# strategy™

bold
vision
**brand**
new
ideas

# THE REIGNING CHAMPS

**Seven years.
Seven AOY golds.
Rethink climbs
to the top (again).**






## Brands of the year

**Why PWHL, Sleep Country, Clutch, Terroni and Kids Help Phone are the best of 2025**

FALL 2025 • $6.95

7 25274 70347 0 04

A PUBLICATION OF BRUNICO COMMUNICATIONS LTD.

CANADA POST AGREEMENT NUMBER 40050265 PRINTED IN CANADA USPS AFSM 100 Approved Polywrap

**Your plans hit the mark.**
Let's celebrate that!

Book a table
**NOVEMBER 26**

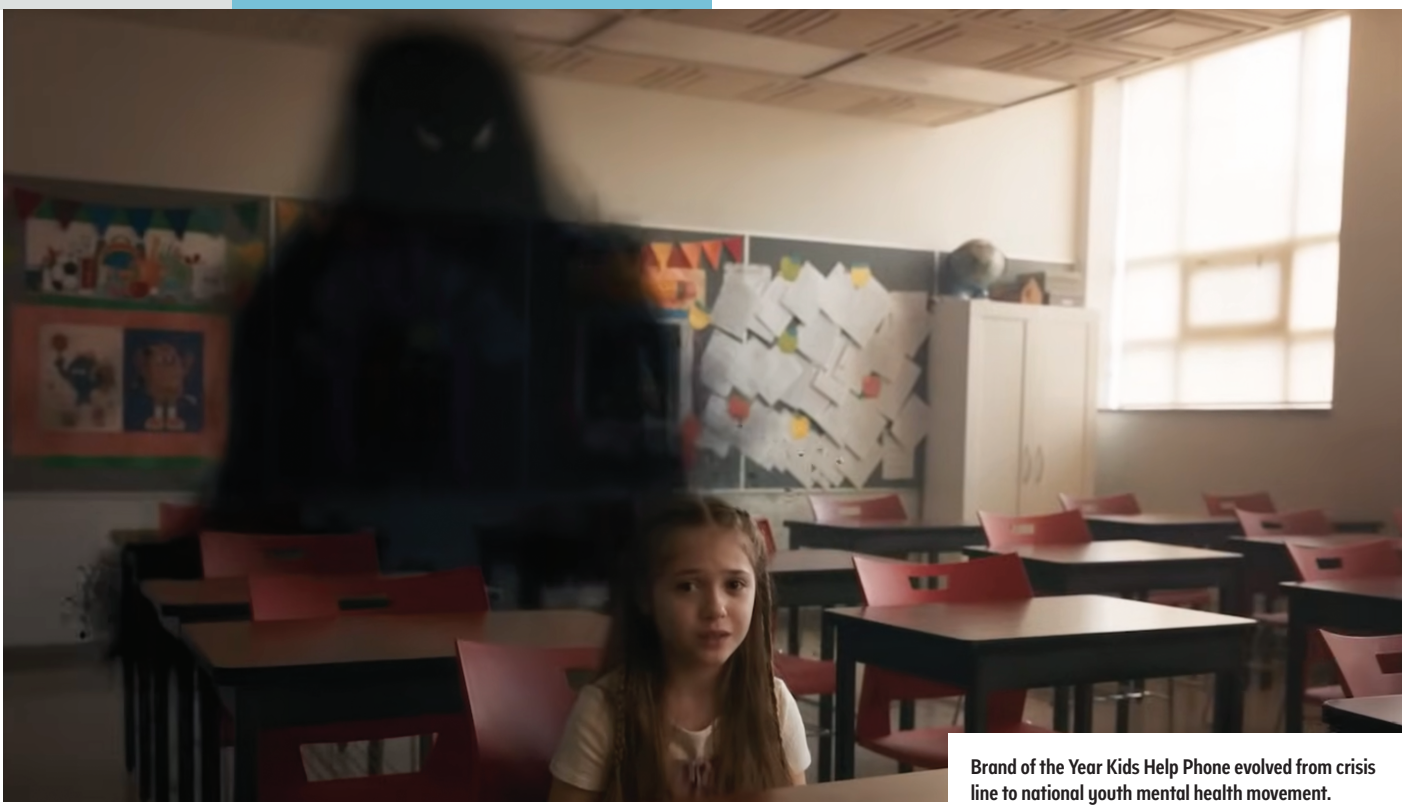
Thanks to our partners

ATELIER LA PRESSE
CINEPLEX MEDIA
GLOBE MEDIA GROUP
REC media
Roku
theTradeDesk
Walmart Connect

mediainnovationawards.strategyonline.ca

MIA(S)
MEDIA INNOVATION AWARDS

FALL 2025 VOLUME 36, ISSUE 4



Brand of the Year Kids Help Phone evolved from crisis line to national youth mental health movement.


**8**

## The big slowdown

Built on acquisition and efficiency, CPG powerhouses now confront slowing growth, shifting values and changing tastes.

**16**

## Standing for something

From co-ops to culture-makers, our Brands of the Year prove principles can still power performance.

**40**

## Creative conviction

How this year's Agency of the Year winners turned conviction, creativity and culture into staying power.

**4 Editorial** Despite uncertainty, this year's winners remind us that belief, conviction and creativity still move the industry forward. • **6 Upfront** Purpose-driven collabs bring brands together, Othership builds community through shared experience, and designers prove sustainability can be beautiful. • **12 Tribute** Marking 125 years of purpose, Desjardins shows values can still lead into the future. • **78 Back Page** This year's Design AOY posters support the Haliburton Highlands Land Trust.





**ON THE COVER:** Seven wins and still going. Rethink takes Gold again, cementing its place as Canada's reigning champ – a symbol of creative stamina in a year that tested everyone's endurance. Across the industry, agencies faced tighter budgets, cautious clients and shifting expectations, yet somehow they kept the ideas coming. The message from this year's winners? You can't slow belief. Even in a tough market, creativity keeps showing up – and keeps finding new ways to succeed. Cover illustration by **Graham Roumieu.**


**THE PHARMA REPORT**

The partners that think beyond the campaign to deliver what matters

SUPPLEMENT Page 35




EDITOR'S NOTE

# Built on belief

In an industry built on ideas, it's easy to assume that innovation alone is what separates the good from the great. But looking across this year's Brands of the Year and Agency of the Year honourees, I'm not so sure. The most inspiring companies of 2025 aren't just thinking differently – they're believing differently.

It's about conviction – the quiet, stubborn kind that holds when trends shift and pressure mounts. You see it in this year's Agency of the Year winners, who managed to protect creativity even under pressure; in Desjardins' enduring dedication to its cooperative mission; in Clutch and other Brands of the Year that lead with empathy, and in Othership's sense of community. What unites them isn't just innovation or growth – it's the belief that business can be both principled and powerful.



THEY REMIND US THAT COURAGE AND OPTIMISM AREN'T LUXURIES. THEY'RE THE FUEL THAT POWERS THE ENTIRE INDUSTRY.

And that conviction matters more than ever. The past year hasn't been easy. Economic uncertainty has hit budgets, teams are stretched thin and growth feels near impossible to come by. Yet what stands out in these pages is how creative leaders keep showing up – finding new ways to adapt, build and create even when it would be easier to hunker down and wait out the storm.

They remind us that courage and optimism aren't luxuries. They're the fuel that powers the entire industry.

For the agencies featured here, belief has been both compass and catalyst. Whether through cultural insight, creative daring or sheer persistence, they're proving that what still moves people most isn't technology or scale – it's purpose.

As guest editor for this issue, I have had the privilege of helping to celebrate that greatness firsthand. Spending time with these stories has been a reminder of why this industry still inspires me – because it's full of people who care deeply about what they make and who they make it for.

So, as you read what follows, take a moment to appreciate what unites us. Not just the awards and the accolades, but the belief that even in tough times, creativity still finds a way.

That's what keeps this industry moving. That's what makes it great.

Brendan Christie, guest editor, *strategy*


**strategy**

**FALL 2025 VOLUME 36, ISSUE 4**
strategyonline.ca

PUBLISHER | **LISA FAKTOR** | lfaktor@brunico.com
CONTENT DIRECTOR, EDITOR | **JENNIFER HORN** | jhorn@brunico.com
GUEST EDITOR | **BRENDAN CHRISTIE**
ART DIRECTOR | **TIM DAVIN** | tdavin@brunico.com
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER | **NEIL EWEN** | newen@brunico.com
DIGITAL EDITOR | **JONATHAN RUSSELL** | jrussell@brunico.com
STRATEGY DAILY NEWS EDITOR | **LAURIE WILSON** | lwilson@brunico.com
MEDIA IN CANADA NEWS EDITOR | **SHERRY NOIK** | snoik@brunico.com
SENIOR REPORTER | **CHRIS LOMBARDO** | clombardo@brunico.com
REPORTER | **ANDREA HERNANDEZ** | ahernandez@brunico.com
CONTRIBUTORS | **TY BURKE, CHELSEA CLARKE, VAL MALONEY, WILL NOVOSEDLIK**
ACCOUNT MANAGER | **CONIDON PINTO** | cpinto@brunico.com
PRODUCER | **MAHALET MENGISTU** | mmengistu@brunico.com

CORPORATE

PRESIDENT & CEO | **RUSSELL GOLDSTEIN** | rgoldstein@brunico.com
EVP, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR | **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. © 2025 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




© Inter IKEA Systems B.V. 2025

BIPOC photographers only make up 21% of the industry[1]. IKEA Canada is committed to changing that by working with more interior photographers like Rohan Dayal.

See his recent work at IKEA.ca/MakingSpace

[1]Hill Strategies, "Analysis of Artists in Canada: 2021 census data in context," 2023



BRILLIANT!

# PURPOSE-DRIVEN DESIGNS THAT MADE US LOOK

By Laurie Wilson

## The seat of sustainability

With the H2Ottoman, One23West brings subtle innovation to outdoor design. The sleek seat doubles as a rainwater reservoir, storing up to 20 gallons while blending seamlessly into patios and balconies. Engineered to support body weight and withstand the elements, its louvered structure evokes a raindrop, blurring the lines between structure and symbolism. By disguising sustainability as design, One23West CCO Jeff Harrison and his team hope to make eco-friendly behaviour both effortless and stylish. With a Kickstarter launch aimed at design-savvy early adopters, the H2Ottoman invites consumers to sit back, relax and let their furniture do the water-collection work.

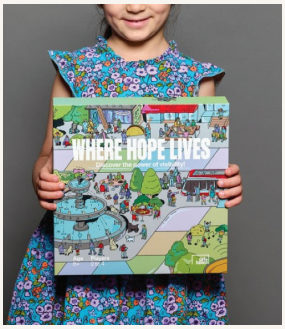


## In touch with beauty

For October's World Sight Day, the Shine Foundation, Cheekbone Beauty and Mint boldly reimagined what beauty looks and feels like. Created with 14-year-old Scarlette, a Shine dreamer who was born blind, the prototype for a tactile, audio-guided makeup palette helps users navigate colour by touch and sound. Beyond product design, the initiative spotlights the gap in inclusivity in the beauty industry when it comes to the blind and low-vision community. The campaign, launched nationally, celebrates Shine's 9,000th dream delivered while calling for partners to help make the palette a reality for others with vision loss. As Patrice Pollack, ECD at Mint, told *strategy*, accessibility wasn't an add-on, "it was the design."

## Playing with inclusivity

Safehaven and The Local Collective turned empathy into a playable board game. "Where Hope Lives" invites families to step into the experiences of medically complex children through trivia, challenges and character-building cards that reveal new perspectives as play unfolds. Designed to spark conversations about inclusion, the game continues the not-for-profit's advocacy efforts. A companion guide helps parents navigate sensitive topics with confidence, while proceeds support inclusive-care programs. Through play, Safehaven is looking to make understanding the starting point for change.




BRAND BUILDING

# COMMUNITY IS THE CAMPAIGN

By Chelsea Clarke

In a cedar sauna in downtown Toronto, 60 people sit shoulder to shoulder as they're led through a visualization exercise. The vibey beats intensify as snowballs infused with essential oils burst onto stones, the scent projected across the space via the guides' choreographed towel-waving movements. Minutes later, the group – "journeyers," they're called here – files out to plunge into tubs of freezing water before gathering again to share reflections or talk with strangers. It's structured, sensory and social – an experience Othership has built into a repeatable brand experience.

Its first location launched in 2022, Othership blends guided sauna sessions, ice baths and mindfulness into a communal practice. And just three years later, the brand has expanded from its original Adelaide Street



location to new sites in Yorkville, New York's Flatiron District and Williamsburg. On paper, Othership fits neatly into the wellness category. In practice, it behaves more like a culture brand built around community.

Scroll through Othership's social and you'll find ice-bath clips from influencers gritting their teeth through cold plunges, posts from guests describing emotional breakthroughs in the sauna, and recaps from Othership's sober social events. The community's experiences have become its marketing content.

"Our growth has been almost entirely organic," says co-founder Robbie Bent. "Othership resonates because it's experiential and communal. Word of mouth has been our most powerful channel. From there, social, PR and partnerships have amplified that energy. But our journeyers themselves have become the brand's best

storytellers. That authenticity travels faster than any ad spend."

Word-of-mouth has spurred Othership's recent growth. Rather than build awareness through paid campaigns, the brand focuses on experience design, creating moments that people share. It's a marketing engine powered by participation. "Most wellness brands sell individual optimization," says Bent. "We sell belonging."

That shift – from wellness utility to cultural identity – has given Othership an edge as it scales. Each market is treated as a unique ecosystem. "When we opened in Toronto, the focus wasn't on how fast we could scale, but on how deeply we could connect and build a real community," says Bent. "Once that foundation was strong, expansion became less about geography and more about extending that impact. When we entered the New York market, we were confident the model worked, but we didn't want to become a 'wellness chain.' Every market gets its own local partnerships, events and micro-communities."

Entering New York was a brand stress test: could the intimacy that defined its Toronto following hold up in a city that moves twice as fast? "Toronto gave us the blueprint," says Bent. "It's an emotionally intelligent, wellness-minded city that embraced community healing early on. When we moved into the U.S., especially New York, we had to adapt for a faster pace and a more saturated market. In messaging, that meant simplifying our story and reaching larger audiences craving social connection."





Journeyers gather in Othership's cedar sauna, where guided heat and cold sessions turn wellness into a shared experience.

Othership's approach has been to view every class as content and every member as a messenger. By turning community into both product and channel, Othership is proving that scale and soul don't have to be at odds – and that a movement built on shared experience might be enough to outpace traditional marketing. "We're always investing in community," Bent says. "We believe the future of wellness is social, not solitary. So, everything we do, from design to marketing, will keep pushing that forward."

COLLABS

# BETTER TOGETHER

By Sherry Noik




It was a cheeky campaign that started a war but ended in a promise to work together. At this year's *strategy* CMO Forum in September, Sleep County Canada's brand and marketing SVP Nuno Bamberg and Ikea Canada's head of marketing Jonelle Ricketts discussed how Ikea's "U Up?" stunt was the impetus for a fun billboard exchange between the two brands that created a buzz for both. Having settled the "Sleep Wars," Bamberg and Ricketts then agreed to put aside their rivalry and come up with a way to collaborate in the purpose-driven space. We're keeping an eye out for more... Meanwhile, here are some other collabs that caught our eye this year.

## UNICEF Canada x Kotn

UNICEF Canada teamed up with homegrown apparel brand Kotn and creative impact agency Public Inc. to put the aid organization's iconic orange Halloween donation box on a limited-edition T-shirt, complete with a QR code for direct donations. Since being introduced in Canada in 1955, the boxes raised millions of dollars toward UNICEF's global humanitarian aid, but they were discontinued in 2006 due to the Canadian penny being phased out. A fashion collab is nothing new, but this campaign revived a legacy program known and loved by generations of Canadians and brought a modern twist to giving back.

## Cooking with purpose

Another collab with purpose came by way of Canadian meal kit brand Goodfood. Developed and led by Initiative, the partnership brought together Indigenous Tourism Ontario and Destination Ontario to launch a limited-edition Indigenous-inspired meal kit. Chef Joseph Shawana, an Odawa from the Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve and a professor and Indigenous culinary advisor at Centennial College, created the recipe. The kit sold 8,900 portions – exceeding the 5,000 expected – and became one of Goodfood's best-selling recipes of the quarter, earning more than 600 reviews and a 4.54/5 rating.

OTHERSHIP PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRAYDON HERRIOTT



# THE END OF SCALE AS STRATEGY

ONCE DEFINED BY ACQUISITIONS AND EFFICIENCY, CPG LEADERS NOW FACE STALLED GROWTH, SHIFTING CONSUMERS AND THE NEED FOR REINVENTION. BY **WILL NOVOSEDLIK**

**IN THE LAST FEW YEARS**, the packaged goods industry has seen some major break-ups.

Ten years after getting together, Kraft Heinz recently announced that it's splitting up. It will hive off its faster-growing "snacking" assets (Heinz Ketchup, Kraft Mac & Cheese, Philadelphia Cream Cheese) from its slower-growing "grocery" products (Oscar Mayer, Kraft Singles, Lunchables) to create two new entities, as yet unnamed at the time of publishing.

