeted Quebecers (Sid Lee), and “Make It Right. Make It Rona,” which featured a literal half-ass and targeted English-speaking Canada (Courage).

“Splitting the work from English Canada to French Canada, I think that was the biggest strategic move that we’ve done,” Laporte says.



**CATHERINE, CONGRATS ON
BUILDING THINGS RIGHT.**

FROM YOUR FRIENDS
AND PARTNER **courage** 

YOU ROCK, CATH LAPORTE!

Congratulations on being named a *Marketer of the Year*.
You are proof that when the right person leads, great creativity follows.

sidlee + **RONA**



into human truths, and with the brand DNA, that's where we found the nugget of really understanding what the pros wanted," Laporte says, adding that the biggest challenge now is, "How do you multiply these culturally relevant initiatives? And how do you multiply them, understanding especially that the Ontario market is so fragmented and multicultural?"

As the most populous province in Canada, Ontario is where the money is. "That's where we have the biggest opportunity," Laporte says.

Market penetration is actually higher in Western Canada, she adds. One key piece of that increased brand awareness in Alberta and B.C. is Rona's partnership with the NHL's Edmonton Oilers. Initially, Rona learned about the importance of that type of partnership – and how to make the most of it – with its more than 30-year partnership with the Montreal Canadiens.

"The way we were able to layer initiatives on top of our partnership, aside from just putting your logo on the rink boards, was very successful," Laporte explains. "So, we try to bring that to English-Canada teams."

In Ontario, partnering with the Toronto Maple Leafs is trickier, since the franchise is owned by Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment (MLSE) and partners with Canadian Tire. Rather than chase team partnerships, Laporte focused on the sport itself. The solution was to own hockey in that market, rather than partner with a specific team. So, Rona launched “Homes of Hockey” in October 2025.

Set to Nazareth's '70s song "Love Hurts," the hero spot by agency partner Courage showed kids playing (and damaging) statues, bannisters and household appliances, acknowledging in a tagline that "the game we love is hard on the home." Anchored by the spot and supported by a 360-degree campaign across OOH, radio and social, the work was timed to coincide with the new NHL season and highlighted the intersection of hockey and home. Rona followed up with a media initiative directing 85% of spend to seven Ontario small businesses.

Managing that kind of complexity requires constant trade-offs. But it's something Laporte welcomes.

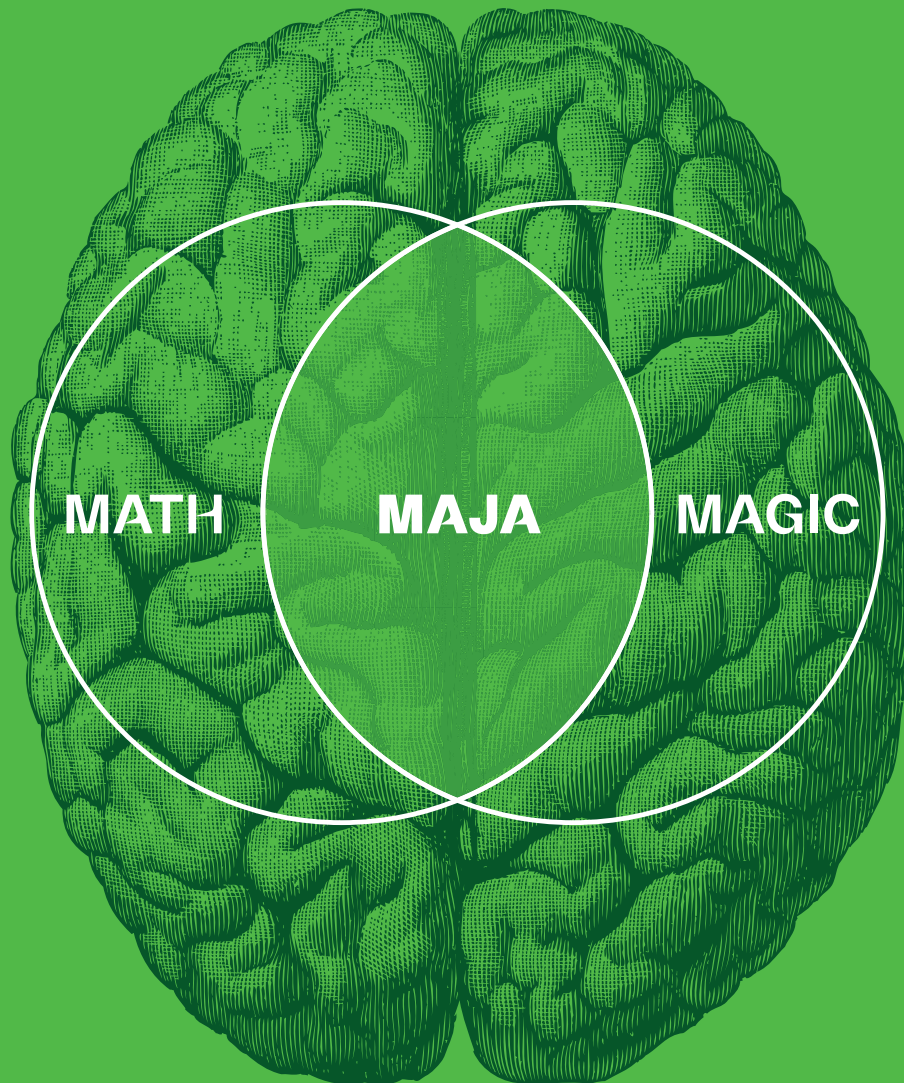
“If you don’t know where you’re going, or you’re not clear on that, and you don’t keep measuring it throughout and making sure that your direction is the right one, you can get lost and make the wrong



Above: From the NHL season launch of “Homes of Hockey” to its Edmonton Oilers partnership in Western Canada and Quebec’s culture-forward “Mike chez Rona,” the brand’s hockey and humour-led work reflects a strategy tailored to two distinct markets.

decision," she says. "I'm pretty pragmatic. I'm not in the business of winning prizes; I'm in the business of driving traffic and winning the hearts of customers."

That pragmatism extends to creative conversations. “Our industry in home improvement and marketing is pretty beige and everybody’s doing the same thing... we want to break the category and approach it in a different way, creatively,” she says. “So, my job has been to pull back the team a bit. In a sense, that’s the toughest conversation. But it’s created the healthiest tension we’ve been having on both sides of the country.”



**Congratulations to Maja Neable
on being named a Marketer of the Year.
From your friends at Diamond.**



Diamond



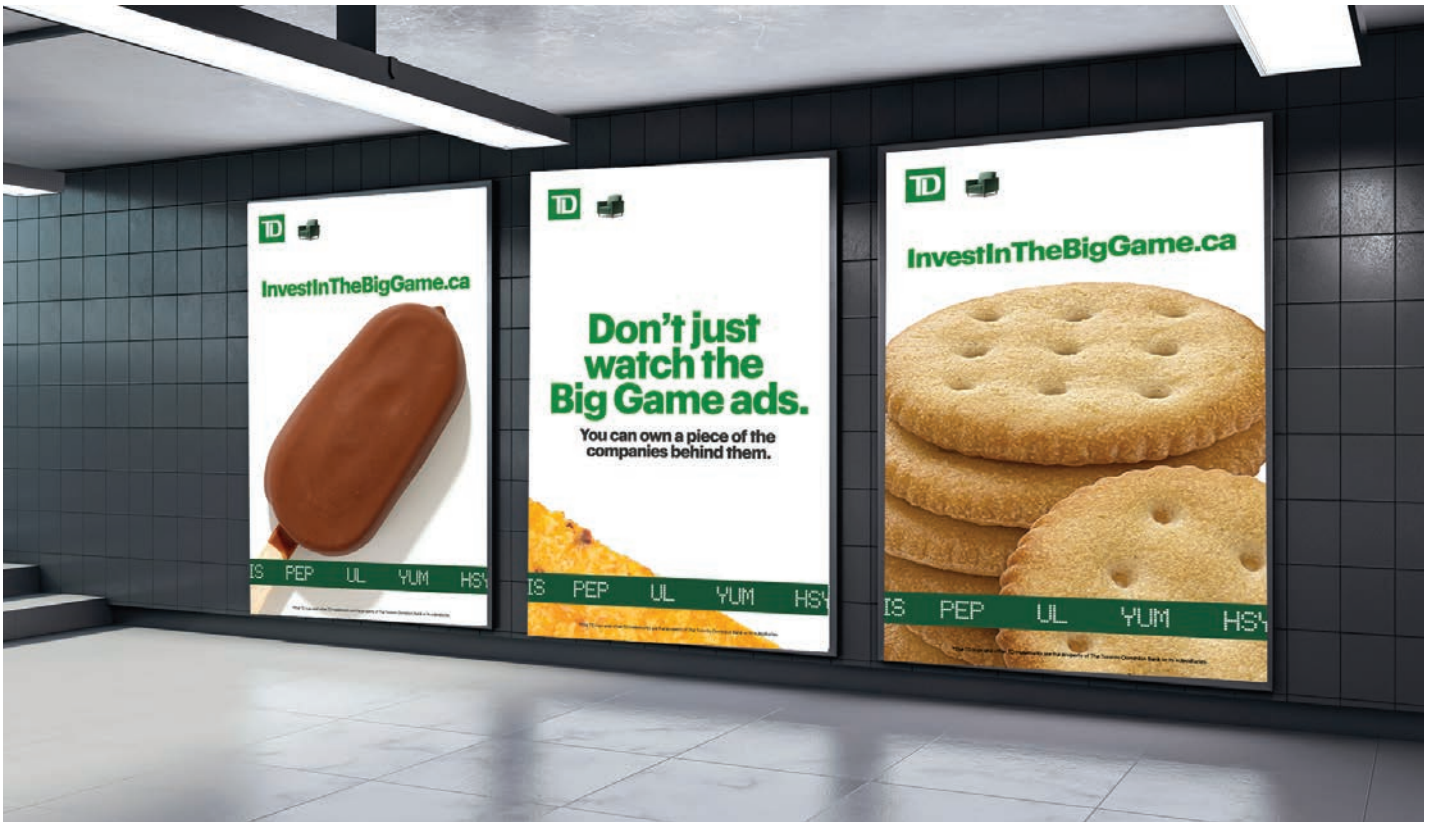
The science behind the feeling

From computer programming to the CMO's office, TD Bank Group's **Maja Neable** uses data fluency and human insight to guide creative decisions that resonate with customers **BY TY BURKE**

For Maja Neable, marketing is both art and science. TD Bank Group's SVP and CMO for Canadian operations studied mathematics at the University of Waterloo and actually began her career as a computer programmer at Expedia before transitioning into marketing. But she knew right away that she wanted a career with a more personal touch.

"I liked math because I was good at it," Neable says, "but I really liked the aspects of the work that were closer to the customer. I wanted to understand their needs and their problems, and create new things that could help make their lives better."

When she moved into a full-time marketing role a few years later, she was hooked. After Expedia, Neable worked at



Above: TD's Super Bowl campaign last year highlighted its TD Easy Trade app, inviting Canadians to invest in the brands featured during the big game through partial share ownership and making DIY investing feel more accessible.

Telenor, a Norwegian telecom company, holding a number of positions over a seven-year stretch – one of them a marketing role that included brand sponsorships and merchandising.

“To be successful in marketing today, the left and the right side of the brain need to work together,” says Neable. “Marketers need both creativity and data. I really enjoy the creative part of my job, but my math background makes it so much easier to connect the dots and explain the value of our work to others in the organization. When you can do both well, there is a real magic to the things you can do.”

But while Neable's mathematical acumen might help convince executives at TD that investing in advertising is worthwhile, it won't convince a potential customer to open a bank account at their local bank branch. For advertising to be effective, people need to relate to the content. And that's where art comes into the equation.

“We want to have a distinctive brand, and we use creativity to push that boundary and make a 150-year-old brand more relevant to the customer,” says Neable. “The primary way we do that is through our ability to truly connect with our customers and their communities in ways that are authentic.”

That emphasis on connection is especially important

at a time when Canada has welcomed millions of newcomers. New Canadians have become a significant focus of TD's advertising, in part because winning that relationship early can lead to decades of engagement.

“A relationship with a bank is long-term. And we need to understand the point in life a customer is at,” says Neable. “We do a lot to connect with new Canadians and serve their needs. We want to understand our customers' life stories, to know where they are coming from and to be able to help them – in both the hard times and the good times. And if we do a really good job, we will have a customer for life.”

Reaching such a broad audience requires a marketing team that reflects that diversity. New Canadians are not a monolithic group – they come from every corner of the world. Neable herself is a Serbian immigrant who first came to Canada to study at the University of Waterloo.

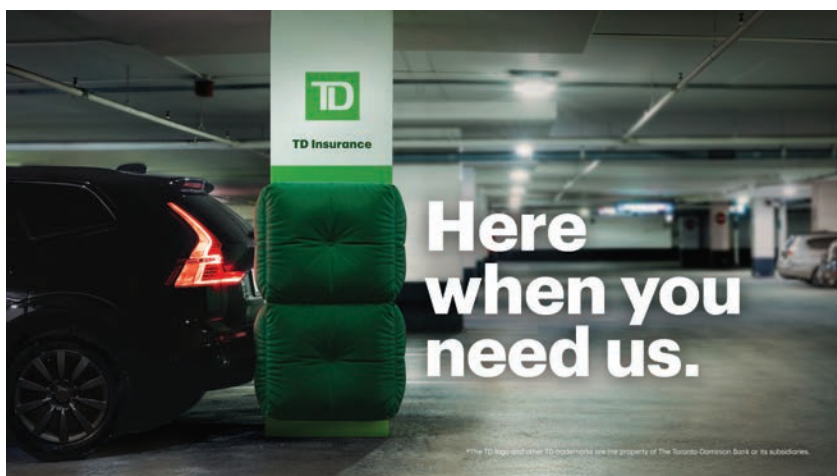
“TD is an exceptionally inclusive organization. We often look for colleagues who are in some way representative of the segments that we serve,” says Neable. “For someone like me, TD provides an environment where I can be my best; where the experiences I've had in life are an advantage. For all of us, our backgrounds play a role in who we are.

○ YOU ARE HERE.

RA 03h 28m 3.1s, Dec +49° 03' 46.6"

In honour of Maja Neable being named a 2026
Strategy Marketer of the Year, we named a star after her.
Making her stardom official.





Having a diversity of experiences is so important.”

That diversity of experience also informs how the brand communicates across a wide and complex portfolio that doesn’t just offer retail banking. The organization also provides insurance, commercial banking, investment products and wealth management services. Each business line has its own audience, but all TD advertising sits under a single brand – a discipline Neable says is essential.

That portfolio includes direct investing, an area where Neable has leaned into insight and timing. With nearly half of Canadian investors now holding a self-directed account, TD used the Super Bowl to spotlight its TD Easy Trade app and real-time partial share trading. The 2025 “Invest in the Big Game” campaign encouraged viewers to move beyond watching ads to owning a piece of the companies behind them,

Above : TD’s 2025 Super Bowl campaign paired a 30-second Super Bowl spot with a digital microsite and real-time targeting, turning pre-game buzz into measurable engagement across social, streaming and OOH; while TD Insurance’s “Pole Pillows” turned a parking mishap into a playful reminder of protection.

positioning fractional investing as accessible and relevant. The effort drove a 300% spike in TD Easy Trade traffic over Super Bowl weekend, with app downloads doubling.

Insurance provides a different canvas for that same philosophy. Across its verticals, for example, TD often aims for humour, using a consistent comic tone to spark curiosity and engagement. “Whether you are trying to reach a commercial client like a small business, a newcomer to Canada or a wealth management client, you need to base your marketing on a human truth,” says Neable. “Then, you follow it with a really strong brand framework that we have. So, when we show up, we show up as one TD.”

Neable points to the recent “Pole Pillows” television campaign for TD Insurance. The ad features an SUV backing slowly toward a parking garage pillar. But as the vehicle nears the pillar, it is magically wrapped in protective cushions coloured in a distinctive TD green, which protects it from damage when the vehicle does hit the pillar.

“As an insurance company, we want to protect our clients. We do not want them to actually need to use the insurance,” Neable says. “I really liked this campaign because you could see people connect to it, saying ‘I need this at my home,’ or ‘my sister should know about this – because she could really use a pillow.’ It was just a fun way to find something that people could laugh at themselves about, while connecting with our brand.”

TD installed cushions in accident-prone locations in Toronto parking garages and worked with influencers to maximize the ad’s reach. Social media users even began tagging TD to request pole pillows in their own garages. The work earned a 2025 Strategy Bronze Award for Connection Strategy.

“Pole Pillows” was a product of TD Bank’s creative partnership with Diamond Creative Agency, one of several agencies that the bank works with. For Neable, strong creative relationships with agency partners are an essential part of the creative process.

“We want to be the kind of client that a marketer comes to with an exciting idea – and to be the ones who are willing to buy into great ideas and help them grow,” says Neable. “And not every great idea will be a great idea for the TD brand, but we want to have mutual trust, respect and openness to explore together. We work hard to be one team, with the

Right: TD's "Invest in the Big Game" campaign reframed ad-watching as a financial opportunity, using real-time partial share trading and geo-targeted media to drive a 300% spike in TD Easy Trade traffic over the weekend.

common goal of building great programs, campaigns and platforms."

That collaborative mindset extends internally as well. Neable credits both her team and TD's agency partners with pushing one another to be better. "We always talk about the importance of understanding the customer, and that comes from both the agency and from our own teams. There's a lot of sharing of client insights," says Neable.

Helping agency partners understand TD's business is a key to the success of the advertising. Financial services can be complex, and marketers need to understand what they're selling. "We put lots of effort into making sure our agencies do know our business," she says. "The more they understand, the better they're able to serve us."

Neable also credits her husband Craig and children with being a sounding board for ideas. After all, a strong idea should resonate beyond the marketing community.

"I find marketing really rewarding, and I love my



job," says Neable. "It is so important to appreciate both the art and science of the field. That doesn't mean you have to do both, or to be both. But marketing is both – and it's important to think about it that way."

FROM ONE CANADIAN COMMUNICATIONS LEADER TO ANOTHER,
**CONGRATULATIONS MAJA ON
 BEING NAMED ONE OF STRATEGY'S
 MARKETERS OF THE YEAR.**

no name®

congratulatory message for congratulating

Mary MacIsaac
Marketer of the Year



no name®



Life at Home





Moving at the speed of culture

Loblaw's CMO, **Mary MacIsaac**, pairs deep customer insight with cultural agility, unifying innovation, value and brand love across one of Canada's most influential portfolios

BY WILL NOVOSEDIK

"You've got to get up in the morning and go to bed at night loving your brands," says Mary MacIsaac, EVP and CMO of Loblaw Companies Limited. And she walks the talk. MacIsaac's approach pairs deep brand passion with a disciplined focus on cultural relevance and measurable growth, a balance that drives much of her decision-making. As an example, she tells a story about socializing with friends on weekends and opening their fridges and cupboards to see what's in there. "I ask, 'Why did you buy this? What about that?' It drives my husband crazy, but you do it because you love it. It's a great privilege and a great responsibility to be in the lives of

Canadians every day."

She sees her primary challenge as building brand love while delivering measurable business impact. "As a marketer, I'm always shifting," says MacIsaac. "You have to be flexible. But in the last couple of years, what's shifting the most is the speed with which we have had to do it. I like to say we need to shift from moving at the speed of retail to moving at the speed of culture. We need to focus on agility. And that agility has got to become a discipline for us."

Take customer insight, for instance. It's never a one-and-done. It's fluid, so you can't take your eye off it. To achieve this, MacIsaac's team has created a customer insight hub. "I'm very proud that the team



Above: For No Frills, the team launched a hyper-local, iPhone-shot campaign featuring store owners speaking directly to their communities and reinforcing the brand's everyday value promise; "Possible Lives Here" dramatized how PC works behind the scenes to make life easier for Canadians; When it came to "Bookable Backyards," PC launched an Airbnb-style platform that let younger consumers book backyard gatherings, turning cultural insight into sold-out demand.

has built a best-in-class customer scorecard. It starts at the top with a pulse on brand health. We'll do a ton of qualitative research, but we also have operational insights – real-time feedback from the stores on a regular basis. And social listening will factor into it as well."

All of that insight also informs the work coming out of the President's Choice Innovation hub, which sits at the centre of PC's product development and seasonal storytelling. Its output is most visible in the pages of *Insiders' Report*. As this story was being written, *Holiday Insiders* launched, showcasing the 100 most innovative new products PC has on offer. While it goes to market, MacIsaac's team is putting *Summer Insiders 2026* to bed and beginning work on *Holiday Insiders 2026*.

"And then, at the same time, we're looking at the next generation of health and wellness," she says. "So you have this awesome insights hub, you have this integration with the divisions, you've got this wonderful portfolio of brands. It's kind of a marriage made in heaven. And underneath it all is a team that's passionate about their brands."

She's not just talking about her marketing team. Last year, when the country faced the unexpected threat of massive US tariffs, Canadians reacted with a wave of national pride. It was an opportunity for the Real Canadian Superstore to stand with Canadians and respond to the cultural moment. "As a brand, we didn't just react tactically, we regrouped. We connected with all our Superstore operators, and we asked: 'What do Canadians need and want to hear most from Superstore right now?' Our first response was two thirty-second spots that we launched with Michael J. Fox and Rush."

But the thing she's most proud of is that Superstore managers coast-to-coast created their own version of it and posted it on social. It was unprecedented for positive sentiment, reach and impact. Says MacIsaac, "I get goosebumps just talking to you about it. Talk about brand love and courage. You stand up as a Superstore manager and you talk about that. Canadians loved it. I think that was one of my favourite campaigns."

As a bookend, Real Canadian Superstore launched "The Invitation," a heartwarming Christmas campaign that positioned the Real Canadian Superstore as an inclusive place that welcomes all – including moose. The 60-second spot was recently included in *AdAge* magazine's Best Holiday Ads for 2025.

That same need for clarity and connection shaped one of the company's biggest strategic

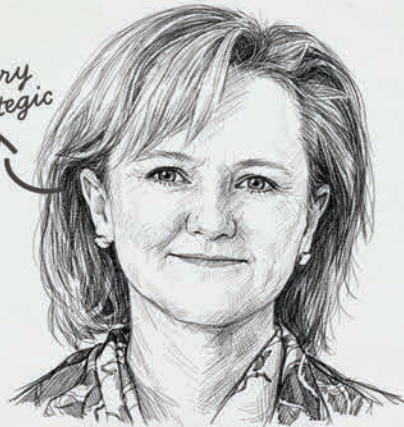


President's Choice®
le Choix du Président®

**MARY
MACISAAC**

MARKETER OF THE YEAR

*Visionary
and strategic*



PRODUCT
OF CANADA

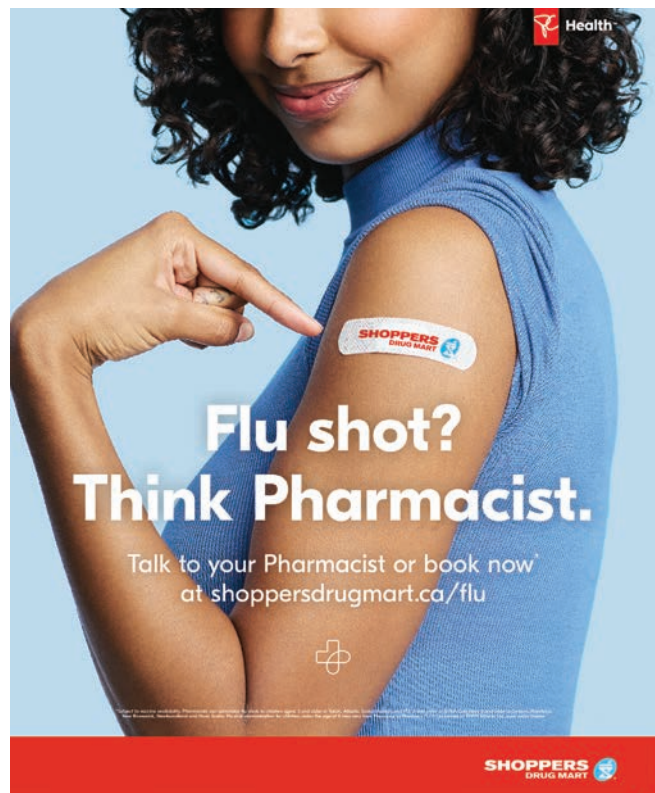
RECOMMENDED DAILY DOSE

✓ NO ARTIFICIAL FEEDBACK

Congrats to Mary MacIsaac, a Marketer of the Year.
Proof that great leadership is the best ingredient.

7-4
zulu
alpha
kilo

veritas.



Left: For the Summer *Insiders Report*, President's Choice spotlighted its most innovative seasonal launches, turning product storytelling into a high-impact retail moment; For its flu shot campaign, PC Health reinforced its healthcare credibility by reminding Canadians to think pharmacist first for trusted, accessible advice; And when it came to PC brand beverages, the team elevated private label into lifestyle territory, pairing bold flavour innovation with culturally relevant creative.

undertakings: repositioning the PC Masterbrand. Although PC had expanded into financial services, health and loyalty, many Canadians still primarily associated it with groceries. The Masterbrand also includes PC Food, PC Financial, PC Optimum, PC Health and PC Express.

"PC affects so many other parts of the lives of Canadians," says Mike Sutton, CEO of partner agency Zulu Alpha Kilo. "And so, Mary says: 'What if we take it up a level and really invest in building the Masterbrand versus trying to build all of the individual business units one by one?'"

The core creative became an anthemic 2:45 launch spot called "Possible Lives Here," built on a fantastical set of interlocking rooms and neighbourhood streetscapes where PC employees work around the clock to make life easier for customers. The spot demonstrates how PC offers a world of goods and services and dramatizes the efforts the brand makes to elevate everyday life, from delivering groceries to pharmacists' advice.

The results were exceptional. Post-campaign tracking showed positive responses to the question "Does PC offer more than just food?" Engagement across video formats grew triple digits and led many Canadians to proactively explore PC products and

services with a nearly 70% increase in time spent across sites.

Together, the results showed measurable shifts across perception, engagement and customer behaviour. It translated into a +10% lift in awareness for PC as more than a food brand and positive lift in emotional connection to PC brand. Positive responses to the question "Does PC offer a wide range of products and services?" were up 31%. Since the campaign began, Loblaw has seen more than 500,000 new shoppers. The work is resonating more strongly with younger customers, showing significant lifts to ad recall and indicating future brand affinity.

Regarding the need to attract zillennials, MacIsaac has demonstrated her willingness to reimagine and reinvent. MacIsaac and her team knew that to attract a cohort twenty years younger, they would need some unorthodox ideas. They also needed ideas rooted in the realities of younger consumers' financial and social lives.

So, to support *Summer Insiders* 2025, PC launched "Bookable Backyards." Based on the insight that this cohort cannot afford a home and therefore don't have a yard of their own, the ZAK and PC teams created an Airbnb-style platform where you could book a backyard for the afternoon and invite your



friends to enjoy a spread of PC-catered food. It sold out quickly, generating more than 1,000 bookings in Toronto and Vancouver. Social generated hundreds of UGC posts and drove a 42% year-over-year sales increase for Insiders products.

Across all banners, value remains the thread that connects the consumer experience. “One of the things that we’re so cognizant of right now is this expanding definition of value, and the need to ensure that we’re delivering it the way our customers want it, when they want it, and where they want it every single day,” says MacIsaac.

“For instance, think about our more than 300 No Frills owners in communities coast to coast, and how they deliver value every day in different ways to their customers,” she says. “We created a campaign called ‘The No Frills Thing To Do.’ We went into stores community by community, recorded

the ad on iPhones and had our owners talking about cultural moments that matter in their community. Then each owner posted the videos locally. We took an authentic community-based local campaign and grounded it in real value that’s meaningful to Canadians.”

What kind of leader does it take to pull all this off? “I think it starts with creativity,” says MacIsaac. “You have to be an innovator. At the same time, you have to be customer obsessed. You need to be comfortable with data. Based on that data, you need to be willing to make decisions and take risks and course correct. You have to be able to connect teams. And at the end of the day, to be a good leader, you have to love your brands.”

It’s a combination that has helped MacIsaac reshape how Canada’s largest retailer listens, innovates and shows up for customers in a rapidly shifting marketplace.

This time we get to be the ones who approve.