Seven years after tying the knot, Keurig Dr Pepper is untying it. It has acquired JDE Peet's (Jacobs, L'Or, Tassimo and Douwe Egberts) and will combine it with Keurig to build up its coffee business, while its soft drink business will continue with core assets like Dr Pepper, Snapple and 7Up.

Then there's Kellogg, which in 2023 split into Kellanova (the global snacks, international cereal, plant-based and North American frozen foods business) and WK Kellogg Co (the North American cereal business). Candy king Mars stepped in to grab Kellanova, while Italian confectioner Ferrero is in the final stages of purchasing WK Kellogg Co.

Then consider Reckitt Benckiser (Dettol, Durex, Lysol, Nurofen, Veet), which is breaking up with Essential Home (Air Wick, Resolve, Easy Off) to focus on health and hygiene.

So, what's going on? Is this just part of the normal industry cycle of expansion and contraction, during which large companies seek growth by joining with other behemoths or by acquiring smaller, nimbler, more innovative players until their portfolios become so complex and unwieldy that they decide to trim the fat?

Reckitt has certainly adhered to the growth-through-

acquisition strategy since 1985. The Essential Home brands came to Reckitt through various acquisitions over the years, including Air Wick and Carpet Fresh brands in 1985, the Spanish cleaning products company Camp in 1989, the Boyle-Midway division of American Home Products in 1990 and brands from DowBrands in 1998. Benckiser's products included Vanish and Cillit Bang before the 1999 merger that created Reckitt Benckiser.

But by 2024, Reckitt's strategic priorities had shifted toward higher-margin consumer health and hygiene products, making its homecare brands "non-core" to the company's new direction.

"A lot of what they're doing is trying to optimize what they've got," says David Kincaid, founder of consultancy Level 5. "They realized they may have bought things in which they actually don't have a core competency. If you think back to the '80s and '90s, and ask yourself what kind of brands comprised Reckitt, it was names like Air Wick and Resolve. It was a household cleaning brand portfolio. But now they've said they've maxed that out and will focus on health and hygiene. Do they have the brands to do it? Do they have the organizational competencies to do it?"

In the case of Kraft Heinz, the original rationale for the marriage was to take advantage of the synergies and cost efficiencies that would come with significantly increased scale. But by 2020, that strategy began to wear thin and net revenue fell for the next five years running.

"I think the core problem that underlies all of these big CPGs is the fact that they have very mature businesses that just aren't capable of delivering profit growth," says Tim Calkins, Clinical Professor of Marketing at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

Calkins tells the story of when he was a marketer at Kraft Foods in Chicago and senior management asked for an analysis of the barbecue business, which he was running. "They wanted a 20-year profit outlook (a projection that would be laughable in today's world), so we did the analysis and found that the profit outlook for barbecue sauce over the next 20 years is that it will be flat. And senior management said, 'well, that's impossible. You can't present that. That's an unacceptable answer.' And we said, 'but that is the outlook. The costs aren't really going to come down. There's no reason to think we'll be able to magically increase our prices. So where will the profit come from?'"

And this is what Calkins is seeing today with large CPG companies. "There's just not fundamental profit growth potential for a lot of them. The easy levers have all been hit, the easy efficiency gains have been taken, and price increases are very risky in an inflationary environment. Companies are still struggling to hold price increases and to hold the line relative to private labels and other brands.

"So, you try to get bigger," he says. "And the theory is that when you become bigger, you will become more efficient. And so, Kraft Heinz comes together, and now we've got a much bigger company. But it doesn't really create a lot of value. There's not actually a lot of cost savings just because you're making both ketchup and aroni and cheese. Those are two separate businesses, different production lines, different packaging systems. Then you run out of things to do. So, do you split your company into smaller pieces and try to sell it? I'm not convinced that in Kraft Heinz's case the separate parts will be super attractive acquisition targets."

What if you don't sell off the farm but put a laser focus on cost-cutting instead? As is well documented, this is exactly what happened at Kraft Heinz. One of the company's key investors, 3G Capital, imposed a regime of zero-base budgeting, which reduced funding for innovation, marketing, R&D and customer insight, all of which are required to remain relevant. It was so focused on cost-cutting and managing its impacts that it failed to see the shift in consumer preferences for healthier alternatives – a trend that did not go unnoticed by its smaller competitors. As a result, the company suffered significant brand impairment charges in 2018, 2019 and 2025.

**"A lot of what they're doing is trying to optimize what they've got. They realized they may have bought things in which they actually don't have a core competency."**



- David Kincaid, Founder, Level 5

Kraft Heinz is not an isolated case. The entire CPG sector has experienced a major shift in economic performance. A recent article by McKinsey points out that from 1980 to 2012, publicly listed CPGs steadily generated average annual growth of 9%, based on a tried-and-true formula of strong brand-building, market and channel expansion, and cost management to generate more funds for brand-building. Investors loved it. Who wouldn't? But in the 2010s, that all changed. Population growth slowed, grocers consolidated and consumer attention and preferences

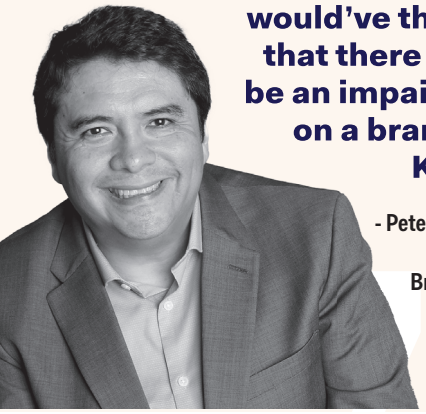
fragmented. Industry revenue grew just 2% from 2012 to 2019, and CPGs became reliant on cost reduction.

As Peter Rodriguez, F500 brand expert and founder of consultancy Brand Igniter, says, you can't cut your way to growth. "You can deliver one, two, three years of incredible profit, but the inability to create value with innovation or brand-building makes it difficult to find growth. Who would've thought that there would be an impairment on a brand like Kraft? If you are not showing consumers day in and day out how your brand makes their lives better, people forget. And before you know it, you're just a commodity."

Lack of innovation is a key factor. According to consulting firm Mintel, 2024 saw global CPG innovation reach a new low. Its Global New Product Database (GNPD) revealed that for the first five months of 2024, just 35% of global CPG launches (i.e. across food, drink, household, health, beauty, personal care and pet care) were genuinely new products. This is the lowest proportion Mintel has recorded since it began tracking in 1996. It means that in 2024, 65% of launches were no more than incremental changes: line extensions, reformulations, new packaging or relaunches.

**"You can deliver one, two, three years of incredible profit, but the inability to create value with innovation or brand-building makes it difficult to find growth. Who would've thought that there would be an impairment on a brand like Kraft?"**

**- Peter Rodriguez**
**Founder**
**Brand Igniter**



That's not to say innovation wasn't happening in the CPG space. It just wasn't the big guys who were delivering it. The Mintel report goes on to say after the shock of the 2008-9 global financial crisis, a lack of R&D investment from bigger brands created the environment for startups to use digital channels to gain a foothold in their respective categories. McKinsey analysed Nielsen data which shows that between 2016 and 2020, only 25% of CPG growth was driven by leading brands. Small and medium-sized brands captured 45% of growth and private label 30%.

Much blame for the lack of growth in large, publicly listed CPGs has been placed on the changing consumer. From an economic perspective, in the wake of COVID, ballooning consumer debt has forced consumers to spend less. According to TransUnion's Q4 2024, *Credit Industry Insights Report* (CIIR), total consumer debt in Canada reached $2.56 trillion by the end of 2024, a 4.6% increase from 2023. In 2013, the average credit card balance for Canadians was $2,000. By the third quarter of 2024, it was $4,562. All this leads to the need for consumers to spend less, which is good news for private label brands but bad news for leading brands – especially if the leaders can't show a demonstrable difference in quality compared to the private labels, which generally sell for 20% less.

Another major contributing factor has been the growing interest in healthier alternatives. It's well known that a heavy diet of ultra-processed foods contributes to obesity and chronic illnesses like diabetes. "I think that the CPG space is under tremendous pressure right now," says Sylvain Charlebois, visiting scholar in food policy and distribution at McGill University. "A lot of people are starting to move away from these products. And there's this whole campaign around ultra-processed foods that is getting people to think twice about what they're eating."

He points to the rise of GLP-1 medications and the chilling effect they are having on grocery spending. A 2024 study by Dalhousie University's Agri-Food Analytics Lab (led by Charlebois) found that an estimated 900,000 to 1.4 million Canadians were using GLP-1 drugs, or 3% to 4.6% of the adult population. Overall, 45.5% of Canadian GLP-1 users reported eating less since starting the drug, and 16.4% reported buying fewer groceries, especially sweet bakery goods, cookies, candy, carbonated soft drinks and salty snacks.

One final aspect to consider is the younger consumer's focus on purpose-led brands. David Kincaid sees this in his students at Queen's University, where he is an adjunct professor.

"Purpose-led is, for this cohort, much more important than convenience," says Kincaid. "They are not even going to bother looking online, let alone at the grocery store, for a product that doesn't align with their values. Look at the snack category. Chips, for instance. That category has exploded by offering more purpose-based propositions like using natural sea salt or organically grown potatoes. Is that an innovation in process? Is that an innovation in product? I'd say it's both."

Charlebois agrees. "When people show up at the grocery store, they are looking for something different, something unique, something healthier. I'm hard-pressed to find any good press about CPGs on this issue, to be honest. It's always bad press, especially when it comes to health. And let's face it, since COVID, a lot of people are focused on health."

# 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**






# MISSION

WITH DEEP ROOTS IN QUÉBEC AND GROWING AMBITIONS ACROSS CANADA, DESJARDINS IS USING ITS 125TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR TO REMIND CANADIANS THAT COMMUNITY-DRIVEN FINANCE CAN ALSO BE WORLD-CLASS FINANCE.

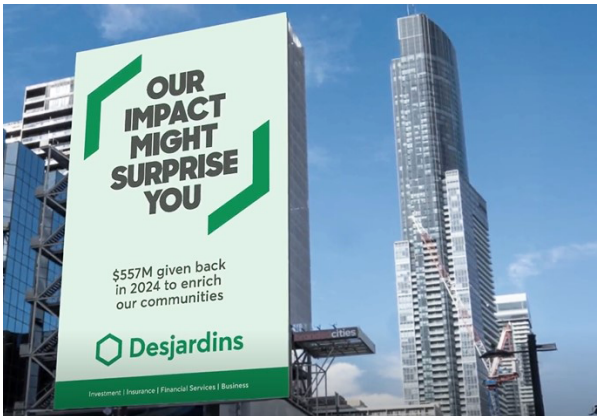
Alphonse Desjardins didn't just establish a credit union – he founded a movement. While working as a French-language stenographer in Canada's House of Commons in the 1890s, Desjardins was shocked to learn just how unfair lending practices in Canada could be. (In one case cited in a Parliamentary debate, a borrower in Montreal had incurred over $5,000 in interest on a $150 loan.) Incensed by such predatory practices, Desjardins decided to do something about it.

He studied cooperative banking models in Europe, and combined the best elements of each to design a fairer financial institution. Desjardins called this new model a caisse populaire, and it became the forerunner of the credit unions that now operate across North America. In December 1900, Alphonse and his wife, Dorimène, co-founded the first savings and credit cooperative on this continent. It was located in Lévis, Québec, and it went on to become the Desjardins Group, now the largest cooperative financial institution in North America.

Desjardins provides its members and clients with a full suite of financial services, but instead of turning profits, it gives back to the communities where it operates – to the tune of more than $500 million each year. Yet despite its national reach, Desjardins remains far better known in Québec than elsewhere in Canada.

In 2025, Desjardins dominated the BrandSpark Most









**From left:** Alphonse Desjardins established the first caisse populaire in Lévis, Québec in 1900, laying the foundation for the cooperative movement; Desjardins brings its values to life as title sponsor of the ROM's Planet Shark exhibition; national outdoor advertising highlights the brand's scale, ambition and cooperative purpose; Desjardins supports women's sport as jersey sponsor of AFC Toronto in the Northern Super League.

# DRIVEN

BY **TY BURKE**

Trusted Awards at the regional level, winning seven Québec awards. Now, Desjardins is working to raise its profile in the rest of the country.

"Our brand history is completely different in Québec," says Björn Bruschke, VP marketing at Desjardins. "We filled a gap when Québecers were getting taken advantage of and didn't have access to financing. That legacy is quite engrained in Québec."

Outside Québec, that story isn't as familiar. Desjardins' origin story aligns with Québec's sense of identity. Francophones were historically disempowered in their own province, and institutions like Desjardins helped empower them. But that local history doesn't resonate as deeply elsewhere. As Desjardins celebrates the 125th anniversary of its founding, it is seeking to ensure that both its values and its ambition are better known to Canadians from coast to coast.

"We didn't talk much about being a cooperative in our 125th anniversary campaign, but we did create content that highlights our cooperative values – about some of the attributes that make our brand different," says Bruschke. "We are not a publicly traded company, so we can make decisions that other financial institutions would not make – decisions that serve to financially empower our members and clients. We are connected to our communities, and we really talked about what it means to bring cooperative values to life."

In 2025, Desjardins created an integrated campaign that showcases its scale, performance and ambition. One long-form digital ad begins with a montage of grainy black and white photographs from the earliest days of the cooperative, before tracing Desjardins' trajectory forward more than a century. It emphasizes that Desjardins is a collective enterprise made up of its members and clients, while also underscoring its position as a high-performing organization. It is the sixth largest financial cooperative in the world, with more than $470 billion in assets.

The ad highlights core cooperative values like integrity and commitment, while pointing out ways it

puts these values to work – from helping clients buying their first home to its work in international finance and leadership in inclusive finance. It concludes on a note of bold optimism: "We are 7.8 million people, moving into the future together. Ambition has a name: Desjardins."

For Bruschke, the tonal shift was overdue. Desjardins' marketing has not tended to emphasize the organization's performance – even though its return on risk and profitability have sometimes outperformed Canada's big commercial banks.

"As a brand, we may be too humble. We are ambitious, and we want to connect. There are different audiences we can support with our full suite of financial services offerings," he says. "Desjardins is known as an insurer, but we have a lot of other business sectors. We have commercial banking. We have capital markets. We are an institutional asset manager, and we are a retail banker. We are much more than just an insurer: we are a full-service financial institution with the ambition to grow."







**Right:** Through its GoodSpark Fund, Desjardins is investing $280 million by 2027 in projects that strengthens communities and drives local development.

## Community connections

One aspect of Desjardins' cooperative values is having a presence in the communities where it operates. Sponsoring community and cultural events brings the brand visibility, while enriching the lives of its members and clients. Desjardins sponsors museum exhibitions, sports teams and other events. It is the title sponsor of a touring exhibition on sharks held at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto in 2025-26, and the jersey sponsor for AFC Toronto, a professional soccer franchise playing its inaugural season in the Northern Super League, the top level of Canadian women's soccer.

"Connecting with our communities is so important," says Bruschke. "Supporting women in sport makes our communities better, and it inspires younger women."

During the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, Desjardins found a unique way to support members of the community during a challenging time. In 2020, Desjardins put its product campaigns on hold and launched a campaign called "Send a Solo," produced in collaboration with its agency of record Bleublancrouge and the Humanise Collective. The initiative invited Canadians to nominate friends or family to receive doorstep performances from local musicians. Each performance was filmed and turned into short documentary-style videos that captured moments of connection during a difficult, lonely time. The two-week initiative worked with forty musicians to deliver performances to 150 Canadians, with results shared across Bell Media's TV, radio, digital and social channels.

"It was right at the beginning of the pandemic, and that required an incredible amount of coordination and production elements," says Bruschke. "Bleublancrouge pulled it off without a hitch."

## Acquisition of State Farm

In 2015, Desjardins acquired the Canadian operations of State Farm Insurance. The acquisition immediately transformed Desjardins into one of the largest insurers in the country – and with that came some major changes. The marketing team had to transition the State Farm brand under the Desjardins umbrella, while ensuring it remained relevant in the very competitive property and casualty insurance sector.

"It was a pivotal moment in our brand strategy – and an incredibly exciting one," says Bruschke. "But it was also a massive undertaking. We had to sunset what was then the most well-known brand in the market and bring it into Desjardins Insurance. And today, State Farm really is not well known in Canada anymore, other than some spillover from the US market."





**Right:** Desjardins turns a game of charades into a full-on performance, capturing the joy of connection – with help from Bleublancrouge.

Desjardins has carved out a brand niche that speaks to its core values. In the "Sizable Care" television ad campaign, a literal giant serves as an avatar for the financial services cooperative. The ad begins with the friendly giant waking in an enormous bed one morning, before fixing his 'Desjardins Insurance' name tag to his shirt, and going for a walk through a small town, helping its residents as he goes.