Congratulations Mary MacIsaac on being named one of Strategy Magazine’s Marketers of the Year. Everyone who works with you knows it’s well deserved.

ONE23WEST

“Yes, and...”

That’s how she became a Marketer of the Year.

“Yes, and...” is the reason we believe bigger is possible, bolder is expected, and more human is non-negotiable.

It’s her signature phrase. An invitation to aim higher, look wider, feel deeper. To push past “pretty good” and step into the promise she’s seen in us all along.

Because when she says “yes,” she sees what could be. And when she says “and...”, she helps us get there.

“Yes, and...” is how she leads and how she inspires. It’s how she makes excellence feel achievable, even when it’s hard. Really hard.

“Yes, and...” is how she’s helping transform a bank from the inside out.

Is Laura Curtis Ferrera our Marketer of the Year? Yes. And we’re all richer for it.

Congratulations Laura, from all of us at Scotiabank.



Scotiabank®



offers at newcomers to Canada, it built the idea around narratives that reflect and empathize with the experience of arriving in a new country for the first time. Scotiabank asked Canadians what advice they'd give themselves on their first day in Canada, whether that was two or twenty years ago, and used that authentic advice to create an empathy-driven campaign.

"Too often, the banking world looks inward," says Curtis Ferrera. "Scotiabank has taken the exact opposite approach, starting with people and trust. It has enabled us to shift from transactional advertising to human storytelling. And what emerges from that is a brand that feels personal, relatable, empathetic, optimistic and reliable." It demonstrates that Scotiabank isn't so much about banks and banking as it is about the everyday realities and ambitions of the people it serves.

That shift to storytelling is backed up by solid business results. The "New to Canada" platform drove a doubling of market share among New Canadians in three years and increased its ranking in the New Canadian market from number four to number two amongst the Big Five banks. The campaign saw a 276% increase in web traffic, 42% growth in account openings and a 48% increase in credit card

acquisitions – four times higher than in 2019.

Another example of this people-first, outcomes-driven approach is the "Bank More" campaign. To promote day-to-day banking, the campaign balanced emotionally resonant 30-second narratives with 15-second product executions.

"This marked a significant shift from a brand perspective," she explains. "It meant that we had integrated storytelling all the way through from connecting on a really human level to showcasing how we could enable success as our clients define it. And it's really working. With the help of our measurement, research and media teams, that

Measure what matters

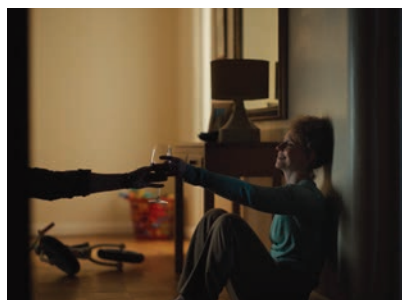
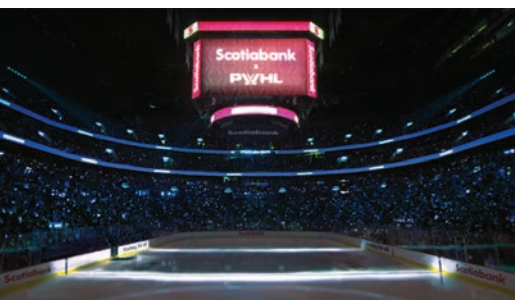
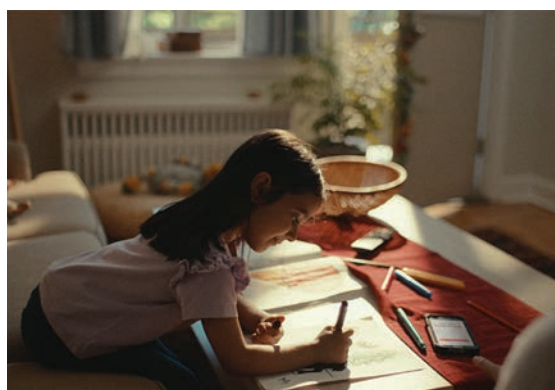
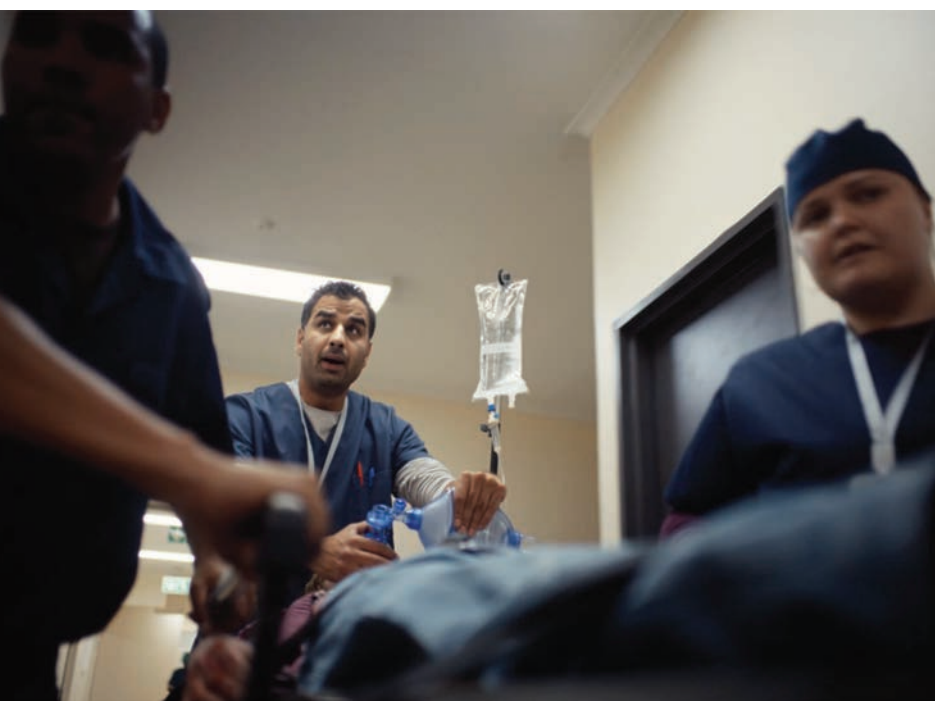
At Scotiabank, global CMO **Laura Curtis Ferrera** outlines how emotional intelligence and measurement combine to shape modern marketing at scale

BY **WILL NOVOSEDLIK**

Laura Curtis Ferrera's impact at Scotiabank is rooted in a simple but powerful shift: placing people, not products, at the centre of the brand.

Ask her for her philosophy of branding, and she'll tell you it begins where human connections are made. "I think it's about the need to truly understand people's hopes and dreams," she explains. "It's not about selling to them. It's about seeing them."

Take "New to Canada," which won a Silver Effie for Sustained Success. Launched in 2021, it's still going strong. Instead of the traditional transactional approach of throwing all kinds of products and



combination of emotionally resonant storytelling and product messaging in our fifteens really is helping build deep, lasting relationships.”

Results of the campaign included a 7% year-over-year increase in Canadians switching to Scotiabank, with 15% new accounts directly attributed to the campaign – a 36% year-over-year lift.

December saw the launch of two new brand spots with the tagline “You Make So Much More Than Money.” It harkens back to the bank’s long-standing brand platform, “You’re Richer Than You Think,” about true wealth being in the eye of the beholder. As Ferrera told *strategy* this past fall, “Defining ‘richness’ has been an evolutionary journey as we continue to see the world through our clients’ eyes to understand what’s important to them, from their point of view at every moment of their lives.”

But campaigns are only one piece of her strategy. A major part of Curtis Ferrera’s leadership has been modernizing the structure, tools and decision-making systems behind the work. Scotiabank can track performance across all its marketing activity as the result of a two-year project to implement a fully integrated measurement suite. Based on a combination of marketing mix modelling, multi-touch attribution and full-funnel measurement optimization, it is designed to measure ROI on

Clockwise, top left:

Under Laura Curtis Ferrera, Scotiabank’s Bank More campaign, long-running “You’re Richer Than You Think” platform and PWHL partnership-led “It’s Her Time” spot illustrate how human storytelling and product performance are built to work in tandem.

marketing spend more effectively.

She also introduced the bank’s first Brand Value Scorecard, giving the org a unified view of channel health, brand equity and marketing efficiency. Says chief brand officer John Rocco, “By supporting her team with the resources to develop sophisticated modelling and data analysis, Laura has demonstrated that emotional connection directly drives business results.”

“We are a performance-obsessed marketing team,” she says. “Turning insights into action is something we do exceptionally well. I have a phrase I like to use when talking about this: ‘storyboards, not dashboards.’

What does the CMO of Scotiabank make?

She makes:

Brave decisions

Real differences

Room for questions

Thumbs stop

Eyebrows raise

Time for everyone

Excuses for no one

Ideas bigger

Visions bolder

The work better

...and better

...and then better again

A great partner



Congratulations, Laura Curtis Ferrera,
on being named a Marketer of the Year,
from your partners at Rethink.



It always starts with listening to our clients, to culture and to our own business teams. And that is followed by questions like: Is there a customer problem we have to solve? A cultural issue we need to address? A business problem to deal with? Then we look at the data critically to glean insights from what the numbers are telling us. The fact that we are so focused on human storytelling doesn't mean we are not also laser-focused on impact."

It also helps that the 360-person team has been reorganized into a single global marketing team with centres of excellence. "We have centres of excellence in performance marketing, global brand, global insights and global sponsorships," she says. "We've maintained strong local connections through excellent country marketing leads and a regional marketing hub in our international markets. We've extended our purpose-driven positioning across all markets. In Latin America we've introduced 'You Have More Than You Think,' which is the locally relevant evolution of 'You're Richer Than You Think.' So, we've got the best of both worlds: a major global brand with cultural sensitivity and local relevance."

In Canada, Curtis Ferrera's team is moving to an agile model to enable a more integrated and horizontal approach to campaign management. "You bring in the right resources from across the organization, spanning business marketing and other functions, and you prioritize, develop and execute acquisition, retention and engagement campaigns faster and more effectively. Those two changes – establishing a single global marketing team and moving to an agile approach to campaign management – are enabling us to future-proof the brand going forward." The result is improved financial metrics, increased capacity and higher employee engagement, year over year.

Changing up the structure of the global marketing team is supported by another major brand undertaking: the creation of a unified global visual identity system. The revamp began in Canada with the introduction of new colours, more sophisticated typography and an updated approach to photography. That was followed by the introduction and implementation of the new visual identity system outside of Canada, something that had never existed before.

It doesn't hurt that Scotiabank's agency of record is Rethink, a relationship now in its fifth year. "They're really unique in the fact that they are both a powerhouse on the creative side and on the strategy side," explains Curtis Ferrera. "And they bring that notion of interrogating and of rethinking to life. They're always asking, how can we rethink this? How can we keep 'You're Richer Than You Think' relevant and meaningful? They're not afraid to ask those kinds of questions."

Curtis Ferrera is always looking for opportunities to show up where the culture is. "I'm really fascinated with culture," she says. "Art, fashion, architecture and books. And I am really interested in how we can bring culture and cultural moments into our work."



Above: Scotiabank's investment creative, part of its broader "You Make So Much More Than Money" campaign, reframes wealth beyond income by encouraging Canadians to invest in what truly matters – from relationships and education to passion projects and long-term goals.

She mentions the use of music by pop sensation the Bronski Beat for Scotiabank's brand campaign in sports, and its partnership with the PWHL to create the music for the "It's Her Time" campaign.

What kind of marketing leader does it take to make all this happen? "Marketing leadership has completely evolved from command-and-control to orchestration and empowerment," she says. "My role is to be a bridge-builder who brings people together across silos. I'm a marketer who grew up in the command-and-control era. But I have evolved to be a leader who leans in and sees the benefits of orchestration and empowerment. That was a huge trust-building exercise for me, but I see myself now more as an enabler who empowers her teams to lead and make decisions."

"And that saves time. We can optimize faster, we can learn faster and, ultimately, we have happier and more engaged teams. I know that we have the best marketers and business people on the team, and the best thing I can do is to create an environment where they can rise to their potential."

John Rocco agrees. "Laura leads with empathy, courage and a relentless drive for performance, balancing creativity with accountability to both her teams and Scotiabank shareholders. She creates the conditions of excellence and inspires those around her to think boldly and deliver beyond expectation with a passion and attention to detail that is unmatched."

Taken together, her approach is redefining Scotiabank's marketing ethos – one that connects cultural insight with performance rigour and empowers teams to build a brand that feels human, relevant and consistently effective.



Congratulations Laura Curtis Ferrera on being named a Marketer of the Year

From your partners at
PHd Intelligence.
Connected.



Make space for meaning

As Knix scales across markets, categories and culture, chief commercial officer **Nicole Tapscott** explains why discipline – not speed – has guided the brand's expansive year BY **CHELSEA CLARKE**

Rapid growth has a way of exposing a brand's decision-making: what it protects, what it compromises and what it's willing to leave behind. Over the past year, Knix, known for its leakproof intimate apparel, has expanded on multiple fronts at once: renewing its US push with a New York City retail launch, expanding into Holt Renfrew stores across Canada and Bloomingdale's in the US, rolling out one of its biggest campaigns to date, and extending the brand into new categories, all while becoming more culturally visible than ever. The acceleration brought real risk: move too fast and meaning erodes; go too broad and the signal gets lost.

Part of what's kept Knix coherent through that acceleration is leadership as an act of discipline. For Knix's chief commercial officer Nicole Tapscott, her role has been less about chasing growth and more about determining which kinds of growth are worth defending.

"At Knix, everything ladders up to the mission: to empower our community to live unapologetically free," Tapscott says. "We've scaled fast this year, but the through

line has been discipline. We don't chase ideas because they're shiny. We pursue them because they serve our community and push the business in a meaningful way."

It's a mindset Tapscott returns to repeatedly, especially as the brand has grown louder, faster and more visible this year. "We ask, 'Does this allow us to be bold and break down taboos? Does the idea truly engage with our community? Does this show how our product is a catalyst for change?' If the answer isn't a resounding yes, we wait," she says. "That clarity keeps us brave, but not reckless, and it ensures our growth is rooted in purpose, not noise."

Her philosophy resists urgency for its own sake. Tapscott has held senior roles in high-growth environments before, such as Casper and Mejuri, and understands the pull of momentum. What experience has taught her, however, is that speed alone is a poor proxy for progress. "Speed does not always equal progress," she says. "The founders I have worked for have always emulated a similar mentality: you can have both a high-growth business and a deeply human one."

The perspective has informed how she leads at Knix. "I've been lucky to work with founders and teams who were building from pure mission and grit," Tapscott says. "From them, I learned ambition, urgency and the art of betting big when the moment presents itself. I brought that with me to Knix, because this brand deserves bold moves."

Her approach creates room for powerful execution without abandoning restraint, so Knix can move decisively when the idea warrants it. The balance is visible in Knix's "You're Good" campaign, a large-scale effort spanning multiple channels fronted by

Kristen Bell. Timed alongside the brand's renewed US expansion, the campaign functioned as both a cultural statement and a growth signal. Built around a universally familiar moment among women – the panic of wondering whether you've leaked, followed by the plea for reassurance – the work is broad in reach, but precise in insight. Transit takeovers, OOH, digital and streaming placements rolled out alongside in-person activations and the opening of Knix's first New York City store in SoHo.

Those real truths are where Knix's marketing decisions begin to carry social weight. As leakproof underwear becomes the fastest-growing menstrual hygiene category in the US, category leadership brings responsibility with it. Under Tapscott's leadership, normalization has remained central to the brand's work. Rather than narrowing its focus as it scales, Knix has widened the conversation beyond periods to include sweat, discharge and



The campaign balanced ambition with intention. "'You're Good' was rooted in a universal, real experience," Tapscott says. "It reframed our narrative with humour, honesty and relatability – and it proved that you can address real truths in fun and authentic ways."

light bladder leaks, realities many brands still avoid naming outright. That intent has taken shape through work like "Every Body in Leakproof," featuring the song "Blood, Sweat and Pee (Nothing to Hide)" by artist Exmiranda, which treats these experiences not as edge cases, but

Right: Knix's expanding portfolio – from category-defining leakproof essentials to new markets and its menswear line MNTD – reflects a philosophy of scale without dilution.



as part of everyday life.

Hesitation in these conversations is exactly what Knix rejects. “We take those decisions seriously, because they matter. Our work often intersects with women’s health, body image and identity, and those aren’t ‘campaign themes,’ they’re lived realities,” Tapscott says. “We listen first. Real stories from real people guide us. We collaborate with sensitivity and intention. We ask whether the work reduces shame or amplifies it.”

For Tapscott, that responsibility

we align on the outcome: What do we really want to say and achieve?” Those original questions – about boldness, community and impact – function as both creative brief and guardrail. “When everyone understands why we’re doing something,” she says, “the ‘how’ becomes a shared adventure instead of a tug-of-war.”

Tapscott’s leadership style is anchored in values she’s carried throughout her career, but which have become particularly relevant in modern marketing. “Curiosity

[founder and president] Joanna Griffiths has modelled brilliantly from day one.”

Looking ahead, Tapscott sees both tension and opportunity. “The changing landscape of women’s lives,” she says, is impossible to ignore. “Her needs are evolving fast, and we have to evolve faster while staying true to ourselves.” At the same time, Tapscott is wary of how the industry measures success. “The noise in the marketing world,” she notes, has made attention an ongoing chase. “Every brand



sits squarely with leadership and shows up long before the work reaches the public. “We will never sensationalize. We will never do it for shock value,” she says. “If a subject impacts our community, whether it be from menopause to miscarriage to mental health, we believe we have a responsibility to talk about it with honesty and humanity.”

And as Knix has expanded into activewear, new markets and, last year, its menswear line MNTD, that conviction has become a disciplined internal process where alignment is non-negotiable. “We start with clarity,” Tapscott says. “Before anyone picks up a camera, writes a line or sketches a frame,

Above: Built around the idea that leakproof isn’t niche, Knix expands the conversation to include bodies, experiences and truths often left unnamed.

has always been my engine,” she says. “I genuinely want to understand people – what they need, what they struggle with, what makes them feel powerful.” In practice, her curiosity functions as a safeguard against complacency. “In marketing, that instinct isn’t optional; it’s survival,” she says.

Integrity, she adds, is what keeps her curiosity grounded. “It’s the thing that keeps me honest when the pressure is high. It ensures our choices are right not just for the business today, but for our team, our customers and our mission long-term.” Together, she says, “they help me lead with both courage and conscience. This is a combination

is competing for attention, but attention can’t always be the goal. The goal should be connection.”

That belief has guided Knix’s through an ambitious year. And when scale often comes at the expense of substance, for Knix, growth has instead been shaped by restraint and intention.

“Women are demanding better products, better representation, better conversations. If we stay curious, bold and mission-first, Knix can redefine what intimate apparel and women’s wellness brands look like for the next decade,” says Tapscott. “We don’t shy away from meaningful conversations. We elevate them.”

Go beyond your network.

Tap into *strategy's* dedicated marketing, media and creative audience to find your next star hire.

strategyonline.ca/careers



Congratulations Laura Cutsey

On being named a **Marketer of the Year**



From your friends at **WPP Open X** + **VML**

Local truth at global scale

Coca-Cola Canada's VP of marketing and partnerships, **Laura Cutsey**, is driving growth by translating global brands into distinctly Canadian work

BY LAURIE WILSON

For a marketer looking to create a Canadian voice within one of the largest beverage companies on Earth, the challenge isn't expanding scale or reach, it's making a globally iconic brand feel authentically local.

Coca-Cola's marketing power might be backed by the heft of a multinational machine, but in Canada, success hinges on nuance. It's more about knowing when to follow the system, when to bend it and when to build something distinct.

That tension is where Laura Cutsey, Coca-Cola Canada's VP of marketing and partnerships, operates. For the past five years, Cutsey has been fostering a creatively agile market within the larger system, spurring substantial growth by making brands that are unmistakably Coca-Cola feel distinctly Canadian.

"It would be easier if we just lifted and shifted everything. But it doesn't always work," Cutsey says, referring to the many Coca-Cola global advertising options on offer. "I'm very passionate about making sure what we're doing is speaking to a Canadian consumer. Not a generic consumer, but a Canadian consumer."

That philosophy has driven everything from the reinvigoration of legacy brands to the launch of entirely new ones.

Few moves are riskier than replacing a beloved brand. But when Coca-Cola's licensing agreement to distribute Nestea in Canada ended in late 2024, Cutsey's team did just that, leveraging the "signature recipe" that Coca-Cola still owned to launch a new product under a new name: Fuze Iced Tea.



"The challenge here is that people never ask for iced tea, they ask for it by name," Cutsey says. "Our hands were tied. You can't say it's the same formula, it's the same taste. You can't say it's this trademark now called Fuze Iced Tea. You can't do any of that. So you have to be very clever and creative."

The task was to convince those who love the drink that the taste had migrated to Fuze, even though the name, packaging and positioning were different. The project required clarity, creativity and scale.

Right (top):

Coca-Cola's Olympic presence in Canada blended global brand equity with local storytelling, reinforcing the role of shared moments, connection and optimism during one of the world's most-watched cultural events.

(bottom): Once a cult favourite in Canada, Fanta was repositioned as a playful, flavour-forward brand through updated formulations, new pack formats and a renewed focus on discovery and fun.

The centrepiece was the largest digital-sampling program Coca-Cola Canada had ever run, with the goal to give Canadians the chance to taste the formula again and decide for themselves. The event went direct to consumers through strategic partnerships with grocery delivery, meal-kit and snack-box subscription services and in-app sampling.

Food-service and on-premises partnerships at restaurants also contributed to the "Fuze Iced Tea Flavour Fleet," delivering two million free product samples during last spring's coast-to-coast trip.

"The whole idea behind it was as much liquid on lips as we could get in the absolute shortest time. So there was no lag and people understood, 'Okay, last week it was this, this week, it's Fuze, I taste it. I'm good. I'm now a Fuze consumer,'" Cutsey says.

An accompanying national campaign (with creative by WPP Open X and led by VML Canada) framed the brand as both new and familiar at the same time. The effects were near immediate, with Fuze gaining a 30% share within three months and strong continuing growth since, results Cutsey calls "almost unheard of."

"I think our agency partners and our creative team internally were really clever with the 'One sip, and you'll know' tagline," she adds. "It was the right strategy. We regained almost as much share as we originally had in the first six months. It's growing month over month. Performance has been outstanding."

If Fuze proved the power of reinvention at Coca-Cola Canada, Fanta displayed the value of patience. Iconic in Europe and South Asia, for years Fanta had been something of curiosity in Canada. But Cutsey saw untapped potential in the brand she calls a "hidden gem" and "sleeping giant."

The rebuild started with the fundamentals. First came a spring 2024 brand overhaul that included an update to its trademark orange formulation, the arrival of pineapple and strawberry flavours and new pack formats, including variety boxes, mini cans and family sizes.

Leaning into the brand's playful, flavour-forward personality, Fanta set out to become synonymous with Halloween, starting with the rollout of an all-black "mystery flavour" in fall 2023.

The following year, Fanta partnered with Warner Bros. Pictures ahead of *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* with three innovations tied to the film's characters, including an all-new Haunted Apple flavour tied to Michael Keaton's

"ghost with the most."

Last fall, Fanta worked with WPP Open X and Ogilvy to delve further into horror alongside Universal Pictures' Blumhouse studio, with LTOs featuring Chucky from *Child's Play*, Freddy Fazbear from *Five Nights at Freddy's* and the Grabber from *Black Phone*.

"We have a very specific strategy to make Halloween for Fanta what Coca-Cola is for the holidays," Cutsey says. "It's that



time of year where we're really focused on the Fanta brand as a point of difference. The essence of the brand is around playfulness, discovery, having fun and a younger demo."

The Halloween push is spurring a special level of growth



Left: As part of the “Fan Work Is Thirsty Work” platform, Coca-Cola Zero invited hockey fans to see themselves on the brand by printing their faces directly onto cans, turning personal devotion into a tangible point of connection.

for the brand in Canada. “It’s up 79% in volume,” Cutsey says, “and we’re the fastest growing market for Fanta within Coca-Cola, in the top 40 global markets.”

Despite the success, the category remains complex as consumers become more health-conscious. In the current landscape, Coke Zero has emerged as a driver of its own, posting double digit growth year over year for several years, she notes.

To bring the better-for-you message closer to home, Coca-Cola Canada focuses its Coke Zero efforts on hockey season. This past fall, the “Fan Work Is Thirsty Work” platform – originally tied to college and pro football in the US – was adapted by WPP Open X and VML Canada for the ice rink in Canada. One of the most powerful ideas to come out of the creative has been the “Fan on a Can” experiential element that brings fans closer to the brand by printing photos of their faces on a Coke Zero.

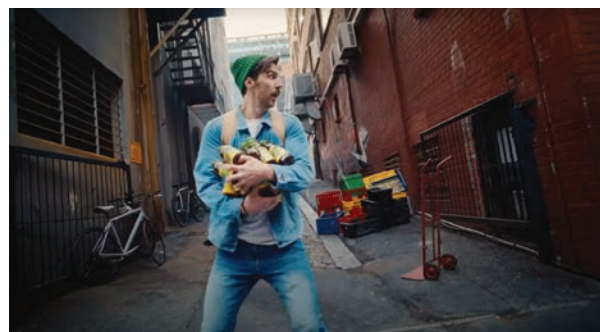
The campaign also reflects a core reality of Cutsey’s role: Knowing when to lean into global platforms and when to evolve them into something more Canadian.

The December period is one such example. While the iconic Coca-Cola caravan and Santa imagery arrive from global headquarters, the Canada team adds its own layer. A bespoke program called Canada’s Kindness Community identifies a community that exemplifies kindness and awards \$100,000 toward a local improvement project.

And the now three-year-old “Balikbayan Magic” campaign contributes to the long-standing tradition among Filipinos living abroad who hope to send boxes



Congratulations **Laura Cutsey** on being crowned a Marketer of the Year, from your Multicultural Advertising Partners at Balmoral.



Right: The Fuze Iced Tea Flavour Fleet travelled coast to coast, delivering two million free samples through restaurants, delivery platforms and in-app activations to eliminate lag between brand change and consumer experience.

filled with sweets and treats to their families back home during the holidays.

“Coca-Cola Original Taste is obviously one of our big brands and Coke is for everyone. But the question is, how do we make meaningful connections with certain groups of consumers?” Cutsey says. “The Balikbayan tradition was a way to really target a very, very specific group with something that is near and dear to their heart and very emotionally relevant. So, kind of creating that memory structure.”

The home-made, region-specific concept runs through the Canadian portfolio, including experiential activations at the Calgary Stampede and Montreal’s Osheaga music festival, and sustainability initiatives that encourage recycling. Experiential, Cutsey says, has been an increasing area of focus. “We’re considering an always-on experiential program that would cover a few of our important brands to have that ability to always show up at the right events and the right consumer touchpoints.”

The ability to move quickly and locally is built into how the Canadian marketing engine operates. Cutsey leads a six-person team, split between partnership marketing and brand roles that liaise closely with global category teams at headquarters in Atlanta.

Two team members focus on partnership marketing tied to sports, cultural and experiential assets, while the other four operate as hybrid brand managers, embedded in global category teams that advocate for Canadian needs.

“They’re completely tied into the brand and category teams that are sitting in Atlanta, but they’re always supplying the information, advocating for and influencing what we need in Canada,” Cutsey says.

If a global program doesn’t work, they build their own. If it does, they amplify it locally. The structure allows Canada to move like a startup.

But for all the systems and scale involved, Cutsey’s leadership style is notably human. She describes herself as straightforward and solutions-oriented, unafraid to admit what she doesn’t know: traits she sees as essential inside an organization with a maze of moving parts.

“I think, with me, what you see is what you get,” Cutsey says. “I know how to navigate the system, but I think it’s important to be vulnerable and, even in my position, to say ‘I don’t understand that, can you explain that to me,’ because it gives permission for everyone else to also feel like they can ask a question.”

That openness, she says, fuels a culture that empowers teams to push ideas further. It’s a mindset that has helped keep her inspired, even after 28 years with the company.

“I’ve had so many different roles and so many different experiences that it feels fresh all the time,” she says. “The portfolio is enviable and I also work with the best people. We’re getting to hire new teammates, and I get to work with new people. Everything always seems fresh, and I’m motivated by something new every day.”