Backed by a song with the refrain of "I am by your side," the Desjardins giant push-starts a stalled school bus, barehand catches a baseball on a collision course with a nearby window, helps a neighbour fix a flat tire and moves a fallen tree. The ad concludes with: "Insurance with a heart so big it shows."

The approach helps set Desjardins apart from Canada's other large insurers, which are publicly traded, profit-motivated companies. And standing out is the point. After all, insurers are selling a product that consumers hope they won't need to use.

"The beauty of insurance marketing is the challenge of it. The number-one driver for consumers is price," Bruschke says. "And it has been that way ever since I became a marketer. So, number one, you need to make sure that you have a competitive offering you can communicate with prospective clients."

Clients who have been through a claim really understand its value, he adds. They remember whether an insurer was there to back them or not when they needed it the most. But for those who have not claimed, they need to know how insurance will protect them.

"Consumers usually shop for two insurers, so you need to make sure your brand is well known," says Bruschke. "But you also need to be sure you relate to them, that you give advice and are transparent. As an insurance marketer, that is a way you can set yourself apart."

Bruschke points to a customer outreach program Desjardins made when rates jumped across the insurance industry in the early 2020s. Premiums were increasing across the industry, but it affected some more than others.

"Consumers saw their rates were going up, but they didn't know why it was happening," says Bruschke. "We sent communications to our home and auto insurance clients and members who had had a certain level of premium increase. We took the time to provide details and explain the reasons for the rate increase. That really brought it back to our members and clients, and why their premiums were going up."

## Marketing with a message

Desjardins offers a wide variety of financial services products, but its mission is consistent and it infuses all of its advertising. Desjardins seeks to financially empower its members and clients, and to make a difference in the communities it serves. No matter what the financial services cooperative is selling, this mission is part of the message.

"When you have one brand, it gives you a certain consistency. Desjardins is known for having strong cooperative values," says Bruschke. "This is who we are, and it brings our brand purpose to life. More and more, consumers want to do business with companies that share their values. They want a competitive product at a good price, but they also want to know what you stand for as an organization.

"Consumers want to do business with organizations they believe in and that they trust. And for us, that is a differentiator."

# BRANDS OF THE YEAR

The most powerful brands don't just sell products – they stand for something. They reflect what people care about, what they hope for and what they believe in. In a year defined by noise and uncertainty, the brands that stood out were those that stayed grounded in conviction – finding steady growth through empathy, creativity and purpose. This year's Brands of the Year prove that belief still drives the best work. **Kids Help Phone** turned listening into leadership, transforming from a helpline into a national movement that makes mental health part of everyday conversation. **Clutch** rebuilt confidence in car buying through transparency, technology and a distinctly human touch. **Sleep Country** reframed rest as wellness, showing that balance is as important as ambition. The **PWHL** brought women's hockey into the mainstream, proving that visibility can inspire an entire generation. And **Terroni** reminded us that tradition isn't a constraint – it's a compass that can guide a brand forward for decades. Each of these brands stands for something bigger than itself. Together, they show that belief isn't just good ethics – it's good business. Because when brands lead with conviction, people don't just buy in. They believe right back.

**Right:**
Rethink's "See My Name" campaign for Molson and the PWHL moved nameplates lower and placed Molson above the numbers, elevating player visibility. The effort won seven Effies and multiple industry awards.




# THE PWHL'S POWER PLAY

From Barbie to Bauer, the PWHL's purpose-driven partnerships are fueling expansion and winning fans worldwide. BY **JONATHAN RUSSELL**

The world was ready for the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL). More than ready. Even before the puck dropped on its inaugural season in 2023-24, the league already had its first sponsor: Canadian Tire. "They committed a significant amount of money to us before they ever knew what we were going to look like on the ice," Amy Scheer, the PWHL's EVP of business operations, tells *strategy*.

Since then, the PWHL's brand partnerships have grown significantly. The league and team partnership portfolio nearly doubled from its first to its second season, increasing from 40 to 60 brands, with notable additions including Ally, Bravado, EA Sports, Factor Meals, Intact Insurance, Midea, SharkNinja and, most recently, DoorDash. "In the middle of our first season, EA Sports said, 'We want to put the PWHL players into NHL 24.' So now you can play NHL on EA Sports with PWHL players," Scheer adds.

Being able to play yourself in a video game is about as clear a sign as any that you've made it.

Heading into its third season (2025-26), the PWHL has experienced success in all areas. For starters, the league is already seeing expansion, from six to eight teams, welcoming teams in Vancouver and Seattle to its existing roster: Toronto Sceptres, Montréal Victoire, Ottawa Charge, New York Sirens, Boston Fleet and Minnesota Frost.

The league's fanbase is also seeing significant growth. In its second season (2024-25), the PWHL drew a total of 737,455 fans across 102 games (regular season and playoffs) – an increase of 52.2% from the previous season, which saw 485,530 fans across 72 regular season games and 13 playoff games. In fact, the PWHL has broken multiple attendance records and holds the worldwide all-time record for a women's hockey game, which was surpassed twice during its inaugural season – including the current record of 21,105 fans, set on April 20, 2024, at the Bell Centre in Montréal.

For Scheer, the PWHL's success starts with the




**Above:** Barbie x Tim Hortons turned a Toronto shop pink to launch limited-edition PWHL dolls of Marie-Philip Poulin and Sarah Nurse, sparking excitement among girls and families.

product. And success in sport is something she knows about, having held leadership roles with the NFL, the WNBA's Connecticut Sun and New York Liberty, MLS's New York City Football Club and New York Red Bulls and the NBA's New Jersey Nets.

"We were put in a position where we could bring all of the best hockey players in the world under one umbrella," Scheer explains, adding that early investment from the Mark Walter Group was critical. "We were able to launch with the highest level of hockey anyone has ever seen, with stars across every team. Our players are authentic, true to who they are. We've made a promise that we're going to put the best product on the ice, and we've lived up to that. Every game counts, every point counts."

With more than 1.2 million attendees across two seasons, global streaming in 106 countries and a digital footprint spanning 150+ nations, the PWHL is setting the standard for purpose-driven, high-impact sports partnerships.

And these partnerships "involve more than just putting their name on a rink board," Scheer adds. She cites a summer 2025 campaign partnering Barbie and Tim Hortons, in which the QSR chain turned a Toronto location pink to celebrate the launch of a limited-edition PWHL doll collaboration with PWHL superstars Marie-Philip Poulin and Sarah Nurse. "They engaged with our league and with our fans at every level, [resonating] with young girls and with parents about what their child could be and what we stand for," Scheer says.

In another partnership, Molson Coors signed a multi-year sponsorship agreement with the PWHL that kicked off with an award-winning campaign, "See My Name," during the Toronto-Montreal game at the Mattamy Athletic Centre on March 8, 2024 – International Women's Day. For that campaign, done in collaboration with creative agency Rethink, the beer brand appeared in the space above the jersey numbers, which is normally hidden by the player's hair, while the player names were moved below their numbers to make them visible. The campaign brought home seven Effie awards, as well as six Atomic and two *strategy* awards.

The PWHL's fanbase skews young, affluent, family-oriented and more than 60% female, making it highly attractive to brands. Furthermore, the league boasts the highest engagement rate on Instagram of 13 major sports leagues, with a 9.4%, and the second-highest engagement rate across all platforms with a 4.9% cross-platform rate. And it's only increasing year-over-year. Engagement across the PWHL's league and team social media platforms

– including X, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Bluesky and YouTube – grew by 68% over the first season.

Beyond social media, the PWHL and the players have made an even deeper connection with fans, through the league's "Dear Hockey" tribute to kick off its first season and its "Dear Fans" tribute ahead of its second, which was part of the larger campaign, "Here's to the Bold," developed in collaboration with creative partner Uninterrupted Canada (UNC).

Programs like "Ready, Set, Skate," meanwhile, offer camps and clinics for young girls that have expanded to all eight PWHL markets. Plus, the league and its official jersey partner Bauer have committed that 3% of licensing fees will help subsidize equipment for young girls.

Most importantly, Scheer says, the connection starts with the players. "If you ever watch them when they come out for their pre-game skate, they'll go up to the glass and they'll actually interact with the fans. They'll throw the pucks. After the game, they'll sign autographs. You'll see players and fans trading pucks for friendship bracelets and candy for sticks, so there's this whole interaction before and after the game that happens between our fans."

For the PWHL – as a brand – the product, players, campaigns and grassroots initiatives combine to make an impact on the sports world and beyond, so that the women's hockey league can stand alongside other success stories in women's sports such as the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) and the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL).

And recognition of the PWHL is coming from outside of the sporting world. Beyond earning a *strategy* 2025 Brand of the Year nod, the PWHL topped the Harris Poll's first-ever Canadian edition of its highly regarded Reputation Quotient. Based on more than 5,500 interviews with Canadians across the country, it offers a comprehensive ranking of how the "most visible" companies in Canada are perceived by the public across key metrics including trust, ethics, vision and products.

"This is proof of concept," Scheer says of the league's successes and potential. "The PWHL has proven that there is a space for professional women's hockey in the sports ecosystem in North America, and we're here to stay. We're here to make a difference in people's lives. We want a safe space for young girls to have a place to compete and to build confidence and self-esteem and leadership skills. We're on a mission, and we want people to be a part of our mission and join us every day. We need everyone's help; we're not in it alone – the fans matter."




**Above:** Fans don't just watch the PWHL – they engage live and online: players toss pucks, sign autographs and trade friendship bracelets while social engagement leads all professional leagues and fuels record attendance.




# SLEEP COUNTRY CANADA IS DREAMING BIGGER

Strategic acquisitions, fresh creative and a wellness-first message keep Sleep Country thriving in tough retail conditions. BY **CHRISTOPHER LOMBARDO**

Once known for its earworm jingle and straightforward mattress sales pitch, Sleep Country Canada has steadily evolved into a brand that reshapes how Canadians think about sleep.

It's an evolution that has been tested in an unforgiving retail environment, yet the company has continued to thrive, transforming its business and marketing through strategic acquisitions and by reframing mattresses, sheets and bedding as essential to holistic health and wellness rather than routine household purchases.

"The products we sell, for the most part, seem like a commodity. Therefore, consumers, when they usually think of us, it's likely [going to be seen as] a grudge purchase," says Nuno Bamberg, Sleep Country Canada's SVP of brand and marketing.

According to Bamberg, creating an emotional, relevant connection can be difficult, especially when the competition includes not just traditional brands, but "any form of content that's more engaging than mattress content could ever be."

For now, at least, Sleep Country is resting comfortably: it's the number-one player in the Canadian mattress industry. Within mattresses, Sleep Country Canada (SCC) currently holds a 20.8% share, with share growth in both Q4 2024



**Above left:** After IKEA asked "U up?", Sleep Country cheekily replied "Sorry, was asleep" – turning a playful jab into one of the year's most talked-about brand duels. **Above right:** From "grudge purchase" to wellness essential, Sleep Country's refreshed brand strategy is redefining how Canadians think about their sleep.

(+2.0 pts vs. Q1 2024, driven by +11% SCC sales growth) and Q1 2025 (+0.7 pts vs. Q1 2024, driven by +6% SCC sales growth). Those steady gains, consistently outpacing the category, have accelerated since its brand-centric pivot in September 2024.

While Sleep Country still asks people through song, "why buy a mattress anywhere else?" its tone has changed – even if the tune hasn't.

As Bamberg explains, bed and sleep messaging can be didactic – don't drink too much coffee, don't stay out late – but Sleep Country has taken a decidedly different approach. A recent campaign by Camp Jefferson prioritized a proper night's sleep above hustle culture, with a "power to the people" pro-zzzs message around sleep shaming.

It's also added levity. With support from AOR Publicis Canada this year, the brand borrowed a tactic that is more commonly seen with QSRs: chiding the competition.

In a similar way to how KFC took friendly shots at rival Popeyes asking why anyone would choose the latter's herbs and seasonings over The Colonel's original recipe of 11 herbs and spices, or Wendy's thinly veiled shots at McDonald's with repeated references to "fresh and never frozen" burgers, Sleep Country got in on the act with a bedding/mattress competitor.

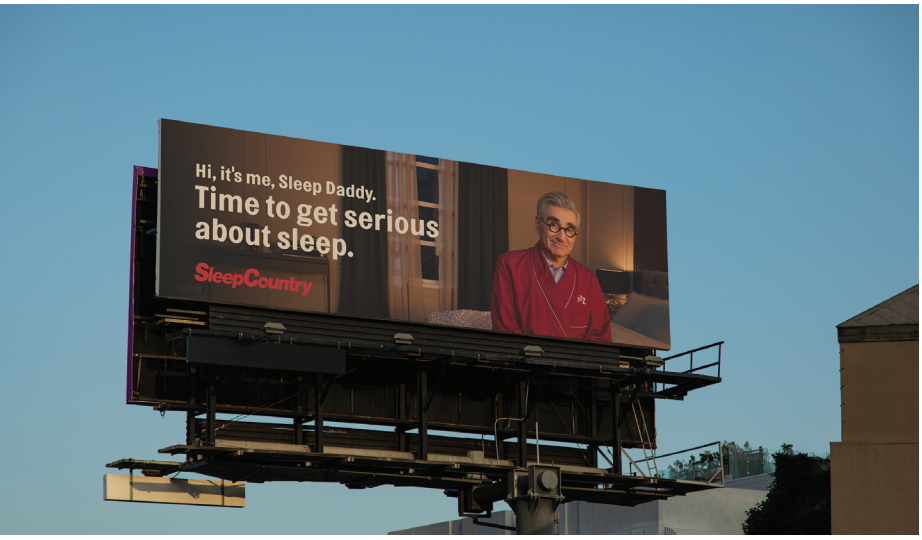
In response to IKEA's "u up?" campaign, the retailer unveiled strategic billboards saying, "Sorry was asleep." After the "mattress war" the two put their squabble to bed at *strategy*'s CMO forum.

And again with support from Publicis, the company launched a new "provocative, funny, father figure," brand face: "Sleep Daddy," played by *Schitt's Creek* star and *SCTV* icon Eugene Levy.

Levy's comic relief has had a serious sales impact: since launch, sales are up 11.3% year-over year, while digital performance (early read, ~3 weeks) showed a Meta 28% lift in share of voice versus the four weeks prior.








According to the brand, it reached more than three million Canadians, while Google (CTV/YouTube) reported a +3.2% relative lift in overall consideration, +87K lifted users, search spikes of +54% for "Sleep Country Canada" and +45% for "Eugene Levy."

Ultimately, Bamberg says the campaign has lifted sales and expanded reach among net-new audiences, increasing consideration and branded search.

In a retail landscape that has seen Canadian giants fold like, well, bedsheets, Sleep Country Canada continues to grow by expanding its footprint. Recently, it entered the UK through its acquisition of mattress company Simba, marking its first expansion outside North America. And before that, growth came through strategic acquisitions: Endy, Hush, Silk & Snow and Casper's Canadian assets.

To gain a foothold in Quebec, Dormez-Vous has been key. Founded in the 1990s by current Sleep Country president and CEO Stewart Schaefer and acquired by Sleep Country in 2006, it carries legacy weight in the province. Respecting nuances is vital, which is why recent brand spots feature the polarizing comedian Marc Labrèche in the French-language market, mirroring the paternal Eugene Levy role.

Sleep Country Canada has also leaned into partnerships and retail experiences. Recently, its Endy brand partnered with the WNBA, laddering back to its holistic sleep positioning, but in this case, connecting sleep performance and optimal sport performance while reaching new audiences. At Toronto's Yorkdale shopping mall it launched a new luxury concept store called The Rest, specifically targeting a high-end clientele with a curated selection of premium mattresses and bedding.

On the CSR front, Sleep Country emphasizes the link between a proper night's rest and mental health, and has partnerships that donate to Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)'s mental health programs, activating in March for World Sleep Day.

The retailer also teams up with Veritree, a climate tech enterprise that plants trees

**Left**: Eugene Levy stars as "Sleep Daddy," bringing humour – and double-digit sales growth – to Sleep Country's latest national campaign.

around the world in an effort to take a stand against climate change. For every Green Glove Delivery service (where teams fully assemble and set up new mattresses and beds for customers) Sleep Country provides, Veritree plants one tree in British Columbia, where Sleep Country sources the wood for its box springs, with plans to reforest in Quebec in the future.

The big-picture strategy is built on the premise that "There's no one-size-fits-all solution for how Canadians sleep," as consumer preferences and lifestyles vary.

As Bamberg puts it, each brand in the portfolio is anchored by the same North Star: helping Canadians get a better night's sleep and elevating the role sleep plays in their lives.

Each of the subsidiaries has the freedom to define its identity, he notes, connect authentically with its community, and grow in ways that are right for its customers. That independence is what makes them relevant and trusted.

At the same time, they are supported by the scale, insights and long-term discipline of the Sleep Country group, which provides tools and resources to accelerate growth while ensuring alignment around business performance and customer-first principles.

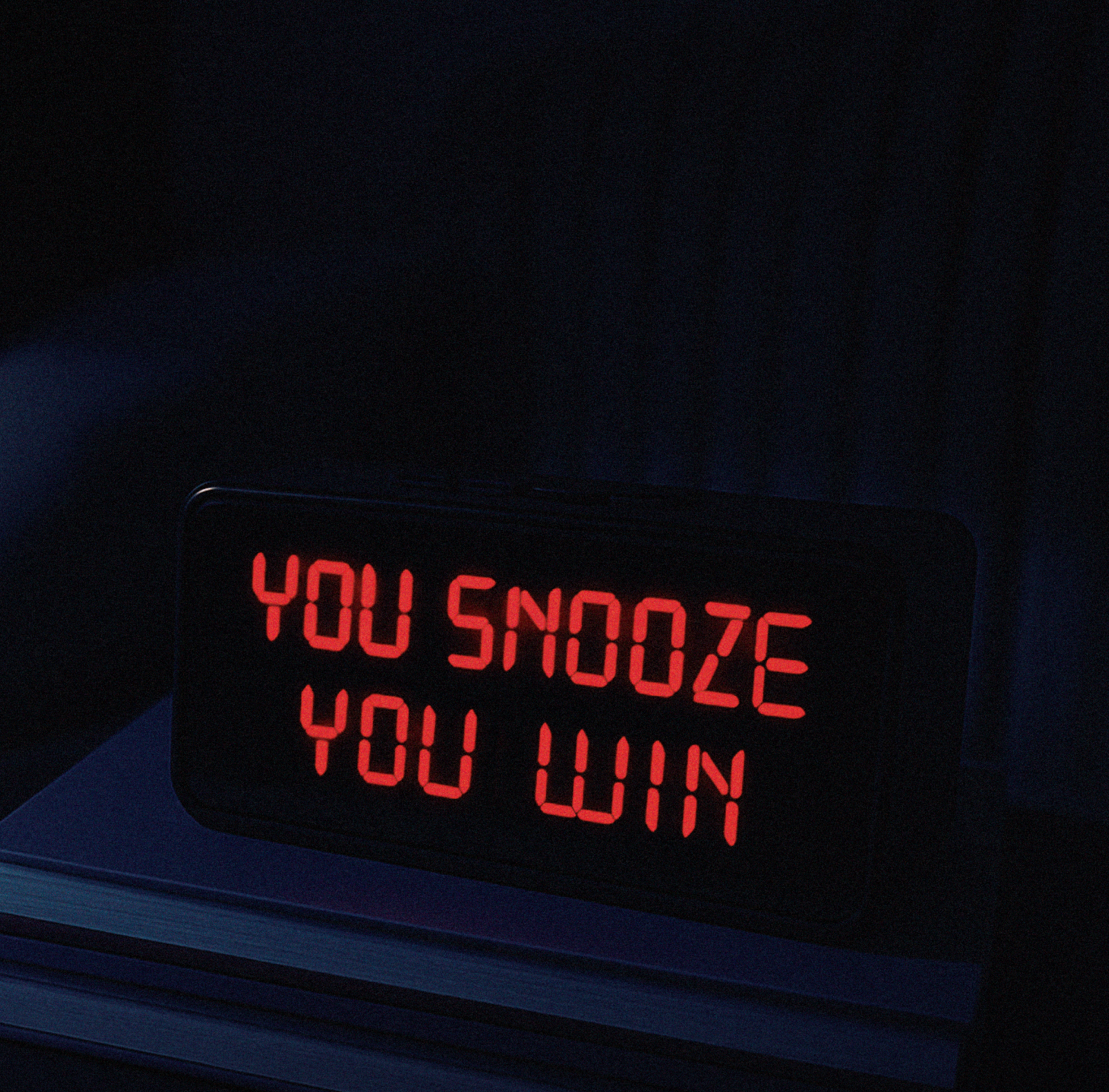
This dual approach – freedom at the brand level, strength at the group level – protects what makes each brand special.

That balance shapes how the brands show up together in the market. Having a cohesive voice, one that draws on the same understanding of how Canadians live, shop and sleep, is foundational when it comes to telling a coherent story.

"Disciplined differentiation gives each brand a clearly defined lane, so they can win with their own audiences without cannibalising each other," Bamberg says. And unified ambition means it holds every brand to the same standard of growth, creativity and impact, even if the way they get there looks different.

"That's why our portfolio works: the brands don't blur into each other. They each stand tall on their own, but together they reinforce Sleep Country's leadership in the category."






Congratulations to our partners at Sleep Country on being named a strategy Brand of the Year.

SleepCountry Publicis

DORMEZ-VOUS? ENDY Hush. Casper silk&snow SIMBA




# DRIVING CHANGE AT FULL SPEED

Halifax-based Clutch is modernizing the used-car industry by merging digital ease with human trust to make car buying fun again. BY **LAURIE WILSON**

Buying a car should be exciting, at least in the mind of Clutch founder and COO Stephen Seibel. But before he launched the digital-first auto retailer, his experience was that it was the opposite. It was stressful, opaque and often outdated. From mounds of paperwork to sketchy sales practices, the process has long been dominated by frustration and a lack of trust. Hence the simple goal of Clutch: to make buying and selling cars seamless, trustworthy and distinctly Canadian.

Founded in Halifax in 2016, Clutch is among Canada's fastest-growing auto companies, powered by tech but rooted in a commitment to a better human experience. "The main focus of the business at first was to make that buying experience better," says Seibel.

For Seibel, the problem was obvious. Traditional used-car buying is riddled with friction: there's no cooling-off period, no easy returns and customers are left to navigate a world of haggling and hidden fees. "One of the biggest things is putting a money-back guarantee on every single unit," he says. "It alleviates the issue of having second thoughts, discovering something about the quality of the vehicle, finding out that a car seat doesn't fit, or that it doesn't fit in the garage. Relying on luck is insane – something we absolutely wanted to fix."

From the outset, the company sought to bridge the trust gap. Promises of test drives delivered to a customer's door, separate appointments for delivery and the "touchstone" 10-day return period were offered not only as

conveniences but as trust-building exercises.

Yet Seibel acknowledges that no amount of processes or guarantees alone can fully convince Canadians to try a new way of buying a car. That's where brand and marketing come in.

"The only thing more powerful than brand, for us, is someone who's bought or sold a car using us and they tell their friends about it," he says. Clutch's marketing strategy keys in on that social aspect while making the experience feel approachable, credible and – ideally – fun.

Mark Arvai, Clutch's head of marketing, puts it bluntly: "Auto advertising is mostly boring and forgettable. We saw that as an opportunity. By embracing a cheeky tone, cinematic style and bold design, we've built a clear set of brand assets and deployed them consistently."

While many tech companies put their marketing might behind digital channels, Clutch has invested heavily in traditional media – TV, radio, OOH – in hopes of achieving what Arvai calls "mental availability" among mass audiences.

Promotional efforts also serve as a platform toward legitimacy. Professional sports partnerships have included 2022's multi-year broadcast sponsorship deal with the NHL and this year's national TV campaigns created by Toronto's Mint Agency, featuring Toronto Raptors players Kelly Olynyk and Immanuel Quickley, have rolled out nationally.

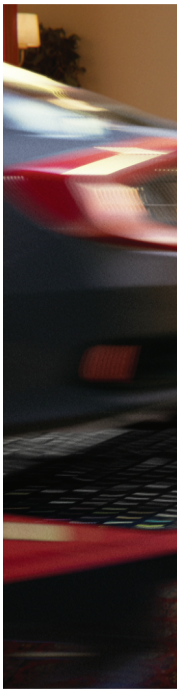
Buying up dedicated space and regularly updating billboard placements on the Gardiner Expressway in Toronto, and similar region-specific OOH activations in Halifax and Vancouver, have helped keep the brand top of mind among urbanites and commuters alike.

"Anyone can make a decent ad on Facebook, Instagram or YouTube," Arvai says. "Not every company can afford an NBA partnership or a big billboard. So, we really focus on what some of those flagship partnerships and media can do to build legitimacy. A big billboard, especially connecting to a commuting group, it's unmissable."

Clutch doesn't stop at grabbing attention; it addresses real consumer friction. A 2022 campaign created with agency Performance Art positioned the brand as a safer option, urging consumers to ditch dealerships and associated used-car hucksters.

More recently, Clutch has been working with Mint on a project basis, first for a March campaign focused on speed, appealing to Canadians who need to buy or sell immediately. A rollout this past summer emphasized ease of use, while highlighting Clutch's massive car-refurbishment facilities in Halifax, Mississauga and Richmond, as well as the



**Right:** Toronto Raptors stars Immanuel Quickley and Kelly Olynyk team up with Clutch to make car buying feel like game night; Clutch aims to turn the hassle of private sales into a simple online experience, highlighting how the brand makes selling as easy as buying.

employees who populate them. The work, launched in July, led to a 25% lift in offers on the first day.

"We focused on the idea that there's actually a lot of people already doing this, and that might make it feel a little bit less scary," Arvai says. "That combination of things – showing scale, showing real workshops, real people working on cars – we thought was really helpful for people to believe that we were a legitimate business to trust."

Clutch CEO Dan Park stresses that branding is inseparable from operational consistency. "The same way you can get a Big Mac in Halifax, Calgary or Toronto and it tastes pretty much the same, we want



a Clutch car and the Clutch standard to be the same across every market," he says.

Honing operating procedures is the key to delivering Clutch's promises at scale. The company says it buys more than three million dollars in car inventory every day and that it has purchased more than one billion dollars' worth of vehicles to date. Challenges come with that volume: inspecting, reconditioning and certifying thousands of vehicles requires not just skilled mechanics but a network of facilities capable of handling those logistics.

"We've hired every single mechanic we can hire and there's still not enough within the country to do what we need to do," Seibel says. "Now it's discussions of how we need to start some form of trade school. We need to start training more people to become mechanics."

Even with this scale, Clutch is mindful about growth. Park likens expansion to an S-curve: periods of rapid growth followed by deliberate pauses to fix processes, optimize logistics and ensure quality.

"When you grow this quickly, processes and structures will break, and those are usually good times to pause and deliberately slow down growth or stop growth," he says.

The scaling approach is paired with rigorous marketing metrics. Arvai says brand awareness has tripled since 2024, while share of search – a leading indicator of future demand – is up 450%.

Park emphasizes that trust and standardization are the heart of the Clutch proposition. Certified mechanics rigorously inspect every vehicle, providing a "Clutch standard" alongside provincial safety certifications. Once the customer experience is dialled in, the marketers step in to amplify.

Arvai says Clutch now leads the category in ad recall across Canada and that customer acquisition costs have been halved, even as transaction volumes continue to rise. Brand and growth teams work closely to ensure marketing efforts complement operational improvements.

Looking ahead, Clutch is taking a methodical approach to expansion. It could enter Alberta tomorrow but instead will wait until later in the new year, when inventory, logistics and brand messaging are ready.

"We wouldn't launch a new city or market without heavy brand investment," Arvai says. "It's when those things happen in unison that our market launches have been successful in the past."

The company's ambition is national as it looks to expand beyond its foundational facilities in Nova Scotia, Ontario and B.C. Seibel says the plan is to offer services in every province in the next three to five years. Achieving that goal will require not just large-scale facilities, but continued workforce development, technology upgrades and process optimization.

The promise, easy to define but much more difficult to execute, is simple: a safe, predictable and modern car-buying experience. "We want people to walk away feeling like they're ahead of the curve, like they're an early adopter," Park says. "I think we've got a team focused on delivering an experience so exceptional that you can't help but share."




# ANSWERING THE CALL

By speaking their language, Kids Help Phone reimagined what support can sound like for a generation that grew up online. The result: a rebrand that makes empathy modern. BY **CHELSEA CLARKE**

For more than three decades, the voice on the other end of the line at Kids Help Phone has been a source of comfort for millions of young Canadians. But in an era when connection happens by text or online, the organization needed to meet its audience where they are. By reinventing how it delivers help, KHP has not only modernized its own brand but reshaped a national conversation about what mental health support can – and should – look like for a new generation.

"When I think about the impact KHP has had over the past decade, what stands out most is the deep level of trust we've built with young people across Canada," says Rebecca Stutley, group head and EVP brand, storytelling and communications. "Seventy-five percent of youth who reach out to KHP tell us something they've never shared with anyone else before. For many, we are the only truly safe and trusted space to turn."

That trust – and the brand reinvention it enabled – has helped KHP on its mission to support as many young Canadians as possible. Consistently ranked among Canada's most trusted and transparent charities, its impact has even reached the national stage: former president and CEO Katherine Hay was appointed to the Senate of Canada as a result of her advocacy for youth mental health in 2025. Since 2020, KHP has facilitated more than 22 million youth interactions across the country.

But perhaps its most impressive achievement is a cultural one: turning help-seeking from something stigmatized into an act of courage.

The result of a multi-year collaboration between KHP and McCann, the organization's evolution had to mirror how young people live, communicate and connect today. In 2022, it launched its most ambitious brand overhaul to date with "Help in All Sizes." The platform reframed the organization's visual identity around the idea that no issue is too big or too small to deserve help, and introduced a modular logo in more than 14 colours to reflect Canada's youth diversity. It extended to OOH, digital, social, PR and branded merchandise.

"Shifting KHP from being seen primarily as a crisis hotline to being recognized as a national youth mental health movement required redefining how we communicate who we are and what we stand for," says Stutley. "It was about moving from a functional narrative focused on crisis response to a more emotional, human-centred story about feelings."

That story came to life in 2023 with the launch of "Feel Out Loud," a national fundraising and awareness platform with a goal of reaching $300 million. The largest youth mental health initiative in Canadian history, it debuted with an anthem video featuring more than 50

Canadian artists and has since inspired countless cultural touchpoints, from Olympic partnerships to social media activations.

"The 'Feel Out Loud' platform expresses our evolution beautifully," says Stutley. "Telling stories that celebrate self-expression, emotion and the many ways young people show up as their authentic selves reinforces that "Feel Out Loud" isn't literal, finite or one-size-fits-all – it's an open invitation, a call to action and sometimes even a reassuring whisper in your ear."

That invitation wasn't just for youth. It was also for adults: the parents, teachers, donors and corporate partners who help sustain the organization. "One of its greatest strengths is that it also invites caring adults to identify with their inner child. We can say to adults, 'give your feelings a place to go,' and invite them to donate or get involved," she says.

Making "Feel Out Loud" resonate not just with youth, but with the adults who support them, meant building a story big enough for everyone to see themselves in. That's the challenge McCann helped solve.

"One of the biggest challenges was to shift Canadians' perception of youth mental health," says Josh Hansen, McCann's CSO and strategy lead on KHP. "For many adults, struggle is seen as part of the journey of adolescence. To frame the current state of youth as one that requires additional support was critical in establishing the unique and necessary role that KHP has evolved into." That reframing also led to a deeper truth that now anchors the "Feel Out Loud" platform: mental health isn't binary. "Often when we hear about mental health in popular culture, we defer to struggles like anxiety or depression," he says. "When, in fact, mental health is a spectrum of emotions and feelings."

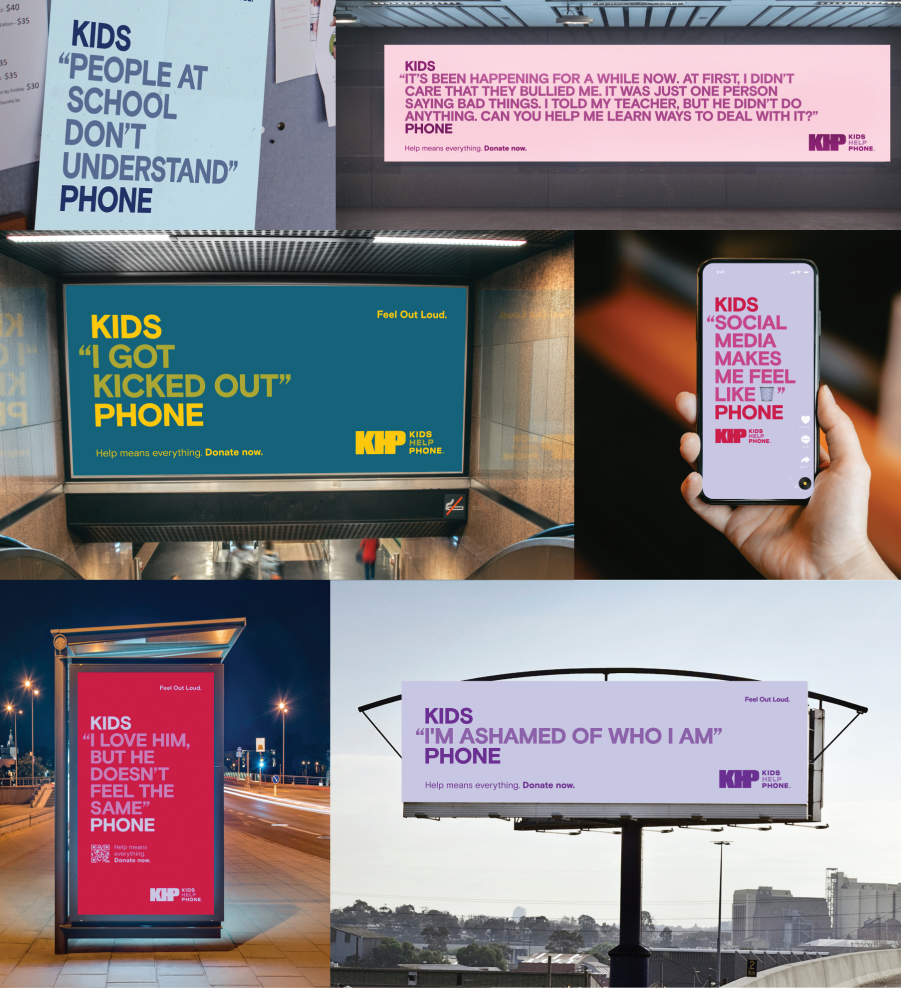
For Athina Lalljee, McCann's creative director and creative lead on KHP, she knew she needed to turn that emotional truth into a brand voice that would resonate with young people. "Youth can spot inauthenticity instantly," she says. "We knew the work had to reflect their realities, their language and the pace of the culture they live in. 'Feel Out Loud' gave us that flexibility: it's not a campaign line, it's a mindset that lets us create space for every feeling, big or small."