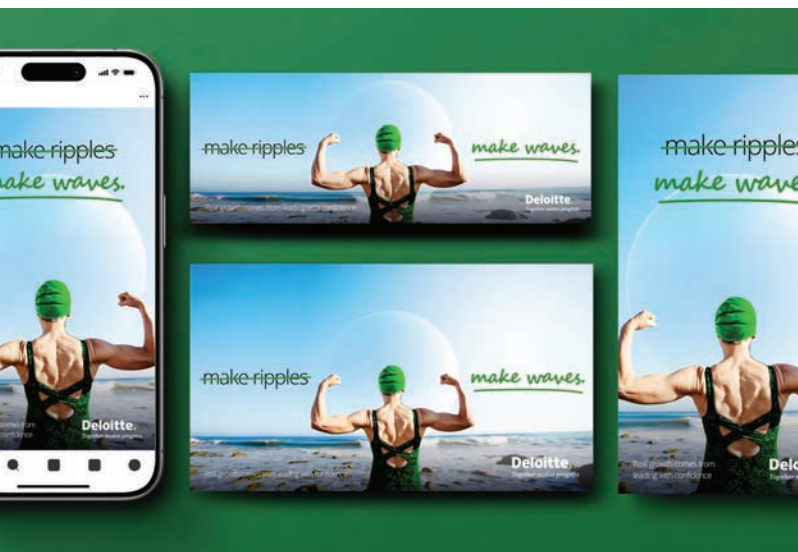
This year's Indie List reveals a quieter shift in what independence really means. It's less about size or swagger, more about structure, intent and accountability. Across disciplines, agencies are building models that keep senior talent close to the work, reduce friction and protect craft under pressure. The common thread isn't scale, but clarity – in how decisions are made, work is delivered and trust is earned.





Solving for scale

M&H specializes in the last mile of modern marketing, helping brands execute at scale



BRANDS AREN'T SHORT ON IDEAS.

They're short on capacity.

As platforms proliferate and formats fracture, the challenge isn't coming up with the big idea: it's executing it perfectly, repeatedly, and at scale, across an ever-expanding amount of channels. TikTok, Amazon, Pinterest, owned platforms, paid media and physical environments, each comes with its own technical requirements, creative constraints, timelines and audiences. In many ways, when the creative is approved, that's when the real pressure begins.

"The most consistent pain point that brands are solving right now is the increased number of channels that need filling from a content perspective," says Dave Nourse, VP growth at M&H. "It's the number of channels, the volume needed to fill those channels, and the inability to bridge that gap."

That gap is where M&H leads. Founded more than 50 years ago, the independent company has grown into a hybrid production and technology partner designed for today's content supply chains. In practical terms, M&H is the production engine that takes finished creative and turns it into hundreds (or thousands) of on-brand assets, whether that means adapting a single campaign across dozens of digital platforms, scaling content into multiple formats and languages or delivering production-ready work for physical environments. Nourse calls it "the last mile – or sometimes the last three feet – of delivery."

Above: Deloitte's "Ambition Reimagined" campaign urges leaders to turn ambition into action, with platform-ready executions produced at scale by M&H.

M&H removes friction at one of the most pressured points of the marketing process. When clients engage the studio, they're plugging into a disciplined system built to absorb scale. Intake is standardized and budgets and timelines are agreed upfront, leaving little room for ambiguity.

That structure is what allows the Toronto- and Montreal-based agency with 110 staff members to operate at volume without quality erosion. Automated workflows take on the repetitive, time-intensive work of versioning, formatting and assembly, while production leads retain hands-on oversight across every asset. "The oversight is what has kept us in business for over 50 years," Nourse says. "No matter what tools come and go, that checkpoint – making sure the work meets brand standards and quality expectations – is non-negotiable."

That philosophy becomes especially critical at scale. For global brands like L'Oréal and BRP, M&H produces tens of thousands of assets each year across digital, physical and experiential environments. Despite the volume, review is never sampled or automated. "Our team goes through asset by asset," says Nourse. "They don't look at every tenth asset. They look at every single one to ensure it's on brand and right for the platform."

But scale isn't the only pressure point. Many assignments demand heightened craft and executional care, where M&H's systems shift from pure volume to precision. When Wines of Ontario wanted to share stories about Ontario winemakers for its "Meet the Makers" campaign, the priority was careful, consistent execution under time. In just two months, M&H scaled creative developed by Purpose Strategy, delivering 176 assets across bilingual digital banners, social advertising and large-format OOH placements, handling everything from production design to project management and final file delivery through its integrated Adobe-powered workflow.

Similarly, for Holland Bloorview's "Together We Dare" campaign – the largest fundraising initiative in the hospital's history – craft was at the forefront. Working alongside lead agency Ultralight Creative, M&H produced a complex mix of digital, social and OOH assets, extending the idea across cinema screens, transit and commuter corridors, digital displays, print placements and social platforms. "Speed and scale are always the underpinning," says Nourse. "But craft and oversight were just as important for Holland Bloorview. We had to make sure the impact was felt."

Across these varied assignments, M&H's systems remain consistent. Technology plays a critical role, with automation and AI-assisted tools for fabrication, assembly, versioning and workflow optimization. As an Adobe Silver partner, M&H has built its internal stack around Adobe Workfront, Creative Cloud and Firefly, integrating project management, creative execution, proofing and billing into a single ecosystem.

Clockwise from left:
1 & 2 For Holland Bloorview's "Together We Dare" campaign, M&H extended a powerful creative platform across digital, social, transit, cinema and OOH. **3 - 5** With media booked and timelines fixed, M&H rapidly translated "Meet the Makers," developed by Purpose Strategy for Wines of Ontario, into hundreds of platform-ready assets across digital, social and OOH.



M&H knows what it brings to the table: clear, dedicated execution at scale. As internal teams strain under growing volume, M&H operates with intent as a specialized production partner. "Once the work gets to our stage, clients can trust that it's going to be done properly, and that the brand standards are protected," says Nourse.

While the industry may be obsessed with the visible – the idea, the stunt, the headline – M&H has built its reputation on what happens after: the infrastructure that allows brands to move at the speed of culture without breaking under the weight of it. Or, as Nourse says, "There's always tension between art and science. We've just mastered the science part. And, honestly, the art too."



CONTACT:
Dave Nourse
 Vice president, growth
 dnourse@mh.ca



Brand versus everything

Lifelong Crush doubles down on human insight to create work that holds attention



Above: Lifelong Crush developed a platform-native branded cooking challenge titled “Milk Masters: On the Moove.” The team re-engineered an existing DFO broadcast property for YouTube and drove over 1 million views with an average watch time of 3 minutes - significantly overachieving benchmarks.

Right: 1 Designed to reach decision-makers, “Get Girl Coached” uses authentic youth-led storytelling to make the case for keeping girls in sport. **2 & 3** Inspired by Kicking Horse Coffee’s distinctive packaging, “Blend Signs” paired people’s personality with the essence of each blend, translating existing brand equities in a way that felt personal, not promotional, driving a 41% increase in net sales YOY. **4** Without a fancy hospital lottery of its own, the Scarborough Health Network Foundation capitalized on Ontario’s newly legalized sports betting moment, borrowing the language of wagering to turn donations into a show of belief - inspiring Scarborough to bet on itself.

MEDIA TODAY IS DEFINED NOT so much by choice but by overload. Rather than brands competing with category peers, they’re also contending with news alerts, group chats and the latest celeb gossip that’s meant to be consumed and immediately discarded. “In the

attention economy, it isn’t brand versus brand - it’s brand versus everything,” says Geoff Gingerich, SVP strategy at Lifelong Crush. But for the Toronto-based agency that’s a starting point, not a complaint. It’s why Lifelong Crush organizes its work around the pursuit of unconstrained ideas: thinking that isn’t boxed in by category norms, channels or assumptions.

Lifelong Crush describes its strategic approach as “90% listening,” and that’s not an exaggeration. Every engagement begins with stakeholder interviews. “We ask questions that get below the surface so we can have a real conversation,” says Gingerich. The aim isn’t to validate a brief, but to interrogate it, listening for tensions, contradictions and unspoken truths.

Those conversations extend beyond clients themselves. “We want to really understand what’s keeping them up at night, what they think the solution might be, what they think the real problems are,” says Gingerich. “Then, we look at their media diet and ask what’s already showing up on their phone: the headlines, what’s current, what’s relevant to them. It’s



CONTACT:
Caroline Kilgour
EVP, managing director
caroline@lifelongcrush.com

our goal to place an idea within that narrative, rather than interrupt it with an overly branded message."

That philosophy is evident in "Bet on Us," a Giving Tuesday campaign for Scarborough Health Network Foundation. When a postal strike eliminated the charity's ability to rely on its traditional donor outreach, the team had to rethink both audience and approach.

The agency found that betting had become a dominant cultural language. "You could bet on who was going to be the next president or when a celebrity would die," Gingerich says. And at the same time, Scarborough Health Network Foundation carried a long-standing brand truth: it was an underdog, historically underfunded, forced to do more with less. The insight emerged where those realities met: people can't resist betting on underdogs.

"Bet on Us" reframed charitable giving through betting mechanics, allowing people to wager on actual hospital outcomes, from babies born to surgeries performed. The idea contributed to Scarborough Health Network Foundation's most successful Giving Tuesday to date, with new donors making up over half the donations.

The same triangulation - brand truth, cultural current, human behaviour - informed Lifelong Crush's work for Kicking Horse Coffee. While the category largely communicates through rational distinctions like roast strength and origin, Kicking Horse had long operated differently, offering a broad range of blends with distinct personalities. Those personalities were already being used socially by loyalists, who identified themselves through blends the way others might identify through star signs.

"People would say, 'I'm so Grizzly Claw,'" Gingerich says, "the same way you'd say you're a Pisces."

At the same time, astrology and personality quizzes had become cultural fixtures, influencing how people made decisions about relationships, work and identity. The "Blend Signs" campaign formalized that behaviour by creating an interactive quiz that paired personality traits with specific coffee blends. "You spend a few minutes with the brand," CCO Derek Blais says, "and by the end, you're invested. It feels made for you."

What connects these campaigns is a disciplined flexibility in how a brand shows up. Lifelong Crush resists the idea that brand consistency requires uniform execution. "Pure consistency is no longer a strategy," Gingerich says. Instead, the agency focuses on maintaining a stable bedrock of tone and values while giving the work freedom to show up in unexpected ways. "We describe a platform as a set of consistent elements with the ability for surprising executions," he says. The goal is coherence, not sameness.

Looking ahead, Lifelong Crush is wary of an attention economy increasingly shaped by automation and excess. As AI-generated content floods feeds and the bar for provocation continues to drop, the agency sees a growing appetite for work grounded in genuine human insight. "People are compelled to find real human truth," Gingerich says. "Things that actually add value to their lives."

In that environment, there's no attention hack. It must be earned by saying something worth hearing, in a way that respects the audience's intelligence and time. For Lifelong Crush, the future means listening harder, thinking deeper and remembering that even in an infinite feed, meaning leaves a lasting impression.





Redesigning collaboration

LG2 builds out an integrated brand experience network



FOR YEARS, INDEPENDENCE IN ADVERTISING WAS

framed as a trade-off. Agencies could be nimble or comprehensive, but rarely both. But as brands confront increasingly complex growth challenges, that binary is breaking down, forcing agencies to evaluate not just what they offer, but how they are built.

That shift sits at the heart of how LG2 now defines itself. Once best known as Canada's largest indie, it has deliberately shifted toward something more structural: an independent brand experience network designed to give clients best-in-class expertise without the friction, silos or inertia of a traditional holding company.

"We now understand that growth for our clients will come from multiple sources," says CEO Claude Auchu. "It's not going to be about one channel, one product, one discipline. That's why we felt we needed to orchestrate different expertise – strategy, design, communication,

technology and media – to truly accompany clients.

"What leaders want is autonomy as entrepreneurs," he says. "But they also want better platforms, better tools, [and] access to deeper talent. As a group, what we want is collaboration, not control."

So, rather than consolidating everything into a single, sprawling agency model, LG2 has built a coalition of specialized businesses – including digital experience shop REF, performance media and CRM specialists Dialekta and Varibase, and public relations and public affairs firm Alinea.

"Clients love the convenience of a one-stop shop," says Auchu. "But they are not willing to sacrifice best-in-class expertise. Integration for the sake of integration is one of the flaws of [the traditional holdco] model – it dilutes expertise. That's what we want to avoid at all costs."

Left: National Bank and LG2 reimaged the back covers of nine leading women's magazines. Designed to match the look and feel of the magazines' front pages, these back covers turned investment into a cover story: all the content focused on empowering women to take charge of their finances.

Avoiding it means redesigning collaboration. LG2's structure emphasizes autonomy rather than hierarchy, with business unit leaders remaining owners and operators instead of being absorbed into a centralized system.

To that end, LG2 has bolstered its ranks with Toronto president Bianca Freedman and tech and AI head Maxime St-Pierre, while placing Mireille Côté in charge of all client-facing business units. As chief business officer, Côté's directive is clear: keep the agency's top talent immersed in solving client challenges, not buried in corporate layers.

"It's about having the right senior people around the table and bringing in the right experts at the right time," Côté says. "Being entrepreneurs ourselves helps. We're always asking, 'If we were the client, how would we want to be taken care of?'"

The approach has shaped LG2's expansion. Launching REF as a standalone digital experience business, for example, was a deliberate move to elevate technology from a supporting function to a growth engine. It reflects a recognition that digital transformation often involves different decision-makers, timelines and expectations than traditional brand work.

The acquisitions of Dialekta and Varibase followed similar logic, strengthening LG2's ability to connect brand-oriented thinking with performance marketing, media and CRM.

"What those enable us to do is really close the loop," Côté adds. "From acquisition to retention fueled by first party data. That was the missing link."

Consider National Bank's ongoing "Invest in Yourself" platform, which challenges gender bias in financial media

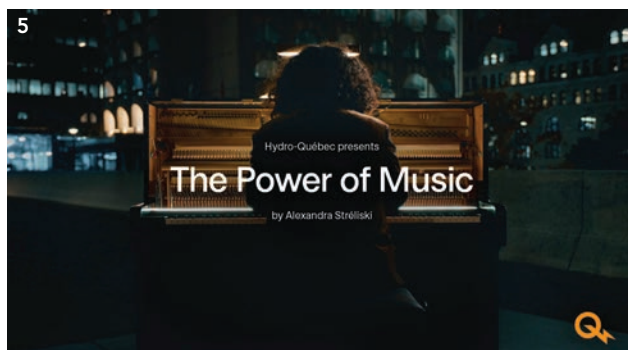
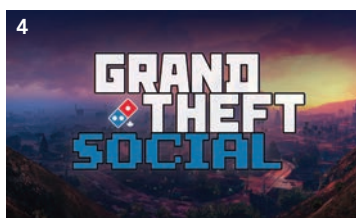
and advertising and won both a Gold and Grand Effie this year. “To me, that project is incredibly important,” Côté says. “Women are still encouraged to save rather than invest. It drives me nuts.”

The campaign rolled out across a fully integrated ecosystem, reaching nearly four in five women aged 25–54 in Quebec and the GTA. It significantly shifted perceptions around gender equity while driving a 21% increase in traffic to the website by women and a 31% jump in women opening investment accounts. “From a national standpoint, the results were amazing – strategically and tangibly,” Côté says.

Meanwhile, LG2’s social-driven “Grand Theft Social” campaign for QSR Domino’s turned a long-awaited product launch into a cultural moment by combining bold brand call-outs with real-time community management across TikTok, Threads and Twitch, embedding the brand directly into fan conversations around overdue games, albums and releases.

Experiential work for Hydro-Québec, “The Power of Music,” took an earned approach as well, staging a live piano performance synchronized to the lights of a downtown Montreal skyscraper. The moment was then amplified through cinematic PR, drone footage and social video to spark a province-wide conversation about energy conservation.

Taken together, the work reflects a deliberate shift in how the agency is choosing to grow. Ultimately, LG2’s evolution is less about scale than intent. “These changes are not cosmetic,” Auchu says. “They’re strategic. We don’t want to just get bigger. We want to be more relevant than ever, connected and efficient for our clients.”



Left: 1 LG2 created a new identity for Olymel, one of Canada’s largest pork and poultry producers, with a clean, modern look to connect with the brand’s target audience and packaging to support product innovation. **2** To promote a new sugar-free version of Crush, the beverage brand and LG2 tapped 90’s heartthrob Chad Michael Murray to be the face of the launch campaign “Your first Crush. All grown up.” **3** For Les Producteurs de lait du Québec LG2 created “Still from Jeanne,” a three-minute video message in the style of a short film and inspired by the authentic daily life of a local family farm. The initiative highlights the family-oriented and deeply human side of the dairy sector. **4** The “Grand Theft Social” campaign for Domino’s by LG2 includes organic posts, engagement with other brands and joining the conversation with specific fan communities online to embed the new parmesan stuffed crust pizza offering into popular culture. **5** Lg2 worked with world-renowned pianist Alexandra Stréliski for a surprise poetic performance in the heart of downtown Montreal. This spectacular event marked the acceleration of Hydro-Québec’s Exemplary Buildings Alliance, a major movement aimed at transforming energy efficiency across Quebec.



CONTACT:
Julie Dubé
Partner & EVP, growth
julie.dube@lg2.com



Freedom without compromise

Horizon Media Canada's independence at scale is reshaping brand growth



IN CANADA'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE, INDEPENDENCE

has often been defined by limitation: freedom without scale, agility without infrastructure. Horizon Media Canada has spent the past decade challenging that assumption.

Today, the agency employs 51 people across Canada, with its largest team in Toronto, a growing presence in Calgary, and plans to expand into Quebec and across Western Canada.

That growth is anchored in a clear operating philosophy. As part of the largest independent media agency network in North America, Horizon offers the scale, data and investment muscle typically associated with global holding companies without the structural constraints that often accompany them. For president Robert Jenkyn, independence is not a positioning statement but a practical advantage that shapes how the agency works.

"As an independent agency, we can make decisions faster," Jenkyn says. "We don't have the pressure to maximize shareholder value. We have the pressure to maximize client outcomes and client satisfaction."

That distinction is increasingly relevant as marketers navigate fragmentation and heightened demands for accountability. Jenkyn says Horizon's model removes layers of bureaucracy, allowing teams to move quickly while still

Left: Bombas makes its first advertising foray outside of the U.S. with a multi-platform launch campaign from Horizon Media Canada to introduce the brand and its one-purchased-equals-one-donated model to English-speaking audiences from coast to coast.

executing with confidence at scale.

Operating across both Canada and the U.S. allows Horizon to leverage shared learnings, advanced data tools, AI-enabled planning systems and sophisticated measurement frameworks. The difference, Jenkyn notes, is autonomy. "We work very closely with our U.S. counterpart and have access to shared resources," he says. "But we're fully independent. We can make decisions that are right for Canada, rather than following a global mandate."

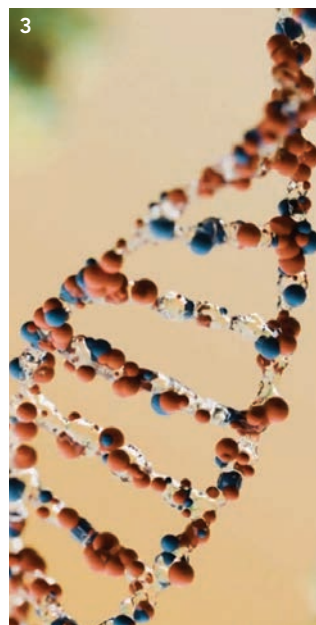
That balance between autonomy and capability underpins Horizon's approach to video and channel planning. The agency takes a holistic view, treating linear TV, connected TV, online video and social as an interconnected communications system. Measurement frameworks emphasize deduplication, audience overlap, and attention, helping clients understand not just where ads run, but where they actually resonate.

Creativity sits at the centre of that thinking. At Horizon, media is treated as a creative discipline rather than a purely transactional one. Teams look for a "hero moment" within every brief, a point where media strategy can elevate a brand's story, cultural relevance or business impact.

"The hero moment is that standout element of a campaign that goes beyond spots and dots," Jenkyn says. "It creates earned media, delivers value and excitement, and gets people talking about the brand."

One recent example is Horizon's out-of-home work for the Shark CryoGlow LED face mask. In Toronto and Vancouver, the agency used large-format 3D and illuminated OOH, including dual-lit billboards and transit tunnel environments, to dramatize the product's light and under-eye cooling features. The executions captured attention and drove product sell-outs in both markets.

Horizon's momentum in 2025 is also reflected in new business wins, including Felix Health, NFL Canada, Asahi US, WSIB, and Bombas. The Asahi US business was pitched and won by the Horizon Media Canada office, which Jenkyn says proves that Canadian talent can land business anywhere. The slate of wins also shows that across categories, the agency's pitch has resonated with marketers seeking faster decision-making, deeper insight, and media thinking that moves beyond standard templates.



Clockwise from left:
1 The Asahi Super Dry campaign blended strategy and local relevance, driving awareness and trial gains across New York and Los Angeles. **2 & 3** Felix's first full-scale brand campaign activated across linear TV, CTV and digital audio, using a full-funnel approach to drive awareness, consideration, and rapid category growth in early 2025. **4** With the launch of Revlon's new Glimmer Gloss, Horizon's hero moment played off the cylindrical product taking it to the streets with large format train and streetcar takeovers in major markets, reaching younger audiences across transit during the summer's busiest months. **5** Horizon used large-format 3D OOH and transit, dramatizing the Shark CryoGlow's light and under-eye cooling features, capturing attention and driving high demand and the product to sell out at some retailers.



That approach is evident in Felix's first full-scale brand campaign, launched in early 2025 across linear TV, CTV and digital audio, including high-impact podcast placements. The integrated, full-funnel strategy delivered immediate category growth, along with lifts in aided awareness, search momentum, consideration and purchase intent among priority audiences.

Operationally, Horizon's independence also shapes how teams are built. Rather than relying on heavily layered structures, the agency emphasizes multidisciplinary collaboration across strategy, investment, analytics and technology, all supported by senior leadership.

Recent senior hires reinforce that focus. Emily Malloy joined as EVP, client value, with a goal of delivering the maximum, client-defined value, from all our media investments and further reinforcing the agency's client focus in the market.

Thiago da Silva also joined as SVP, Digital Innovation,

leading digital investment across programmatic, search, social and emerging channels while integrating AI-powered intelligence throughout the process.

As consolidation continues to reshape the agency landscape, Horizon Media Canada is betting on a model that combines freedom with capability, creativity with rigour, and speed with accountability. Independence, reinforced by scale, is how the agency believes media partners can remain relevant, standing closer to clients and delivering work that drives business outcomes.



CONTACT:
Robert Jenkyn
 President
rjenkyn@horizonmedia.com



Raising the bar

Other. proves transparency can be operational, not just aspirational



TEN YEARS AGO, NICK MORETTA,

Kat Wong and Matt Jenkins left holding company life not simply to launch another independent media agency, but to challenge an operating model they believed no longer served marketers or agency talent particularly well. In an industry long defined by opaque economics and misaligned incentives, the trio set out to test whether a more transparent, accountable approach could make a difference. Together, they co-founded Other. Today, the integrated media agency employs roughly 50 people in offices in Toronto and Ottawa, marking its first decade during a period of significant tumult in the agency business.

"We started the agency as we felt there was a better way to do things," says Moretta. "We all worked at holdcos and felt we needed to raise the bar for clients and for our people."

That mission-driven approach defines Other.'s positioning. As holding companies pursue mega-mergers and cost-driven integration, Other. has focused on clarity, senior leadership and measurable business outcomes rather than growth for its own sake. "When we think about growth, it's about reaching a size where we can make a meaningful impact on the industry," says Moretta.

Central to that philosophy is a rejection of long-standing industry practices that Moretta believes have steadily eroded trust between agencies and marketers. "Media rebates, commission models, pre-bought media, marked-up programmatic inventory, these all

Above: For the premium Canadian-made infant-formula brand Niuriss, Other. launched a multi-platform campaign, including TV product placement with Corus Entertainment, to unify brand trust and build credibility.

lack transparency and accountability," he says. "Advertisers often don't realize, for example, that programmatic media can be marked up by up to 40%~50%."

Other. does not take media rebates, mark up inventory or typically operate on a percentage-of-spend commission model and has proven that it can still be successful. "We've been doing this for 10 years. Many said you can't run a profitable agency this way, and we just refused," Moretta says.

Instead, the agency ties accountability directly to client results. Fees are often linked to business outcomes, such as new customers or revenue rather than media-only KPIs. "We align agency success with client success in a way that is measurable," he says.

That alignment begins before any media plan is built. Other. follows a principle Moretta calls "foundation before innovation." Too often, he says, agencies rush to solutions without fully understanding the business problem: "What's happening with the consumer? What's driving demand? How aggressively is the competition competing?"

In one anonymized example, he says a client initially attributed declining performance to increased competitive pressure. Other.'s analysis revealed a different issue: insufficient rigour and methodology within platforms. The insight shifted the strategy away from defensive spending and toward tighter operational discipline.

It's an approach that's formalized through Other.'s proprietary methodology, Propel, a suite of productized solutions addressing common CMO challenges. "We looked at the top problems our CMOs face and built integrated methodologies around them," says Moretta.

The model was recently applied in work for BC Children's Hospital Foundation on its "Make Our Holidays Mighty" campaign, which ran from November through December. Other. led integrated media strategy and execution, alongside creative agency 123W and the foundation's in house team.

The campaign delivered a 20% year-over-year increase in online donations, and Giving Tuesday set a new record, generating 25% more than the previous year.

Client partnerships are led by senior subject matter experts with direct accountability for business performance. Rather than relying on traditional service models that leverage junior talent, Other. delivers through productized solutions that systematize strategy, execution, and optimization in order to balance brand and performance, fundamentally reinventing how agency services are delivered.

Looking ahead, the agency is investing in AI as an enablement layer, not a replacement for human judgment. "AI enhances what people do and the quality of delivery," says Moretta.

Growth across North America remains part of the plan, but always in service of the same objective: making Other.'s model the de facto standard for the industry. "That's what raising the bar really means," he says.

Below and Right: 1 & 2 "Make Our Holidays Mighty" ran from November through December, driving one-time and monthly donations for BC Children's Hospital Foundation through integrated, trust-led media that converted seasonal intent into record-breaking generosity nationwide.



Above: 3 Other. built awareness for the Great Canadian Casino Resort Toronto with an integrated brand and performance campaign, spanning radio, publisher partnerships, CTV, paid search, social and UGC to drive visitation and consideration. **Left: 4** For the luxury real estate and hospitality company, Cabot, Other. created a campaign that included private airport DOOH ads and luxury lifestyle publications to reach the niche target audience.



CONTACT:
Nick Moretta
Founding partner
nick@weareother.ca



Original by design

Balmoral Multicultural Marketing delivers effective nuance through creative leadership, cultural fluency and long-term thinking



IN AN INDUSTRY GRAPPLING WITH HOW TO REACH

Canada's fastest-growing audiences in meaningful ways, multicultural marketing has moved from the margins to a measure of strategic maturity. For Canadian brands and agencies alike, the question is no longer whether to invest in multicultural audiences, but how deeply, consistently and authentically they are willing to commit.

For Balmoral Multicultural Marketing, that commitment has long been defined by originality, cultural fluency and a belief that long-term brand equity matters more than short-term adaptation. With Canadian offices in Toronto and Vancouver, and affiliates in Mumbai, Shanghai and Dubai, the 40-plus-person agency has built its model around understanding immigrant communities not as a monolith, but as distinct audiences shaped by lived experience, language and culture.

Balmoral distinguishes itself by insisting on something more fundamental: originality as the starting point, not the afterthought. Rather than adapting creative developed elsewhere, the agency positions multicultural audiences at

the centre of strategy and idea development.

That original work is driven by a team that knows the audiences it is targeting firsthand. More than 35 years after entering the market, Balmoral continues to make diversity within its staff the "secret sauce" of reaching multicultural consumers authentically, says co-founder and CEO Sharifa Khan.

"Our team is entirely international," Khan says. "They're experienced marketers who've had stellar careers with multinational agencies abroad, and they're all immigrants from regions that matter most in Canadian multicultural marketing."

That lived experience translates into what Khan describes as "feet on the street" marketing, an approach grounded in in-community presence, ongoing cultural immersion and proprietary research rather than assumptions or surface-level insights. It also underpins Balmoral's positioning in Canada's agency landscape as a strategic creative lead, rather than a downstream execution partner brought in after core ideas have already been defined.