The creative canvas continues to grow. KHP's latest campaign, "Help Means Everything," reinterprets The Beatles' "Help!" to reflect many definitions of support. Activated across TV, digital and social, it uses cinematic metaphors drawn from real youth experiences – loneliness, loss and self-acceptance – to make "help" feel personal, multidimensional and modern. "The line 'help means everything' is intentionally layered," says Stutley. "For adults, it invites them to help, while for youth it reminds them that KHP is here for anything and everything."




**Left:** Kids Help Phone's "Help in All Sizes" rebrand reframed help-seeking as an act of courage, using bold, modular design and colour to reflect the diversity of youth in Canada; **Above:** KHP's 24/7 text-based crisis service meets young people where they are, in more than 100 languages.

That layered definition of "help" also informs how KHP builds partnerships, turning ordinary touchpoints into moments of connection. In its 2024 collaboration with Lactalis and Cheestrings, KHP launched "No Lonely Lunches," a back-to-school campaign that placed KHP's contact information directly on snack packaging nationwide. The initiative was inspired by an insight from KHP data: one in three young people feel distressed at the thought of returning to school. By normalizing help-seeking during that potentially isolating moment, KHP proved that help really does come in all sizes – from national campaigns to the smallest everyday gestures.




**Above:** From digital billboards to snack-pack partnerships, KHP's national "Feel Out Loud" and "Help Means Everything" campaigns have done a remarkable job bringing youth mental health into everyday spaces.

Through every partnership, KHP keeps one principle constant: fundraising is about relationships, not transactions. "We focus on building trust and shared understanding," Stutley says. "By connecting caring adults, whether they work in government or in a company, with the real issues, feelings and experiences of young people, we're able to find pathways for authentic engagement that not only raise funds but also drive real impact for youth mental health."

While KHP's brand voice has expanded, so has its infrastructure for care. Over the past seven years, the organization has introduced new technologies and programs that have made mental health support more immediate, inclusive and accessible. It launched a 24/7 text-based crisis service, extended support in over 100 languages through translator services, and introduced online messaging for youth without mobile access. Dedicated initiatives like Finding Hope for First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth; New Journeys for newcomers; and RiseUp, the country's first mental health support program for Black youth, have made KHP's reach national and intersectional.

Inside the organization, the creation of the KHP Innovation and Applied Research Accelerator has supported its vision. The accelerator processes millions of anonymized data points from youth interactions, analyzing real-time language and sentiment to uncover mental health trends. It also identifies "service deserts," regions where access to youth mental health resources is limited and helps the organization deploy support accordingly.

"AcceleratorKHP turns data from millions of youth interactions into actionable insights by first ensuring that all data is de-identified, aggregated, and tagged to understand the key trends and issues young people are reaching out about," says Justin Scaini, group head and EVP strategy, innovation and transformation. "We've developed a machine learning model capable of detecting emerging themes and identifying the reasons why young people reach out, helping us better understand their evolving needs."

Beyond diagnostics, this data powers everything from campaign messaging to service design. "By integrating external data sources, we're able to build unique data assets that inform our health promotion and outreach efforts," he says. A generative AI prototype is also being developed to further personalize youth interactions while maintaining complete confidentiality.

Today, Kids Help Phone is recognized as a movement with its own voice, language and community. It's powered by data and grounded in the philosophy that everyone deserves a place to turn and a person to listen. The brand shows that technology can amplify humanity, not replace it – and as it looks ahead, it remains committed to meeting Canada's youth wherever they are and however they choose to connect.

"KHP has always been a trailblazer in youth mental health," says Scaini. "Since 1989, we've continuously innovated to meet the speed of need without ever compromising the trust young people place in us. The next chapter of our brand builds on that legacy by setting a new standard of care. We're focused on creating a seamless blend between human connection and AI to develop solutions and experiences that reflect the realities of young people's lives today, including the ways they communicate, the words they use when seeking help, and the places they trust to turn to for support."

For a generation that's always connected, KHP found a way to make connection matter when it counts most. No longer just a number to call, it's a movement helping young Canadians feel out loud – and in the process, changing how a country listens.



# TRADITION AS A GROWTH STRATEGY

The brand is on a mission to keep up with the masses by focusing on individuality. BY **SHERRY NOIK**

No two restaurants look the same. Menus don't allow modifications. Raw materials are imported from hand-picked suppliers in Italy. Wines come only from a curated roster of producers. In its mission to deliver an authentic Italian experience, Gruppo Terroni does everything with intention – and has built a devoted following by consistently communicating that message.

"We do things the way our ancestors have done them, and our longevity is a testament to that," says marketing director Francesco Giorgio. "Our brand is deeply rooted in this philosophy."

The Toronto-based hospitality group has carved its own path since 1992, when founders Cosimo Mammoliti and Paolo Scoppio (now deceased) drew on their southern Italian roots to open the first Terroni location. Today, the company boasts a growing portfolio of restaurants, curated food markets, e-commerce and, most recently, retail grocery products.

While it has remained true to tradition, Terroni has also kept its brand image as fresh as its ingredients through a tech-forward, integrated marketing strategy spanning its family of brands: Terroni, La Bettola, Sud Forno, Spaccio, La Bottega di Terroni, Cavinona, Porta and Stock TC.

Over the past five years, the company has onboarded its more than 1,000-strong team onto Connecteam, an app that puts everything from company policies to descriptions of menu items in one place where staff can access it any time – what Mammoliti calls the "School of Terroni."

"You want to really make sure that people understand the work that's been put behind 33 years of business," Mammoliti says.

With this centralized knowledge base at their fingertips, staff can explain any aspect of the company's ecosystem: how sourdough is baked daily from Terroni's own mother yeast; that semolina for fresh pasta comes from Altamura, Puglia; that Coratina olives are cultivated exclusively for its EVOO; or which gelato flavours are in development.

"It's to tell our story of how authentic we actually are… we just want them to be knowledgeable of what effort is put in every day," Mammoliti says.

"We are a customer-facing business where first impressions are made at the host stand, so as a result, we've invested a lot of time and money into staff training and education," Giorgio adds. That investment directly correlates with higher scores across Google and OpenTable, the two review/reservation platforms the company monitors.

So unwavering is Terroni's commitment to authenticity, its menus explicitly state: "No modifications and no substitutions." The rule has
















turned off some customers, especially in the early days. "We lost a lot – like, a lot – of angry people," Mammoliti admits.

Requests come up often. Guests sometimes ask for Parmigiano on seafood pasta, but the sharpness would overpower the delicate flavour. Others want their pizzas sliced, but serving them whole preserves presentation, heat and structure. "I've seen people get up and leave," Mammoliti says. "But now a lot of our guests are our best advocates."

**Above:** Co-founder Cosimo Mammoliti knows Terroni's strength lies in authenticity, so from the brand's cookbook to Cavinova's curated list of fine Italian wines, every detail reflects the same commitment to materia prima.

From the website: "While modifications may seem easily accommodated, such requests compromise the unique characteristics of our food and the efficiency of our service. Please respect our menu."

Rather than broad awareness campaigns, Terroni focuses on conversions and direct engagement. After three decades, its brand awareness is secure. The challenge is tailoring marketing across so many distinct brands, each with its own personality.

Terroni Adelaide, for example, occupies a former courthouse with a wine cellar in historic jail cells. Spaccio East and West are anchored by take-home commissaries. Stock TC offers more of a bar-bistro feel.

"One customer at a time, one guest at a time" is Mammoliti's mantra. So, Giorgio runs many mini-campaigns simultaneously, mostly across Gruppo Terroni's owned channels, which have grown into a significant network of websites, social accounts, bricks-and-mortar locations and email subscribers.

Much like Terroni's famous Spaghetti al Limone, the marketing strategy layers in elements that complement each other, all contributing to the flavour profile.

"It's an omnichannel approach… and [we] just made sure that every decision we made on the digital side reflected everything we did at the restaurants," Giorgio says.

The marketing department was established eight years ago with a team of two and a blog post. It's now a multidisciplinary team of seven that includes graphic designers, digital marketers and content creators led by Giorgio, who works to bridge the gap between the offline and online experience of the brands. When many brands abandoned email marketing for social media, Gruppo Terroni doubled down. Email is the ideal platform for telling the brand's story, Giorgio says, and it's where the company sees the best ROI.

"About 80% of our online shop revenue comes from our newsletters," he says. "In the last five years, our online store has grown from a small pantry to stocking enough items to fill a small grocer. Our email strategy has helped massively with increasing repeat purchases, as we've figured out the best content to send to the right people at the right time."

He says tactics like automations, customer journeys and abandoned-cart reminders "have

really helped us convert emails into sales," he adds. Content includes product launches served up dynamically (for example, a chef video); invitations to wine tastings or pasta-making classes; profiles of some of the craftspeople behind the food, like the Italian farmers and millers that supply the company or the local chefs and bakers; and features that highlight the company's commitment to quality materia prima (raw materials), like the 150,000 kg of Paolo Mariani flour they import annually.

"Our materia prima series has helped our audience understand how important this is to us, and in turn has increased their perceived value of what we offer," Giorgio says. "This storytelling builds emotional connection and loyalty."

As new restaurant locations popped up, some added commissary kitchens, others added food and wine markets. With a growing supply of its own hand-picked and custom products, the company was able to expand into e-commerce.

That's how Cavinona came to be. Mammoliti curated the company's wine list from scratch, starting with one producer in Italy 19 years ago and growing to more than a hundred producers and nearly 400 labels, which spun off into a dedicated wine-buying agency offering labels not available at the LCBO.

Sud Forno was born out of the need to supply the restaurants with bread and the desire to bring that activity in-house. Meanwhile, La Bottega di Terroni brings together the artisanal prepared foods, bakery items, pantry staples and imported products found at the restaurant locations onto one shopping site.

"Our expansion into retail and wine importing came from the idea to offer guests a complete Italian experience beyond the dining table," Giorgio says. "These arms of the business feed into each other: you may discover our bakery through dinner at Terroni because you had the complimentary Sud Forno bread, or fall in love with a wine you tried and discover Cavinona as a result. Our ecosystem was built this way on purpose, and we really do try to offer our guests a 360-degree authentic Italian experience whenever and wherever they dine with us."

Like most hospitality establishments, Gruppo Terroni hosts its share of weddings and other revenue-generating special events – a segment of the business Giorgio says has grown in the past five years thanks to a corporate outreach program that includes custom-designed decks, photos and videos to sell the event spaces. But woven into Giorgio's omnichannel approach in recent years are smaller marketing events that are passion projects: pasta-making classes, wine tastings and a new pizza-making workshop. These support the overall goal of extending the customer experience beyond the restaurants.




**Above:** From a former courthouse on Adelaide to bustling Spaccio commissaries and intimate Stock TC bistros, each Terroni location offers a distinct authentic Italian setting curated for memorable local dining experiences.

"These initiatives tell us that experiences are the ultimate ROI for us," Giorgio says.

Gruppo Terroni never sits still. It just made its first foray into content marketing with *La Cucina di Terroni: The Cookbook*. (Mammoliti lost the battle to have it titled *No Modifications and No Substitutions*.) Published by Simon & Schuster and co-written with Meredith Erickson, the book was a three-year process and includes some recipes from Terroni's menus and some of Mammoliti's personal ones. It's available at Indigo and other booksellers and, naturally, through Gruppo Terroni's restaurants and websites.

The company also rolled out a line of Roman-style frozen pizzas, under the brand name Porta, that are sold in a growing list of grocery stores including Longo's, Whole Foods, Sobeys, Foodland, Costco, Walmart and Safeway.

The tagline for Porta may as well be the company slogan: "Made in Canada. Rooted in Italy."

# Canadian media covering Canadian media.

Media™ IN CANADA

**Sign up for your free trial**

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

**mediaincanada.com/subscribe**

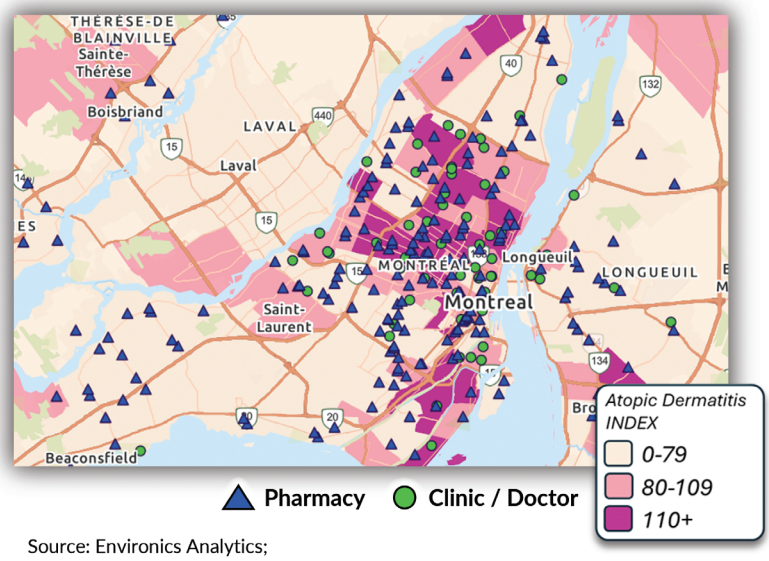
# The PHARMA REPORT



The pharmaceutical industry in Canada is at a crossroads. Patients are carrying more responsibility, physicians are under strain, and misinformation is shaping decisions before care even begins. Strict regulations only add to the challenge. In this environment, awareness isn't enough. Campaigns must build trust, deliver relevance, and strengthen confidence in a system under pressure. This year's Pharma Report highlights the partners proving that when expertise, analytics and creativity unite, the industry can achieve outcomes that matter far more than campaigns alone.

# The power of patient potential

## From access to adherence, Environics Analytics shows how data connects Canadians with care




Source: Environics Analytics;

**Left:** Environics Analytics uses community health indicators to identify where future demand for care exists.

**FOR PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANIES IN CANADA**, connecting patients with the right healthcare providers has never been more complicated. Shifting provincial rules, shrinking primary-care access and system strain make it essential to pinpoint where patients are and how they move through care. Kevin Lacey, SVP, sales for pharma and CPG at Environics Analytics, helps pharma organizations navigate these obstacles. He says that what's most important isn't just measuring market size or tracking prescriptions, but uncovering what he calls "patient potential."

"When we talk about patient potential, we mean understanding the prevalence of health conditions," says Lacey. "Using community health indicators from our data, we can identify which which postal codes have the individuals that are most likely to have those conditions, and therefore may need treatment. In other words, we see where future demand for care exists, even before it shows up in prescriptions or diagnoses." These patient insights are then linked to healthcare practitioners (HCP) to uncover opportunities for growth.

Environics Analytics then layers on demographic data, access to doctors, specialists or pharmacists and even attitudes toward care – whether a patient is more inclined toward holistic treatments, likely to seek specialist advice or in a position to pay out of pocket. This will drive optimal HCP engagement strategies within growth opportunity areas.

When executing DTC campaigns, we use insights about their age, household makeup and media habits to understand how they prefer to be communicated with, whether that's through social channels, digital platforms or in person.

"Then, once a patient is on treatment, the question becomes how to support adherence and engagement," says Lacey. "We use insights into their needs and preferences to understand how they prefer to be supported whether that's through financial assistance, nurse support, education to name a few.

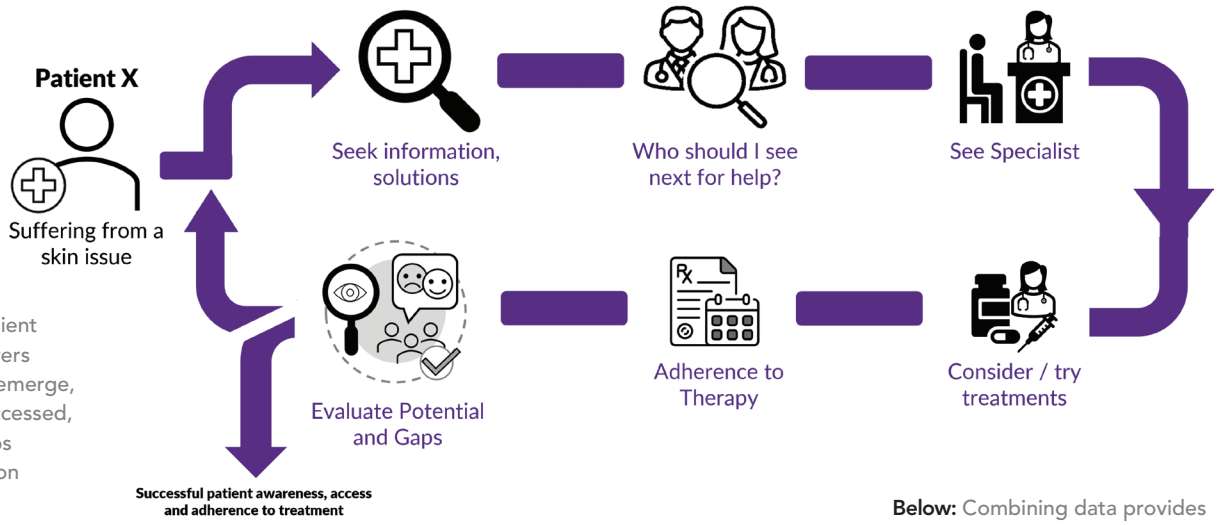
That intelligence not only informs targeting and engagement but also makes outcomes measurable. Because the data is tied to geography, Lacey and his team can work with collaborators such as global healthcare data, analytics and technology company IQVIA to connect patient potential with prescribing behaviour. "We're not just focused on reaching patients and HCPs efficiently, but we can also measure what happens next," says Lacey. "Did we fulfill the potential we identified? Did awareness increase? Did adherence improve? Those are the outcomes pharma companies really need to see."

The approach applies to many categories, including discretionary areas like dermatology and competitive areas such as GLP-1 therapies. Lacey points to campaigns that revealed populations being left behind, either because patients weren't aware or providers hadn't prioritized the condition. "There are often awareness gaps in certain conditions," he says. "We work with pharma companies to identify those populations and prioritize physicians to provide them with the insights they need to address them. The result is more efficient marketing spend and better alignment between patient needs and healthcare delivery."

One of the most persistent blind spots, he notes, comes from the assumption that the doctors writing the most prescriptions must represent the highest potential. "It really only takes into account their current prescription behaviours," Lacey says. "Just because a doctor is prescribing a lot doesn't mean there isn't more demand in an area that's not being tapped into. And the alternative, a doctor who is not writing high prescription volumes, doesn't mean there isn't a large demand in their practice. This should alter the engagement approach with the particular doctor, with more focus, attention and support. Without understanding patient potential, you risk missing sizable opportunities," says Lacey.

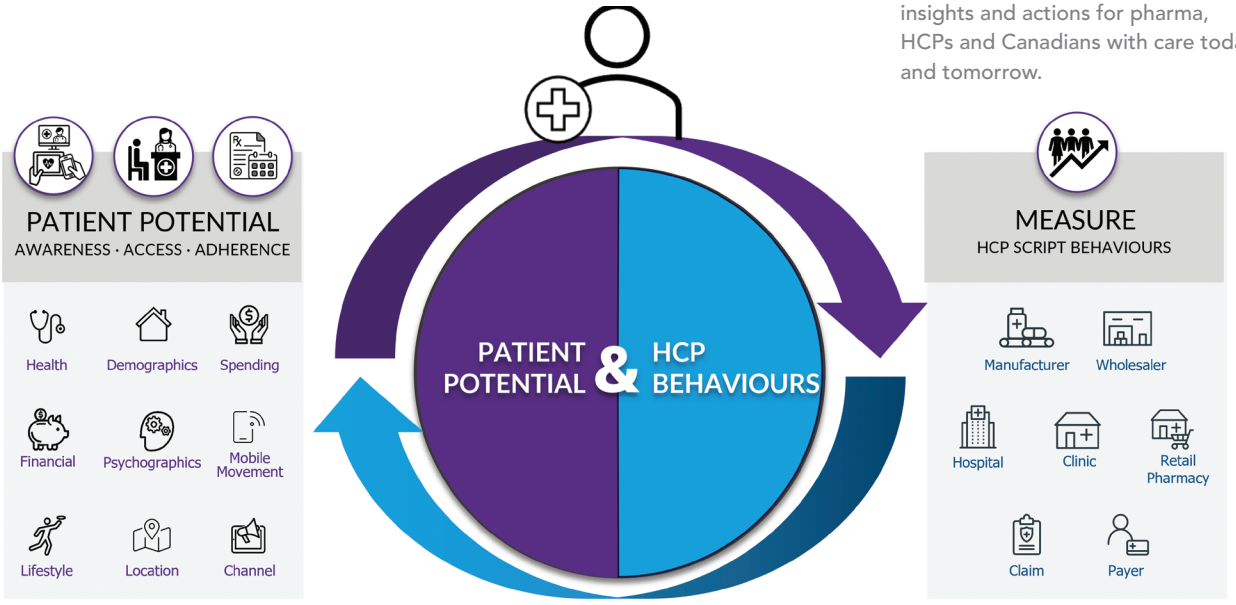
Underlying all of this is a rigorous approach to data privacy, something Lacey describes as non-negotiable.

## Understanding the Layers of the Patient Journey




**Right:** The patient journey uncovers where needs emerge, how care is accessed, and what helps patients stay on therapy.

**Below:** Combining data provides insights and actions for pharma, HCPs and Canadians with care today and tomorrow.




Source: Environics Analytics

Environics Analytics was among the first globally to achieve the ISO31700 Privacy by Design designation, a framework that governs every stage of data handling.

Looking ahead, Lacey sees patients taking a more active role in shaping healthcare decisions, which raises the stakes for companies that can provide the right insights at the right time. "Canadians are becoming more informed about their own healthcare, and in many ways, required to become more involved," he says. "That opens the opportunity for those who can support with insights. Whether it's pharma companies, healthcare providers or pharmacists, it's going to be critical to provide resources that help patients understand how to access care, what their options are, and how to ensure they adhere to treatment."

For Environics Analytics, the mandate is to anticipate future challenges while addressing today's barriers. "We want to help Canadians and Canadian providers identify where health services are constrained, find alternative pathways to care, and think about what diagnosis and treatment will look like in five or ten years," says Lacey.

CONTACT:
Kevin Lacey
SVP, sales team leader for pharma and CPG
Kevin.Lacey@environicsanalytics.com

# From insight to impact

## ChangeMakers Health translates insights into outcomes that drive real change




**Above:** For Invokana's "More Than My Condition" campaign, ChangeMakers Health put the spotlight on people's individuality rather than their diabetes, driving a massive spike in web traffic. **Right: 1** With broadcast TV, digital, and OOH – and even an original anthem track – Invokana became a name patients remembered and asked their doctors about. **2** Changemakers Health's campaign for Invokana sparked record engagement across channels, boosting brand awareness and patient recall.

**IN PHARMA, DATA IS EVERYWHERE** and campaigns are abundant. What's rarer are insights that actually shift behaviour and deliver impact. And that task has only become tougher as trust erodes and budgets tighten. "Increasingly, marketers are being asked to do more with less," says Michael Service, SVP healthcare strategy at ChangeMakers Health. "That's where agencies have to figure out how to be efficient and make every dollar work harder."

Efficiency alone, though, can't deliver impact. Autumn Gehring, ChangeMakers' VP client partner and co-lead of the health marketing team, notes that the real pressure point lies deeper. "Our role is navigating healthcare complexities to deliver meaningful change, whether that's helping physicians get faster access to information, improving workflows or making communication clearer for patients." In other words, insight has to solve a real problem, not just shape a message.

That belief informs how ChangeMakers handles every challenge. Clients may come with tactics already in mind, but the agency scrutinizes whether those solutions match the underlying issue. The goal is to ground strategy in insights strong enough to justify the spend. That can mean layering traditional research with social listening, tapping into industry databases or leveraging AI. "Too often, budgets get spent on tactics that don't get at the root of the challenge," Service says. "By




CONTACT:
Michael Service
SVP, healthcare strategy
michael.service@thechangemakers.com

digging deeper, we uncover the real insight, and that's what allows us to deliver work that actually shifts behaviour."

That discipline was tested in a direct-to-consumer campaign for Invokana, a type 2 diabetes treatment. On paper, the brief was to raise awareness in a crowded category. But the breakthrough insight came from research: people with diabetes resisted being defined by their condition. "It's what they have, not who they are," Service says. From that truth came the "I'm More Than My Condition" campaign: portraits of real-life patients framed by their passions and identities, with diabetes pushed into the background.

The centrepiece was an original anthem that crossed into mainstream radio, even drawing praise from DJs. "That kind of resonance, in a space as regulated as pharma, only happens when you anchor a campaign in an authentic human truth," Service says. And the results were further proof: website traffic and organic search grew exponentially, and brand awareness lifted across the board.

But insight isn't useful unless it can be validated. That's why ChangeMakers created the Health Advisory Panel, a standing network of Canadian physicians, patients and caregivers built in partnership with global research firm Leger. The goal was to validate assumptions quickly and cost-effectively, turning instinct into evidence. "We wanted to take hunches off the table," Gehring says.

That approach came to life in a recent project with a national medical association that wanted to clarify its identity. The advisory panel was proposed as a way for ChangeMakers to test how other healthcare providers viewed the specialty, providing valuable insight that could be turned into impactful action.

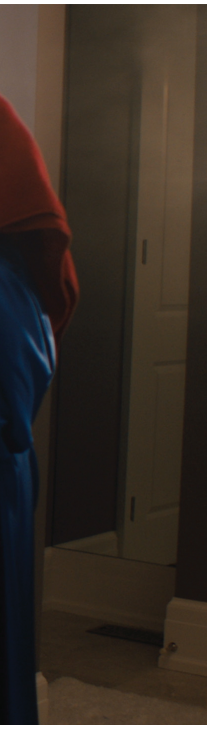
"If we're going to ask clients to invest, we need to know the problem we're solving is real," Gehring says. "The panel gives us that clarity, and that's what makes impact possible."

That same philosophy shapes how the agency approaches today's thorniest issues. Take misinformation: ChangeMakers' research shows Canadian physicians now spend nearly a full day each week correcting false health advice that patients find online or elsewhere. To close that gap, the agency validates messaging and develops campaigns that address the root of medical misunderstandings. In one case, research uncovered that many physicians were frustrated because existing treatments were only managing symptoms but not addressing the underlying cause. By clarifying the science in a way that physicians could easily convey, ChangeMakers was able to help patients better understand that more could be done.

"Every day a patient follows false advice is a day they're not getting the treatment they need," Gehring says. "If brands don't show up with credible, human messaging, the void gets filled by misinformation."

And whether the challenge is misinformation, shrinking budgets or regulatory hurdles, the task is always the same: turn insight into action that makes a difference. For ChangeMakers, that means getting to the root problem, validating assumptions with real-world voices and accelerating research without sacrificing judgment.

In a sector where wasted time or misdirected spend can have real consequences for patients and providers, impact must be deliberate. As Service puts it: "Insight without impact is just research. Impact without insight is just luck."







# 2025 AGENCY OF THE YEAR AWARDS

If 2024 was the year AI found its footing, then 2025 was the year agencies figured out how to keep theirs. The industry's biggest wins weren't about the newest tools but the people using them – those who found fresh ways to connect human creativity with data, design and purpose. Across disciplines, agencies worked to bridge divides: between tech and touch, craft and scale, performance and meaning. Independent shops doubled down on culture and courage, while network agencies used their size to localize and personalize in new ways. Together, they proved that creativity still drives results – and that relevance, empathy and emotional intelligence remain advertising's sharpest edge. In this year's Agency of the Year lineup, you'll find proof that the real breakthroughs happen not in the code, but in the connection.




RETHINK

# Built to be unforgettable

BY **WILL NOVOSEDLIK**

"At many agencies, the goal is to earn impressions," says CSO Sean McDonald. "At Rethink, we are trying to leave an impression."

With seven consecutive AOY Golds to its credit, Rethink has certainly left an impression on the marketing community. And it has achieved that by doing for itself what it does for its clients' brands. "Ultimately, the goal of a brand," continues McDonald, "is to challenge the conventions that surround it so as to be distinct. The idea is to be unforgettable."

As proof, who can forget the "Draw Ketchup" campaign for Heinz, or the Scotiabank tagline "You're richer than you think," or IKEA's "The Troll"?

Though known for its creative brilliance, Rethink's success is also the result of strong, longstanding client relationships, a fact not widely known in the industry.

"This year is our 25th anniversary, and we're still working with our very first client, A&W. I don't think people understand how hard we work on the relationship." In fact, the average length of a client relationship at Rethink is eight years – that's an enviable achievement.

For long-term relationships with clients like A&W, Molson Coors, IKEA, Scotiabank and Kraft Heinz, it's a matter of mutual success. "We have a lot of relationships where we see our clients succeed and they've watched us succeed with them," says McDonald. "That momentum is precious, and I think it's something that a lot of agencies would clamor for."

It has also allowed the agency to build a strong full-service model, with many key clients engaging Rethink across advertising, PR and design. Late last year, the agency launched a new PR unit, headed by Meredith Burns.

McDonald points out that it wasn't so much a launch as it

was about hiring a new leader and renaming the unit Rethink PR. "PR launched several years ago under the name Brand Narrative, but not everybody understood what the service was, and so to be clear to clients, we renamed it Rethink PR. Meredith joined us from Hill & Knowlton to lead it, and it's grown tremendously."

In June of this year, Rethink announced the launch of a global design practice. The practice will span its North American offices in New York, Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, but it is headed out of New York by managing director Larissa Marquez, who joined the agency in May after more than eight years at Brooklyn design studio Gretel, with career stops at Pentagram and 2×4. As reported earlier by *strategy*, its goal is to deliver end-to-end design solutions, from brand strategy and visual identities to packaging and design systems.

It's an interesting evolution. Rethink started 25 years ago as a Vancouver-based design firm. It expanded its creative capabilities to include

## CASES | AGENCY

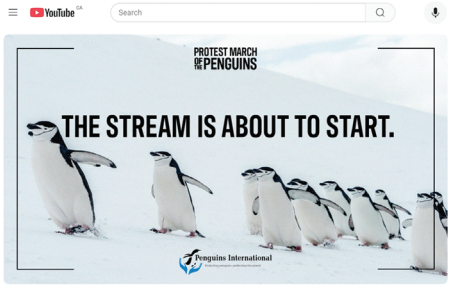
**1. Olympic-sized workaround**

With IOC rules blocking athlete endorsements, Rethink found a clever loophole for Molson – paying their parents instead. Paid Through Parents turned moms and dads into brand ambassadors, funneled $15K per athlete and earned 389M impressions for the Paris Games.

1

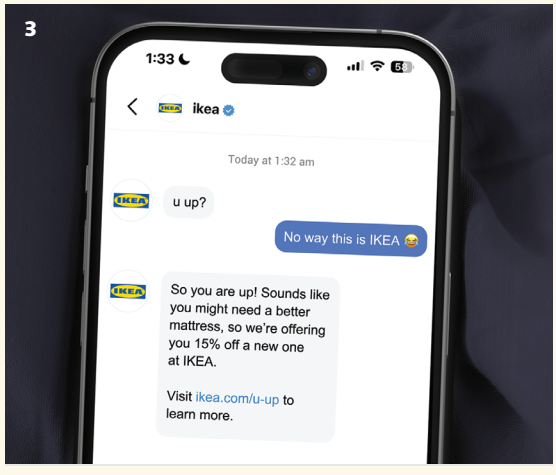



2




**2.** Penguins took centre stage in a tongue-in-cheek protest against global tariffs. The Protest March of the Penguins turned meme culture into activism – earning 1B impressions, 3.4M views and a 453% spike in donations to Penguins International's conservation work.

3




**3.** When Canadians couldn't sleep, IKEA slid into their DMs with a cheeky "u up?" Instead of a hookup, it offered discounts. The playful campaign sparked 4.5M earned impressions, 36% higher mattress sales and a nationwide sleep conversation.

**4.** Knix's Sport Your Period campaign by Rethink challenged the stigma around menstruation by paying athletes to speak openly about their periods – no logos, no product, just truth. The global movement earned 400M+ impressions, 31 hours of coverage and a 39% sales lift.