A clear example is the agency's work for OLG Horse Racing on its "Let's Hit the Track" campaign. To position horse racing as a preferred entertainment option for Ontario's South Asian and Chinese communities, the agency used what managing director Jeffrey Almeida calls "entertainment to sell entertainment."

Creating a contemporary racing narrative, Balmoral created an original rap-based music video recorded in Hinglish, Cantonese, Mandarin and English, an approach rarely seen in regulated categories. The execution leveraged local slang, cultural cues and high-energy audio-visual storytelling to convey the thrill of live horse racing. The music video anchored a cross-platform campaign highlighting racetrack experiences from crowd energy to winner's-circle celebrations, and exceeded media performance goals and drove significant visits to the race track.

That same research-led philosophy is evident across Balmoral's broader client portfolio. For longtime client Canada Life, 2025 marked an evolution in how the brand engages multicultural audiences nationwide, positioning it as an insurance and financial services company that understands and supports consumers at every stage of life.

To speak to members of Canada's South Asian, Chinese and West Asian communities, Balmoral launched the "Life Stages" campaign. Four online videos in five languages reflected real-life milestones such as starting a business, beginning a new job or preparing for retirement, reinforcing that Canada Life understands the realities of

Left: To spark awareness for horse racing in Ontario, the "Let's Hit The Track" campaign features an original rap song created by Balmoral that's recorded in Hinglish, Cantonese, Mandarin and English.

building a future in Canada. The campaign delivered exceptional results, greatly surpassing key performance indicators across aided awareness, familiarity and consideration.

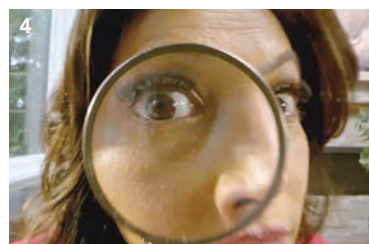
Similarly, Balmoral elevated brand awareness and enhanced familiarity for Clorox's Pine-Sol among South Asian and Chinese communities in Toronto and Vancouver. Ads highlighting cleaning ahead of key cultural moments ran across YouTube, connected TV and over-the-top TV platforms, programmatic display, social media and influencer channels, generating an outcome that surpassed expectations, impressively producing nearly 12 million impressions - at a substantially lower cost than originally planned for.

For Khan, those outcomes reinforce a broader point about how success should be measured in multicultural marketing.

"Measuring success goes well beyond reach and impressions," she says. "It's about driving sales objectives, increasing consideration and tracking year-over-year growth trends that show whether brands are building real equity."

That long-term, strategic mindset also informs Balmoral's work with other top consumer brands, including Tata Consumer Products, Brita and Coca-Cola.

As more brands reassess where growth will come from in an increasingly fragmented market, Balmoral's trajectory offers a clear signal. Sustained multicultural investment is not just additive; it is foundational. And for an agency that has spent decades building bridges between brands and communities, the next phase is less about making the case for multicultural marketing and more about raising the bar for how it is done.



Left: 1 Centering on a traditional saying, "plant good, and good will come," Balmoral developed the Canadian Cancer Society's first Chinese-specific campaign to advance awareness and fundraise for cancer research.

2 Canada Life's new "Life Stages" campaign, created in five languages, demonstrates it understands and has solutions for Chinese, South Asian and West Asian audiences at every stage of life.

3 Addressing dairy consumption among new immigrants, Balmoral launched campaigns for the Dairy Farmers of Canada to build sustained awareness and successfully strengthen equity for the brand's distinct blue logo and key messages.

4 To strengthen its appeal within multicultural communities, Clorox's new campaign for Pine-Sol Multi-surface Cleaners magnified how it gets your home spotless while leaving a refreshing scent that tells visitors you've been busy. **5** Created in six languages, FreshCo's "Freshsters" campaigns by Balmoral feature fun, retro, disco-inspired commercials and jingles to connect freshness with great deals and quality.



CONTACT:
Sharifa Khan
Founder & CEO
sharifa@balmoralmkt.com



Outcomes over optics

Feast Interactive proves big ideas don't require big agencies



Above: Feast's "Stand Against Scams" campaign for Canadian Anti-Scam Coalition opens with relatable characters almost falling victim to scams.

Right: 1 & 2 For "This Is For You" Feast used a powerful visual motif of a military uniform growing on individuals who demonstrate military potential, culminating with our heroes confidently wearing the uniform, symbolizing pride in service and shared purpose. **3** Feast's DND campaign shows how people's individual skills translate into meaningful roles within the military. **4** A large scam warning sign drew audiences into this "Be Scam Smart" educational escape room experience for the CRA.



CONTACT:
Lucia Mariani
Chief strategy officer
lucia@feastinc.com

AS NATIONAL CAMPAIGNS BECOME INCREASINGLY complex and are subject to greater scrutiny for their real-world outcomes, Toronto-based Feast has built its business around a simple ethos: staying close to strategy, staying involved in the work and owning the results.

Founded in 2010, Feast is a trusted partner for clients working to change behaviour at scale. Its philosophy is consistent: strategy must be based on evidence, creative must be purposeful, and success must be measured by action, not just awareness.

Feast competes head-to-head with much larger firms by keeping decision-makers close to the work. "Everything comes from an executive thought-leadership perspective," says co-founder and creative director Rob Vena. "We start with strategy, ensuring client objectives and business goals are fully integrated into the strategy and creative development."

The result is an environment that creates space for Feast's team to fully understand the problem before rushing to solutions.

Lucia Mariani, co-founder and head of strategy, says this approach is even more critical in today's rapidly evolving landscape. "The environment in which we design and create campaigns now is very dynamic," she explains. "It is extremely complex, but we build strategic frameworks that are adaptable to ever-changing campaign environments." With fewer layers and a tightly connected team, Feast can respond to shifts in audience behaviour, platform performance and client needs without losing



strategic coherence. Creative, research and execution are developed simultaneously rather than sequentially, allowing the work to evolve without drifting from its original intent.

That approach has defined two of Feast's most visible campaigns over the past year. "This Is For You," for the Canadian government's Department of National Defence, marked a deliberate departure from traditional military recruitment advertising. Instead of focusing on heroic images, the campaign focused on the personal values and motivations of its target audience.

"Instead of saying, 'Look how great the Canadian Armed Forces are,' we flipped the lens to the person watching and said, 'We see how great you are. This is the place for you.' It's people-first storytelling," says Vena. It was a message Canadians wanted to hear: the approach delivered a 106% year-over-year increase in applications and a 67% increase in click-throughs. The results reinforced Feast's belief that behaviour change requires emotional relevance to build meaningful connections with audiences that spark action.

A different challenge defined "Stand Against Scams," an effort led by the Canadian Anti-Scam Coalition that brought together banks, telecoms, tech companies and government partners – many of whom had historically communicated independently. The task wasn't simply to raise awareness, but to create a public facing message that multiple sectors could support.

The agency branded the coalition and developed a strategy and platform, then built a flexible system of assets designed to live across broadcast, digital, social, in-branch and in-store environments. Just as importantly, the framework allowed

participating organizations to deploy the work through their own channels without fragmenting the message.

The program combined Feast's creative and paid strategy with a sustained bilingual PR program led by Veritas, resulting in more than 2.5 million paid impressions and approximately 47 million earned impressions across English- and French-language markets.

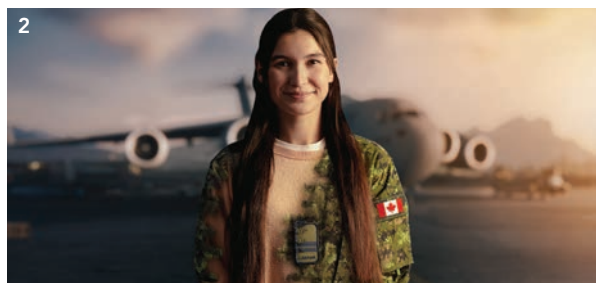
Crucially, Feast's approach is driven by audience insight rather than channel novelty. For example, research for the CRA's "Be Scam Smart" platform revealed that younger audiences – not just older Canadians – were highly susceptible to fraud, but unlikely to engage with traditional educational messaging. In response, the agency developed an in-person escape room experience designed to let participants experience how easily anyone can be scammed, turning awareness into first-hand understanding.

Despite leading multi-million-dollar campaigns and competing directly with some of the country's largest agencies, at Feast senior leaders to stay close to the work. When projects demand it, the agency scales up through long-standing senior partnerships.

Looking ahead, Feast is pursuing growth in areas such as financial services and CPG, while exploring the growing efficiencies offered by new tools like AI. But the agency remains clear-eyed about what it wants to preserve.

"There is value in the Canadian independent agency model, in Canada and abroad," Mariani says.

And, for Feast, independence isn't a branding exercise. It's a way of working that allows the agency to stay close to the problem, close to the client and accountable for results – even as the work grows bigger and the stakes get higher.





Raising expectations

Elemental puts delivering greatness at its core



AS TRUST BECOMES HARDER TO EARN AND EASIER to lose, Elemental is sharpening its focus on what clients should expect from agency partnerships – and what agencies should be accountable for delivering.

As it marks its 25th year in business, Elemental used its recent rebrand to clarify the belief that has guided the agency for decades. Rather than repositioning the brand or adopting the latest industry language, the process was about articulating what truly differentiates it.

The new tagline, “Expect More,” serves as both a promise and a provocation, defining how Elemental works, while challenging clients to demand greatness from their agency relationships.

For partner and CSO Dustin Brown, the anniversary was an opportunity to articulate something Elemental has long prioritized but had never stated outright. “When we went through the [rebranding] process, we turned inward to try and understand how we’ve gotten to where we’ve gotten over these 25 years,” he says. “We really wanted to focus on the amazing service and the experience we provide to our clients.”

And that focus isn’t abstract. At Elemental, it shows up from the start. It begins with a “Briefstorm,” a collaborative working session that brings together creative, media, strategy and social leads alongside the client at the outset of an assignment. Instead of treating the brief as a handoff,

the agency uses it as a shared moment, ensuring every discipline hears the challenge directly and understands how the work will ultimately need to perform.

The result is clarity and momentum. With senior media and creative leaders involved from the start, ideas are designed with real-world execution in mind – reducing silos, minimizing rework and aligning expectations early.

The model works, says partner and CCO Brent Wardrop, because everyone plays to their strengths. The agency focuses on how to engage people and move ideas forward, while clients contribute the insight that only comes from knowing their business inside out.

That’s one reason why Elemental focuses on how clients experience the relationship, not just the work. “We hope that every meeting, every call, every touchpoint between us and a client,” says Wardrop, “helps them get one step closer to achieving their goal by delivering work that actually makes a difference.”

That philosophy has helped Elemental build unusually durable partnerships in an industry defined by churn. Several client relationships now span nearly a decade, evolving as brands, platforms and mandates change.

Over the past year, Elemental has expanded its relationship with insurer Canada Life, partnering on a creative platform designed to reflect the different paths Canadians take through life. The work emphasized flexibility, acknowledging that milestones, challenges and achievements look different for everyone, and positioning the brand as a constant source of support. Elemental manages strategy, creative and media, delivering across connected TV, social and digital. The campaign led to an increase in aided awareness, familiarity and consideration, and ultimately delivered on the goals for the brand.

The agency also added new clients, including retailer Leon’s, for which it developed multiple broadcast TV campaigns for Canada Day, Leon’s Services and MLSE for the brand’s “That’s Comfortable” platform. Most recently, Leon’s partnered with MLSE, featuring work with hockey legend Wendel Clark alongside Maple Leafs broadcaster Joe Bowen and longtime Raptors voice Jack Armstrong. Launched at the end of November, the campaign leaned on familiarity, humour and trust. By placing well-known Canadian sports figures in everyday, relatable moments, the campaign – which is still in market – reinforced Leon’s position as a brand

Canadians turn to for furniture that feels right.

For Baffin, a relationship that has spanned more than eight years, Elemental helped introduce the Terrain Collection – the brand's entry into performance hiking footwear. The campaign merged rugged trail footage with subtle technical overlays, including blueprints, diagrams and design cues that revealed the engineering behind the product. Elemental developed the creative platform and digital elements, and managed the media buy and performance.

With a staff of just over 20, Elemental is a full-service agency built for deep partnership and high-impact work. Brown says the agency's model ensures close collaboration, senior leadership on the work and an uncommon level of commitment to client success. "We're designed to be deeply involved," he says. "That's where we do our best work, and how we punch above our weight."

Right: 2 For Baffin's Terrain Collection, Elemental fused rugged trail footage with technical overlays and design cues, revealing the engineering behind the brand's expansion into performance hiking footwear. **3** With Canada Life, Elemental built a new creative platform and managed national media, delivering an integrated campaign that reflected the many paths Canadians take through life, positioning the brand as a steady source of support.



CONTACT:
Dustin Brown
Partner, chief strategy officer
Dustin.Brown@elementalinc.com



One office, two languages

Open's integrated bilingual model helps brands create work that resonates

metro.ca



IN A MARKET WHERE

bilingual campaigns are still often built in silos, Toronto agency Open takes a different approach. Its “one office, two languages” model is designed to help brands create work that performs in both English and French from the start – not as an afterthought.

“Our clients really appreciate that it simplifies their lives when it comes to having to work with two languages,” says partner Martin Beauvais. “It goes beyond understanding that there are two languages in this country. It’s also about discussing the different habits of Canadians versus Québécois.”

Beauvais, originally from Montreal, and partner Christian Mathieu say their shared background gives them a practical understanding of how consumer behaviour, humour and cultural references differ between Quebec and English Canada – differences they argue are still underestimated by many national marketers.

Too often, says Beauvais, brands rely on a familiar but flawed model: English-language creative is developed in Toronto, then handed off to a Montreal office or partner agency to be adapted for Quebec. “Often, the creative doesn’t work – the references don’t make sense in the Quebec market.”

Above: Metro’s “As You Wish/Comme je veux” campaign by Open highlights that the grocer uses humans instead of robots, allowing shoppers to customize their online orders.

Open’s alternative is to remove adaptation from the equation altogether. The agency develops ideas simultaneously in both languages, ensuring relevance on both sides, with cultural references that work for the Canadian and Quebec markets – sans AI translations.

“You might be surprised by how few agencies do that for their clients,” Mathieu says.