**For Rethink's Agency Campaign of the Year, see p.74-75.**

**NEW BUSINESS**
Cracker Barrel, Canton Gadoua, Egg Farmers of Canada, Instacart, FreshPrep, Destination Vancouver, Variety BC Children's Charity, STARS, Ferrara Confectionary, Rockstar Energy

**NEW HIRES**
51, including 10 in Montreal, 14 in Toronto, 17 in Vancouver and 10 in New York

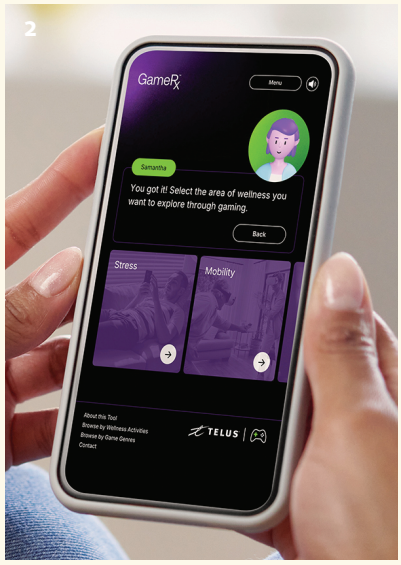
**OFFICES**
Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, New York

**STAFF**
323

## CASES | DIGITAL

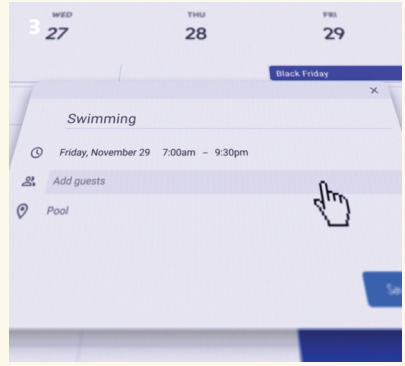
**1. Reclaiming history**
When Google erased key cultural dates, Rethink and YWCA turned its own tech into a protest. Rebook It invited people to re-add erased observances, sparking 11,000+ rebookings across 69 countries, 270% higher web traffic and a global call to reclaim visibility.




**2.** For TELUS, the agency launched GameRx, the world's first pharmacy that prescribes video games for wellness. Doctor-backed and gamer-approved, the platform reframed play as therapy – earning 4.6M impressions and changing 71% of perceptions about gaming and health.

**3.** When the Black Friday frenzy hit, Rethink and Decathlon Canada urged Canadians to reclaim time for movement. Make Time for Sports invited people to book workouts in their calendars – earning 1,100+ sign-ups, 26% higher searches and an 11% sales lift without discounts.




advertising and PR, opening offices in Toronto and Montreal, and eventually it came to be known primarily as an ad agency with support services in PR and design. With these recent announcements, McDonald believes the agency has repositioned its PR and design services from being subsidiaries of advertising to being peers.

He points out that there's always been a PR capability within Rethink, but maybe not as a distinct service. "What we have started to do is put some more clarity around the services we offer. At the core of it is our strong focus on relationships. We have account managers and strategists recognized for both their creative and strategic effectiveness and that works across public relations, advertising and design."

These days it's sometimes difficult to see a clear line between those disciplines. Take PR and advertising, for instance. Looking at how agencies decide what categories to enter at awards shows, it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between an ad campaign and a PR campaign. We asked McDonald how Rethink avoids that.

"Prior to working in advertising, I worked in PR," he explains. "So I'm going to challenge you by saying that the way you positioned that question is a very advertising-centric way of looking at PR. And that's because what you're looking at is how can this brand gain attention in the public space. But there are also other reputational opportunities in terms of people, the brand topics, products and interests that any brand or business has that you won't see at an advertising award show.

"Rethink sees itself as a steward of the brand across all of its functions. And that can happen in the public ways we're famous for, but also in subtle ways. We can see corporately who represents the brand and what they have to say about it, what stories need managing and clarification so that they're best understood and clearly covered.

We're known for having products outperform media investment, but we're also very capable of being practitioners of the message and ensuring that brands have the right conduit for that message. How does it align to your overall advertising strategy? How can we develop it internally? How can we develop it with your leaders? How can we profile parts of the business, the brand or the product that may not get the attention it needs? And these are all functions that you don't see in an awards show."

So how are these practices knitted together? According to McDonald, it starts with the strategic core of a client's brand – its identity, its personality and its frame of reference – ensuring that the brand challenges its surroundings and has the potential to be memorable. PR ensures the message is consistent and unforgettable, and design ensures a consistent identity across all visual touchpoints. The advertising will amplify that identity, promoting products and creating waves that drive results. All those things woven together help the agency outperform. "I think any agency that's just filling the spaces that a client buys for them hasn't done their job," says McDonald. "We look at every opportunity that we can to be unforgettable. The goal is always to outperform the media investment, because that's the only way we feel like we've done our job."

To some extent, accounts are geographically localized. For instance, Montreal works with Bibigo, Vancouver works with Dave Forest, and Toronto works with Kraft Heinz and Molson Coors. But New York works with Kraft Heinz and Molson Coors in the US as well, plus other clients like Frito-Lay. McDonald thinks the difference with Rethink is that it isn't a network agency. A network shop would likely require that work outside of Canada be done outside Canada. "At Rethink, we believe every

## CASES | PR




**1. Culture takes front seat** When frozen dumplings couldn't join the car-mukbang craze, Rethink and Bibigo built the Dashboard Kitchen – the world's first in-car cooking station. The idea went viral, earning 317M impressions, $2.9M media value and a 13.8% sales lift.




**2.** To make golf more welcoming, Rethink and Golf Town created The 400some – 400 players teeing off together in one epic round. The record-breaking event drove 8.24% higher sales, 5.7% more traffic and 25M+ earned impressions nationwide.




**3.** To mend cross-border tensions, Rethink and Maple from Canada launched Maple Mate – a dating-driven campaign inviting Americans to brunch with Canadians. The cheeky initiative earned 445M impressions, 86% positive coverage and boosted U.S. maple-syrup sales by more than 16%.

one of our offices is a globally capable agency, and they act that way," he says.

If that is the case, why have a New York office? The answer isn't surprising. With more and more global clients, Rethink needed to be geographically closer to them. Its expansion strategy reflects the firm's deep commitment to building strong client relationships. But at the same time, McDonald says growth is not the agency's goal. Its goal in any market is to set the standard. "If that means that we have relationships that we can further invest in, be they in Europe or in South America, that would be an exciting opportunity. And I would say it's not impossible over the next three to five years."

The other investment on Rethink's mind these days, as with everyone else in the business, is keeping up with technological change. Says McDonald, "Steve Jobs said that the personal computer should act like a bicycle for the mind in terms of increasing human efficiency. With every change in this industry, first comes the hype cycle, then everybody gets excited, then everybody gets scared and then everybody gets real. We're in the 'excited-to-scared' phase, and I think we're about to get real about where it can create efficiencies."

The firm is looking at every way it can increase the time for Rethinkers to think, to be more ambitious, to improve the work and to improve throughput. "Rethink produces the most campaigns of any agency in this country," says McDonald. "We feel success not through meetings, but through output. So how does AI affect collaboration? How does it enrich our thinking? How does it contribute to process? How does it help improve our production and our creativity? We look at it as a way to empower people, not replace them."

If there's evidence of that throughput, it's this past year's creative. Rethink launched a platform for Destination Canada based on the tagline 'Canada, naturally.' Montreal launched a witty campaign for IKEA based on the way the brand name is pronounced in Quebec. New York worked with Walton Goggins to launch golden sriracha Doritos, with the idea that 'it's spicy but not too spicy.' And it's done some fun stuff for Tangerine Bank, Molson-Coors and Miller – all in the service of making brands unforgettable, including its own.

## CASES | DESIGN




**1. When ketchup finally met its match**
Rethink and Heinz reinvented ketchup as Chip Dip – a clever packaging redesign that turned fries' favourite sauce into a viral snack staple. The campaign went on to earn 604M impressions, 99% positive sentiment and reignited love for Heinz with a 7% sales lift.




**2.** Rethink and TELUS reimagined the TELUS Esports Series with a design system rooted in gaming culture. The refreshed look balanced brand heritage with player authenticity – earning 55.9M impressions, 1.9K participants and crowning TELUS as Canada's largest esports tournament.

**3.** To stand out in a slow-food category, Rethink and Full Pin Mushrooms built a racing-garage identity – sleek, efficient and engineered for performance. The bold new look fueled 18% B2B growth, sell-out grocery launches and 63% higher social engagement.





LEO

# Building an agency that moves culture

BY **TY BURKE**

Winning awards can do a lot for an advertising agency, but they're far from the only thing that matters. The real payoff is when people connect with the work.

"We talk a lot about the value of awards," says Ben Tarr, president of Leo in Canada. "The value of being recognized by your peers, of spotlighting your work in front of potential clients and of making your existing clients feel great. And it really does help us attract the best talent."

Still, he says nothing compares to seeing an idea spill over into culture – and that's been happening a lot at Leo lately.

For example, at a recent Toronto Blue Jays game Tarr attended with a client, two Blue Jays fans brought some unexpected attention to a campaign Leo created for Smucker's Canada. It featured George Springer and Vladimir Guerrero – both Blue Jays stars – arguing over the best way to enjoy a sandwich: peanut butter on top (PB&J) or jam on top (J&PB). The spots aired so often during Jays broadcasts that two fans turned the debate into merch of their own, with a set of matching T-shirts that echoed the campaign – one emblazoned with PB&J and the other J&PB. When the camera landed on their shirts and the argument flashed across the Jumbotron, Tarr and his guest – Smucker's VP of marketing for Canada and International, Adam Zitney – were stunned. (To top it off, the Blue Jays won the game with an epic grand slam home run.)

"It was a pretty remarkable night," says Tarr, who was still glowing from the experience. "To see that happen was almost like a dream."

But dream runs don't happen overnight. Just a few years ago, Leo was in a slump. The agency wasn't winning as many awards, clients were pulling more work in-house, and consulting and PR firms were encroaching on adland.

"As an agency, we were seeing a major disruption," says Tarr. "But one of our core values is being open to 'new.' It means we're always thinking about what's next and how we need to evolve."

**NEW BUSINESS**
Irving Consumer Products (Royale), Clover Leaf, TD Bank US, Gardiner Roberts LLC

**NEW HIRES**
Karan Rana, senior strategist; Jackson Kemp, ACD/copywriter; Adam Pickard, creative director/innovation

**OFFICES**
Toronto, Montreal

**STAFF**
182

Evolving meant new people and new skills. In came CCO Angus Tucker; creative director, innovation Adam Pickard; senior art director Shirley Xu Wang; and senior copywriter Marly Dichter. The agency also added specialists outside the usual ad world, like senior strategist Sara Carpentier, whose PhD in cognitive neuroscience and background in behavioural economics gave campaigns added depth.

It also meant getting closer to Canadians themselves. Since 2022, Leo has published *The HumanKind Study* – original research on issues such as finance, housing, health and climate change.

"Our clients crave real Canadian data as opposed to American data that we hope will work as a proxy," says Tarr. "Our clients have seen this work, and they've been able to leverage it."

One Bell Canada campaign zeroed in on loneliness among Zillenials – a mini-generation of young Gen Zers and elder Millennials born in the 1990s. *The HumanKind Study* showed that many people in this generation weren't just lonely, but they also experienced anxiety around non-digital communications like making phone calls.

"When we explored our findings, we found there was actually anxiety around human connection. Everyone's living in this digital world, chatting through DMs and Snaps and so on," says Tarr. "And we asked: 'Well, what can Bell do about this?'"

Leo's answer was "Just Talk," a campaign inspired by Bell's "Let's Talk" mental health platform. The idea: encourage people to talk with a friend for ten minutes a day about anything at all.

"The idea is that it doesn't matter what you talk about, it just matters that you talk," says Tarr. "We had one 30-second spot that featured two friends talking about whether they would rather fight 50 mini dragons or one giant dragon. And we created a set of cards with stuff you could chat about with your friends, just to have that human connection. And for me personally, it was such a moment of pride to see the work we'd been doing translate directly into a creative product."

Leo's resurgence underscores a simple truth: ideas that move culture also move business. By pairing research with creativity, the agency has shown that when work taps into real conversations and connections, it can leap off the screen and into people's lives.

## CASES

**1. When big burger fell for the Hut**
Leo and Pizza Hut flipped the script on burger culture with Cheat on Your Cheeseburger – a one-day stunt inviting McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's employees to try the Cheeseburger Melt free. It turned rivals into endorsers, earning 58.6M impressions and doubling Melt sales while boosting followers 171%.




**2.** To fight loneliness, Leo and Bell Canada reminded Canadians that connection starts with a call. Through playful OOH debates, emotional films and gamified "Calling Cards," It's Good to Talk sparked 3.5M impressions and lifted brand sentiment 55% across social.




**3.** Leo and Starbucks Canada reignited what made the brand special with It's Never Just Coffee. Using the humble cup checkbox as a storytelling canvas, the campaign celebrated real moments of belonging – lifting sentiment 57 points, transactions 36% and Rewards membership 12%.







**4.** Leo and Jif transformed a hard-to-believe stat into an interactive social storm. Text Peanut 1,300 Times generated 1.7M texts, 10M impressions and a 27% sales boost, proving one irresistible truth – people will go nuts for Jif.




**5.** With The TD Super Portfolio, Leo and TD Bank hijacked Super Bowl buzz – encouraging Canadians to invest in the very brands buying airtime. The idea scored 114% higher awareness, 27% higher consideration and a 500% spike in TD Easy Trade downloads.




COURAGE

# The business of being brave

BY **WILL NOVOSEDLIK**
WITH FILES FROM **JENNIFER HORN**

Most people think that courage is the absence of fear. But that's not what it is. If it were, then you wouldn't need any.

It means having the strength to face your fears. In the creative industry, that translates to having the courage to propose bold ideas and the skill to persuade clients and their customers to embrace them – despite their fears.

Courage partners Dhaval Bhatt and Joel Holtby call it a "one-word business model." Unlike firms that overthink their names or hide behind long, overcomplicated positioning statements, Courage keeps it disarmingly simple and honest.

According to Bhatt, they've seen it work in their favour many times in the three and a half years since they launched the agency. "We truly believe that we can help brands find their courage. It's not this super lofty thing; it's actually very functional. When we look back at the kind of work that we've been most proud of throughout our careers, it's not always doing the craziest thing you can do at that moment. It's about pushing boundaries. There's always going to be something to overcome, and our job is to convince clients to take the leap with us."

Holtby agrees. "Courage can be big or small. Fear is paralyzing, and being stuck as a brand leaves you stagnant and not part of any conversation. Great strategy and cultural understanding are what makes brands excel, and I think those are things that we do really well."

They come by it honestly. Having both worked at agencies like Rethink, John Street and No Fixed

**NEW BUSINESS**
Skip, RONA, Sephora, Maggi, Staples

**NEW HIRES**
Maxime Sauté, partner, ECD; Marilou Aubin, partner, ECD; Rafik Belmesk, partner, head of strategy

**OFFICES**
Toronto, Montreal

**STAFF**
80

Address, they bring some hard-earned lessons to their own venture. Bhatt says that those experiences taught them an important truth: "One of the things we learned from great people like Arthur [Fleischmann] and Angus [Tucker] at John Street or Aaron [Starkman] at Rethink is that clients aren't really buying your ideas, they're buying you. It really is how you show up."

According to Bhatt, it's just as important to learn what not to bring to the table. "When we started Courage, we knew that a lot of big agencies are scared of their clients. They're scared to challenge them or even pick up the phone. We just don't operate that way. I think the thing that has led to our growth as an agency is that we see clients as smart human beings."

Similarly, Holtby has deep respect for Courage's clients, seeing them not as obstacles to outsmart, but as the ones driving the win. In his view, it's their money, their brand and their approval that ultimately brings ideas to life – and his team's job is to make saying "yes" easy, smart and compelling.

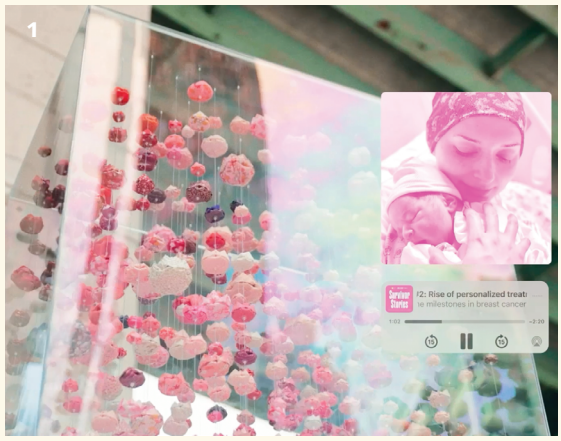
Courage takes great pride in its decisiveness. They call indecisiveness "the sin of spin." Not spin in the sense of sugar-coating a weak idea to make it look better than it is, but spin in terms of the endless circling that happens when teams can't make a call. "Everybody hates it," says Bhatt. "Creatives don't want to do it. We as business owners don't want to do it, because all it does is waste time."