Having the “one office two languages” shop based in Toronto appeals particularly to Quebec clients seeking to market across Canada, Mathieu says. Those brands often feel caught between Quebec agencies with limited English-Canada experience and Toronto shops that lack fluency in the Quebec market.

“Clients say: ‘it’s so refreshing to not have to do the work in my mind of how this is going to work in French. Here’s an agency that really gets my market but also gets the rest of Canada,’” Mathieu says.

Beyond strategy, the partners add that creating concepts that work from the get-go in both English and French can also lead to simplified productions and potential cost savings, eliminating the need for double shoots.

Founded in 2010, Open works with a mix of long-standing and newer clients, including Metro, Chartwell Retirement Residences and tire distributor Groupe Touchette. Retail, in particular, has become a core strength. Mathieu previously worked at IKEA, while Beauvais has done creative for clients like IKEA, Best Buy, Toys R Us, Babies R Us and Simons. “We don’t shy away from doing retail work,” he says.

That experience helped shape Open’s work for Metro’s discount banner Food Basics. Rather than treating promotions as a constant drumbeat of price messaging, the agency proposed giving the brand a single, ownable sales moment. It came up with the “Wowza!” a recurring mega-sale positioned as an event rather than a discount.

After the event became a major traffic driver for the brand, Metro decided it wanted an equivalent for its Quebec discount banner Super C. The problem was, “Wowza” doesn’t work in French. Enter “Ayoye.” Explains Beauvais: “If you see an unbelievable price on something, you’ll say ‘Ayoye.’” The “Ayoye” sales event now runs a few times a year.

Last summer, Open ran a campaign for Metro, Food Basics, Jean Coutu, and Super C, focusing on the tariff situation and the push to buy Canadian. The “Bags Up” campaign – a variation of elbows up – depicted shoppers holding up bags from the grocery brands and called for consumers to show their support for Canadian brands.

Open also rebranded Metro's online delivery system in Ontario and Quebec. With all their delivery trucks branded "As You Wish/Comme je veux" that highlights that Metro offers online shoppers greater choice through its use of humans instead of robots. If you want to customize the cut of your steak and have two perfectly ripe avocados delivered to you, it's As You Wish," Beauvais says.

Beauvais, whose bonafides prior to Open included long creative director stints at Taxi and BBDO Montreal, says the agency's creative reflects the ambition of a much larger agency, despite its size. "We punch above our weight."

With a team of roughly 15, Open has deliberately avoided chasing awards-driven briefs in favour of long-term client impact. "When we launched Open, we to make work that works – something we stand behind for all of our client work, that, beyond awards, is actually effective," Beauvais says.

What's more, Open works faster than bigger agencies, he adds. "There's no bureaucracy, there's no politics. We're one layer. In a bigger agency you would need twice the amount of people for the work we do."



Left: 1 For Chartwell, one of Canada's biggest retirement residence operators, Open created a multi-media campaign that celebrates the joy people moving into a residence can find in finding new friends, activities and communities.



Left: 2 Open did a brand refresh for ClicknPark and created a campaign spanning digital and OOH to introduce the brand into Ontario, focusing on helping users find the perfect parking spot.



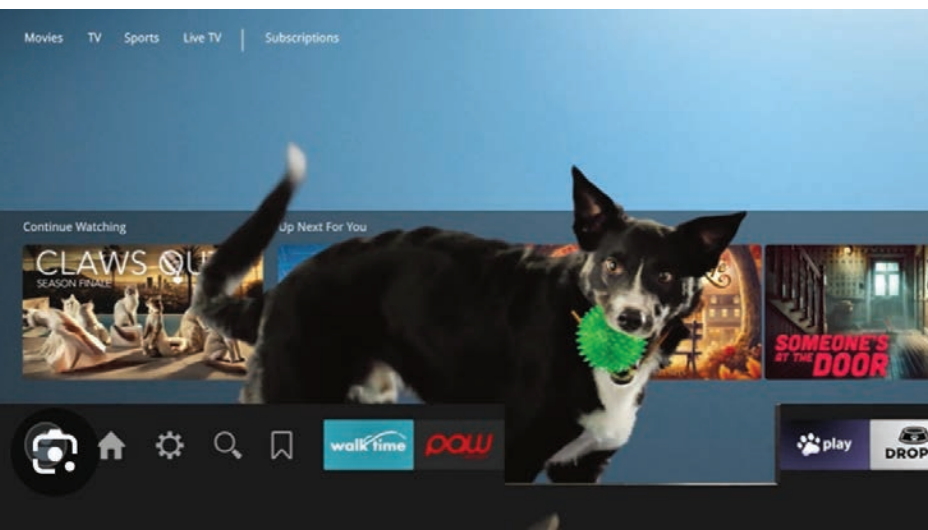
Above: 3 Taking a leaf from "Elbows Up," Open created Metro's "Bags Up" campaign to encourage shoppers to buy Canadian.



Left: 4 Open branded Food Basics biggest sales event of the year Wowza! and developed a fully integrated campaign including a TV Spot, Radio, OOH, digital/ social and instore elements. The agency also regionalized the effort with Ayoye! for Super C in Quebec.



CONTACT:
Christian Mathieu
Partner
christian@opencreativecompany.com



LOVE, LEASHES AND LOYALTY

HOW PET VALU MADE EMOTION ITS GROWTH STRATEGY

BY WILL NOVOSEDLIK

To understand Pet Valu, you have to start with how people feel about their pets.

In a TV campaign that's currently running for pet specialist Pet Valu, two men – one a pet owner and the other a Pet Valu staffer – pause over a small but emotional milestone: the pet owner's Bulldog is ready to move up from puppy to adult kibble. As the staffer pulls a bag of Performatrin off the shelf, both he and the pet owner begin to sniffle. Wiping away tears, the

staffer says, "They grow up so fast."

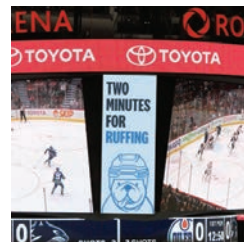
The moment is played for humour, but the emotion is real. It's a perfect expression of Pet Valu's brand platform: "Love Lives Here." The spot captures a simple but powerful insight: for many people, pets aren't just animals – they're family. This tendency – referred to as "humanization" – was explained in a 2024 profile of the company by journalist Trevor Cole for *Report on Business Magazine*: "Forty or 50 years ago, it was common for dogs to be kept outside, chained or in cages. Then we welcomed them into our homes, then into our bedrooms, then onto our beds and laps. The closer they've gotten, the more they've become extensions of

us, and the more willing and even eager we've become to spend on them as we would on ourselves."

What's striking is that while the platform feels modern, the company behind it is anything but new.

Historical interlude

Though the "Love Lives Here" platform was only launched five years ago, the brand has been around for 50 years. Founders Geoffrey and Carole Holt opened



Above: From everyday emotional moments to unexpected collaborations, Pet Valu's "Love Lives Here" platform stretches from in-store storytelling to partnerships with brands like ReMax and Chatelaine, all rooted in the bond people share with their pets.

the first Pet Valu retail store in Scarborough, Ontario in 1976. They quickly expanded to three stores in the Metropolitan Toronto area the following year. By 1987, it operated 77 stores across Ontario, and began franchising existing locations.

That early growth set the tone for what came next. In 1995, the company launched in the US, opening its first American store in Bowie, Maryland, and quickly expanding to over 80 stores across the mid-Atlantic by 1998. That same year, Pet Valu acquired two regional pet specialty retail chains in Ontario: Paulmac's Pet Food Inc. (55 stores) and All Pet Enterprises Ltd. (11 stores, under the Pet Foods Plus and Groomingdale's banners), bringing its North American network to over 390 company-owned and franchised stores by the end of 1998.

Over the next 28 years, the brand went through a rollercoaster ride of expansions, contractions, mergers and acquisitions. In September 2009 founder Geoffrey Holt retired and sold to US private equity firm Roark Capital, which merged Pet Valu with a number of other pet food specialist brands, expanding the network to 1,150 stores across North America by 2018.

Then the growth story abruptly broke. COVID ultimately forced the decision to close all 358 US Pet Valu stores, along with associated warehouses and

corporate offices, by December 2020.

What followed was not a retreat, but a reset. Now repatriated, the brand re-listed on the TSX in June 2021 and went back on the acquisition trail. In February 2022, it acquired Les Chico Franchises, franchisor of the pet specialty retail banner Chico with 66 locations in Quebec, providing Pet Valu with a platform for growth in the only Canadian province where it had yet to establish a presence. The company now operates more than 800 stores across ten provinces, including banners Pet Valu, Chico, Bosley's by Pet Valu, Paulmac's Pets, Total Pet and Tisol.

National scale, neighbourhood feel

Scale alone, however, doesn't explain the brand's current momentum. According to VP marketing Idan Driman, Pet Valu has four key differentiators. Together, they define how the brand shows up in people's lives.

First is its blend of local operators and a national footprint. "We are everywhere, but we are local. With that many locations across Canada," says Driman, "you never have to go too far to find one. They are very much part of your neighbourhood, no matter where you live." Given Pet Valu's neighbourhood focus, they tend to be community oriented. Staffers not only know their customers' names but their pets' names, too.



From left: Pet Valu's "Love Lives Here" platform is built on small, emotionally charged moments that pet owners instantly recognize. The campaign balances humour and sincerity to reflect how quickly pets grow and how deeply they're loved.

Second is the brand's culture of caring. Staffers and franchisees are passionate about pets. Many of them are pet owners themselves, so their expertise and empathy are genuine.

When it comes to product, Pet Valu targets the upper end of the market. Only about 5% of its products overlap with the mass market offerings found in local supermarkets or big box stores. On Pet Valu's shelves you'll find premium brands like Acana, Orijen and Royal Canin alongside Pet Valu's proprietary brand, Performatrin. You'll also find more unusual offerings like cake mixes and dehydrated ice cream for dogs, or chewy treats made from kangaroo meat. There is pricey bone broth, and special seasoning that you can sprinkle on your dog's dinner.

But the most innovative products can be found in what the store calls its "culinary" section, which features items such as frozen quail eggs and goat's milk, and frozen raw or gently cooked (then frozen) meals. No wonder dogs drag their owners toward the front door of the store whenever they pass by.

Finally, Driman points to "memorable moments." They happen while customers are busy trying to control their pets during a dog washing – there is a washing station at the back of the store – or how excited their pets get

as they approach the front door. Such moments are recorded by pet owners and store staffers and posted to social as a kind of grassroots form of earned media.

Driman's clear understanding of, and disciplined adherence to, the brand's key differentiators are rare attributes in a marketer. Says Driman, "When we brief our creative agency (Arrivals and Departures) or media agency (True Media) on any campaign, it always starts with the question 'Does it align?' We're not necessarily interested in the coolest idea. We are interested in any activation or campaign that will go back to one or more of our differentiators. One thing that I always say is, if I can put a different logo on it than Pet Valu, it's probably not the right solution. It might be the coolest one and the most creative one, but if it doesn't line up with our differentiators, it's not Pet Valu."

The campaign trail

Up until five years ago, Pet Valu's marketing communications consisted of print flyers, an end-of-quarter TV spot and the occasional radio promo.

Not anymore. Since 2021, this rather restrained use of advertising and media has been completely transformed. The success and warm reception of the "Love Lives Here" platform was followed by a series



of award-winning campaigns that illustrate Pet Valu's differentiators while being unique and unexpected.

For instance, building off the humanization concept, its recent "Feast on Love" holiday campaign built a story around the idea that food can be festive for pets as well as their owners. "Let's Go Outside" is a digital travel guide that speaks to all the things you can do with your pet when travelling to other locales. "Playtime" promotes Pet Valu's toy department on the insight that it's not so much about the toy but about fulfilling your pet's need to spend time playing with you.

Some of its most innovative work is done in collaboration with other high-profile Canadian brands. For example, it teamed up with *Chatelaine* to dedicate an entire issue to cats and their owners (it helped that the editor was a "cat parent"). They called it *Catelaine*.

Pet Valu saw an opportunity with ReMax to create a complete online guide to moving with pets, because moving can be stressful for pets, too. For Canada's *FASHION Magazine*, they teamed up with dog accessories brand Bailey&Bella to promote its Wedding Collection. And in a collab with Tim Hortons which launched in early 2026, Pet Valu is a "prizing" partner so that when you "roll up the rim to win," you might be getting a prize for your pet instead of for yourself.

As for social, Pet Valu already has high engagement because so many people love to talk about their pets. The challenge is differentiation. Pet Valu has developed a "four-legged" social strategy.

Says Driman, "We're focused on four different content areas. One is PGC – Pet Valu generated content. The second is UGC. Luckily for us, our customers are always posting. Dog wash moments are a favourite. The third piece is influencer content. We partner with a company called Hashtag Paid, which is a marketplace for influencers."

The fourth leg is what Driman considers the real differentiator: Pet Valu staffers, or Animal Care Experts (ACEs). "A lot of them are social savvy, but more importantly, they know our brand more than any influencers," says Driman. "I don't need to brief them. We empower them with an expert-generated content playbook they can use to create content in their own social channels, which we then repost. Sometimes it's even better than what we get from our agencies."

Pet Valu is built on love: the everyday, unwavering kind people have for their pets. That foundation has carried the brand from a small neighbourhood pet shop to a beloved national Canadian retailer over 50 years – proving Pet Valu, like the bond it serves, is here to stay. **B**

We believe if you're here,
you either read the whole magazine
or you flipped it accidentally.

We believe nothing important happens back here.
Which is why we put this here.

We believe this is the one page no one will reference in a meeting.
That's what makes it powerful.

We believe the back page doesn't need to convince you of anything.
It's already won. You're still holding it.

We believe if this were inside the magazine,
someone would have notes.

Anyone can fight for the front page.
Only a select few make it all the way to the back.

We believe you are now done.

There is no CTA. There is no next step.

This is it. There is nothing after this.

You can put the magazine down.
Gently. Like it had a long day too.

Brought to you by **cossette**

**Marketing
intel that moves
Canadian brands
forward. Daily.**

strategy

Sign up for your free two week trial

and get context for all the marcom news, research
& trends impacting the Canadian market.

[**strategyonline.ca/subscribe**](http://strategyonline.ca/subscribe)



The catalyst
to great work,
is a great
strategy

Take credit
for yours

Enter by March 27

strategyawards

awards.strategyonline.ca