Holtby is practiced in ending spin before it starts. "Spin can happen in any part of the process – in strategy, creative or production. When we start to feel it, we just call time out. We stop, get on a call, realign and go forward. We don't end up constantly doing rounds and rounds of creative."

Peers often point out that Courage produces an exceptional volume of work – a pace the founders say is only possible because they minimize spin at every stage. "It sounds like a little thing, but it's actually core to how we operate," says Bhatt. "It leads to more new business. And we pitch very differently than most places. We rarely have late nights, we rarely work weekends and we're not cracking ideas until the night before the pitch. We're just more decisive."

The same decisiveness that keeps late nights at bay has also become the foundation of Courage's growth. Bhatt says the agency's success comes down to one thing: quality work. "Clients don't come to Courage for anything other than that. We don't sell efficiency," he says. "We don't sell the idea that we can make 800 ad units in five minutes. That's just not who we are."

## CASES | DIGITAL







**1. Hope on display**

With Courage, CIBC's Milestones transformed Run for the Cure's 30th year into a celebration of progress, not fear. Survivor stories became immersive art at Toronto's Bentway, shared through touchless audio and streaming platforms. The result: $15M raised, 55,000 participants and a record-breaking Run powered by hope.

**2.** With Courage, KFC put 88 years of human craft against 1.2M AI-generated chicken recipes. Using Lovable.AI, engineers built the "ultimate" fried chicken, only to see 88% of taste-testers choose KFC's Original Recipe. The campaign reignited love for the brand, driving a 360% lift in quality perception.

For Courage's Digital Campaign of the Year, see p.74-75.

Courage's move into Montreal shows how growth at the agency often follows talent. The team had been eyeing the market for some time, with clients already in place, but waited for the right creative leaders to emerge. Then the stars aligned: Marilou Aubin (partner and executive creative director), Rafik Belmesk (partner and head of strategy) and Maxime Sauté (partner and executive creative director) were interested and ready.

"You can open an office somewhere, but if you're not creating it with the right talent and environment, it's always going to just feel like a satellite," says Holtby. "I'm really proud of those individuals in Montreal who have already started to crack things. Throughout our careers we've watched them do killer work, and we can't wait to have them do the same for our clients." And they are: its F1 work for KFC was talked about globally.

AI has quickly become one of the biggest drivers of change in the industry, prompting agencies to rethink what their true value is. Bhatt sees that reckoning as an opportunity. "When I look at most applications of AI right now, they're focused on versioning and asset recreation," says Bhatt. "Some agencies are even building full revenue models around that. From a broader perspective, it feels like the industry is returning to its early days, when creative was treated as a value add.

"But that's where Courage differs. What we do is fundamentally human – driving persuasion through ideas born from unexpected connections and insight. AI, by nature, makes predictable ones. It can't replicate creative alchemy."

In the end, Courage is a group of hungry, talented people who find joy in the work. "You can see that we love what we do," says Bhatt. "I truly believe that creativity is one of the best business drivers. And if you come to work every day and you find joy in the work that you create, it's infectious – and that's the thing that we hold on to. That's the thing that draws people and clients."

## CASES | AOY

**1. No half measures at RONA**

With Courage, RONA turned a job-site insult into a national icon. Half-Ass – a literal half-donkey – became the face of doing things right, not halfway. The cheeky campaign drove 101% higher web traffic, 73% brand love and made RONA the go-to for pros who don't half-ass their work – or their tools.










**2.** With Courage, KFC celebrated the Oilers' first Finals run since 1990 by reviving its original ads from that same year — vintage spots, posters and pricing included. The nostalgic stunt drove Alberta's highest sales month on record. Game 7 alone saw sales up 51% and transactions up 31%.
**3.** When a global IT crash hit, Courage turned chaos into calm, remaking the "Blue Screen of Death" as a "Have a Break" ad. It sparked a 230% engagement spike and 520% earned media lift.




**4.** Courage and CIBC helped newcomers bring home with them — literally — by reuniting them with items left behind and gifting extra baggage for their journey. The campaign lifted conversions 47% and cut acquisition costs 33%.

**5.** Courage helped Skip win back Canadians with a platform that let them skip life's hassles. Featuring Jon Hamm, the campaign drove 35% more new users and a 22% lift in awareness.



# Influence the Influential

## Where Luxury and Lifestyle Intersect

The Globe and Mail's reimagined Life and Style digital sections and relaunched *Style Magazine* speak to Canadians who want to feel as inspired as they are informed. With enriched coverage across wellness, fashion and beauty, food and drink, design, and travel, the platform offers a blend of practical insights, expert advice and aspirational features for placements that are as nuanced as the customers they serve.



Life/*Style*
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

**LEARN MORE**
globemediagroup.ca/life-style



COSSETTE

# Design that changes the game

BY **WILL NOVOSEDLIK**

The histories of design and advertising in Canada have long been intertwined. That entanglement has gone through cycles of integration and separation since the '50s, with design shifting from a department inside agencies, publishing houses and printing operations, to standing on its own, only to be absorbed back into agencies again by the early 2000s.

One of the firms launched in the midst of this back and forth was Cossette, founded in 1972 as Cossette et Associés, Graphic Designers-Consultants Limited. Its offering quickly expanded beyond design to include advertising. In 1982, it created a new business unit that combined design with brand strategy and named it Graphème. In 2003, it acquired London-based design firm Identica. By 2010, all business units were unified.

In a way, this reflects the cycle of integration over the last 20 years that has seen ad agencies either acquire design firms or build design teams in-house.

Richard Bélanger, VP design at Cossette, has a perspective on this. "Design used to be regarded by many agencies as the poor cousin to advertising. Back in the day, agencies would go to designers whenever they needed a logo or a 'look and feel.' Design was not seen as a strategic practice, but as a cosmetic one. But in the last 20 years, that perception has changed."

Bélanger believes agencies have a new understanding of the ways in which design touches all aspects of marketing communications, beginning with branding. It's no longer an afterthought but the visual foundation of a brand's positioning, setting the tone for every expression of that brand.

Perhaps the most memorable result of the integration was Cossette's "Follow the Arches" outdoor campaign of 2018, in which billboards placed in high traffic areas across the GTA broke the famous Golden Arches into four pieces, each acting as a directional sign with copy like "On your left," "Next exit" or "Just missed us." The campaign showed how fragments of

**NEW BUSINESS**
**Tourisme Montreal, Schulich School of Business, Sleep Country Canada, Benny & Freres, Pratt & Whitney Canada, HYDRO-Quebec, Industrielle Alliance Assurance, BC Lottery Corporation, Insurance Brokers Association of Ontario**

**NEW HIRES**
**77 new hires last year**

**OFFICES**
**Halifax, Montreal, Quebec, Toronto, Vancouver**

**STAFF**
365

a globally recognized logo could carry an entire message. It went on to win the Cannes Outdoor Grand Prix, One Show Design Gold and Outdoor Gold, D&AD Outdoor Wood Pencil, *strategy* Agency of the Year and *strategy* Marketing Awards Best in Show.

According to Bélanger, design provides the holistic underpinning for everything a brand does, from tone of voice to campaigns to experiential activations. "An agency that can offer all those areas of expertise under one roof is well positioned to develop more long-lasting relationships with its clients," he adds.

Clients are also embracing this view. "They are looking to strategic design as a way of solving business problems," he says. "For them it's not cosmetic, but fundamental, because of its holistic nature. They understand that the depth of thinking required by the discovery phase of a strategic design – about their business, their customers and their competition – is of great value to how an enterprise understands itself and manages its assets."

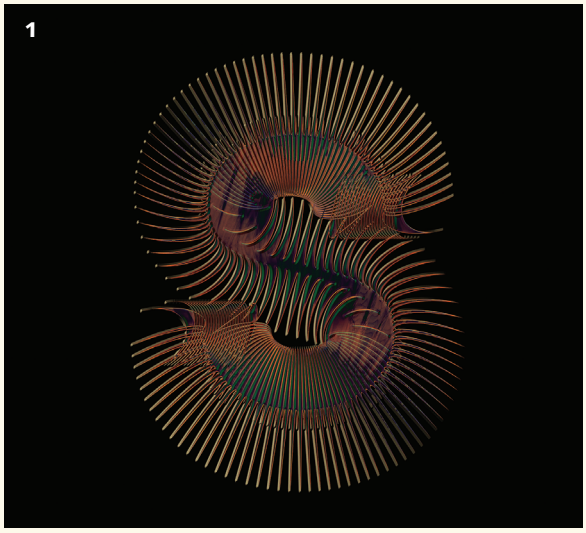
Bélanger feels design is especially important as a tool of transformation. The imperatives of digital transformation required by businesses just to stay in the game today beg us to defend and foster the role of humans in the face of technological change. "Brands are human creations," he says. "They now urgently need a longer-term vision if they are to remain relevant and impactful."

In a multidisciplinary shop like Cossette, design touches every part of the business. A great example is the collaboration between the design team and the digital team for the Montreal Heart Institute Foundation website. The goal was to connect innovation with emotion on every page. With simplicity and clarity, the connection is made by turning testimonials into sensitive and engaging videos, all easily accessible as one navigates the site.

In another example, the digital team demonstrated its UX design chops for the McDonald's "Eat the Code" website. Based on the insight that developers are often so focused on coding that they forget to eat, the website hid offers in lines of code, allowing its finders to order their favourite items without having to step away from their computers.

With a staff count of 20, including not only designers but strategists and account managers, Cossette's design team supports the agency's clients and enjoys clients of its own – brands focused on design but often needing expertise in digital, UX/UI and experiential. Bélanger regards the team not so much as a business within a business, but as a mutually supportive culture. "There is no such thing as working solo in our team. It's very collegial in that everyone is welcome to express their point of view on whatever project is in the studio, not just on their own desks. In the end, it just makes the output better."

## CASES | DESIGN




**1. Design that became the experience itself**
Cossette and the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal transformed the 2024 Fantasmagorie Ball into an immersive dreamscape. Hypnotype used kinetic typography and surreal motion to blur art and illusion – selling out the event in weeks and raising nearly $1M for the MAC Foundation.




**2.** Cossette and Les Roses FC de Montréal created a symbol of defiance with Roses – a blue rose emblem and custom typeface drawn from Montreal's heritage. The brand sparked $100K in early sales, 100% positive coverage and 15 new investors before the first match.




**3.** With Emotion in Motion, Cossette and the Festival de Cinéma turned brand design into storytelling. Using film-inspired repetition, blur and texture, the identity revived attendance 30% and restored the festival's status as Québec's creative heartbeat.

## DESIGN | GOLD + DIGITAL | BRONZE

One example of the team's output for a direct client is the brand identity for Montreal Roses, the city's first women's football (soccer) team. The challenge was to take something that didn't exist in the world and bring it to life and, on top of that, create a brand that expresses the ambition and makes it relevant in both the culture of Montreal and the wider world.

The Roses identity became a beacon of hope and change. It embraces the dualities of force and finesse, resilience and elegance. Built around a blue rose, the team's name recalls the iconic Farine Five Roses sign visible to anyone entering the downtown from the southwest – but with a thorny twist, made visible by the scalloped edges of its custom typeface.

Within 24 hours of unveiling it, ticket and merch sales hit $16,000 – going on to surpass $100,000, all before the first match. The launch earned positive media coverage, boosting brand visibility and credibility.

Two other recent cases that Bélanger is proud of were for Cossette clients Air Canada and the Afrodescendant Leadership Alliance. To encourage travel to European destinations, Cossette partnered Air Canada with Spotify to create the "Musical Travel Guide", curating playlists inspired by artists' journeys through Europe. The results: 22 minutes of daily streaming per user, +7% business growth for Air Canada and a 12x engagement rate.

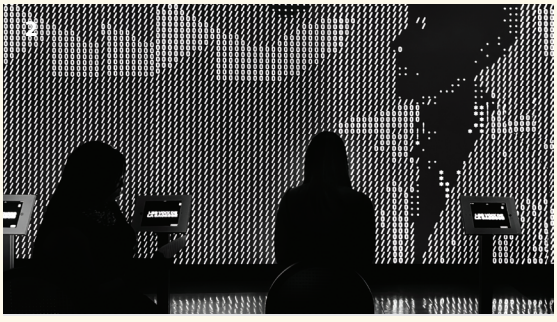
For the Afrodescendant Leadership Alliance, Cossette created "AI Mentors," an immersive experience showcased at the ALA 2024 Gala. Participants engaged with an AI trained on the speeches and writings of iconic Black leaders. The AI generated 1,440 history-backed responses tailored to participants' personal aspirations.

All three cases demonstrate the vital role that design has played at Cossette, providing ample evidence that the agency has had design in its bones from the day it began, way back in 1972.

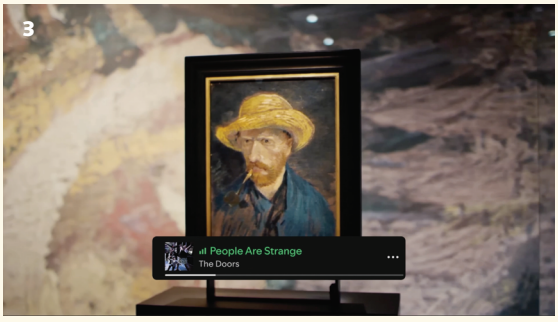
## CASES | DIGITAL

**1. Cracking code for a McBreak**
With Eat the Code, Cossette and McDonald's Canada turned programming into play. A custom site hid promo codes inside real code, rewarding developers who debugged their way to McDonald's meals. Engagement soared – one in three Quebec developers joined in, spending six minutes per session and praising the brand's smart, relevant approach.




**2.** With AI Mentors, Cossette and the Afrodescendant Leadership Alliance turned the wisdom of Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou and Nelson Mandela into living mentorship. Trained on 200+ speeches, the AI offered personal guidance to hundreds of participants. The result: 100% felt inspired and connected, proving mentorship can transcend time and technology.




**3.** Cossette and Air Canada invited Quebecers to discover Paris, Amsterdam and Barcelona through Musical Guides – audio journeys blending stories, local insight and curated songs from top Quebec artists. The campaign turned flights into cultural connections, driving +7% European sales and making Air Canada a bridge between emotion, culture and travel.

# Go beyond your network.

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

**strategyonline.ca/careers**






LG2

# Indie thinking, national scale

BY **VAL MALONEY**

When it comes to design, LG2 is building brand ecosystems. The agency's design-forward approach helped it repeat its Silver win in this year's Design category, recognition of both its creative craft and its philosophy on brand transformation.

"We consider ourselves a brand experience agency... design really is our superpower and part of our DNA," says Josh Stein, partner and CCO. "We ground everything we do in strategy, but we have these great levers to pull across disciplines to make sure the right solution comes to life."

This year, the agency's reputation for world-class craft was on full display. From rebranding heritage Quebec culinary staple Cordon Bleu to reimagining design systems for art nonprofit EXMURO, the work demonstrated how design can be both a commercial driver and a cultural amplifier.

"Design, craft, innovation and ideas that lead to impact... craft remains critical. It's an anchor for creative excellence," Stein says. Even as the advertising market has cooled in 2025, LG2 has invested in future-facing capabilities. Earlier this year, the agency hired its first experiential design lead, formalizing a discipline it had dabbled in but never fully committed to.

"We saw a need. Experiential ideas are not new to us, but we knew we needed to go deeper," Stein says. "We brought in a team that sees the role of tech in experiential too, and how to layer in innovation and AI in a way that feels seamless."

One recent example is OCS's Buzzkill, an educational Toronto-based storefront designed to mirror illegal cannabis dispensaries while informing consumers about the risks of unregulated products. The stunt mixed retail branding, interactive design and experiential storytelling, targeting Gen Z consumers in

what Stein calls "the beauty of experiential as a form of creative expression." It garnered 32.2M earned media impressions, lifted awareness of cannabis risks to 59% and drove a 152% increase in Ontarians saying they'd choose the legal cannabis market.

LG2 has also expanded with the launch of REF Digital, a standalone digital agency led by long-time LG2 leaders Julie Pilon (partner and president), Nicolas Baldovini (partner and CCO) and Romain Prache (partner and VP, product). "Clients were asking for big build e-commerce projects and tech-forward solutions," Stein says. "REF gives us a new brand to put on the door and the ability to get into the room with the right level of expertise."

With its launch, REF brings along a progressive roster of clients including Keurig, It Gets Better Canada, Royal Ontario Museum, Hydro-Québec, Producteurs de lait du Québec and National Bank of Canada. As part of the LG2 Group, REF will work closely with sister agencies Dialekta and Varibase (media, performance marketing and CRM) to add digital depth to LG2's brand experience offering.

Unlike many competitors, the LG2 Group operates outside a holding company. LG2's national leadership council, which exists to elevate the work and steer its evolution from an independent agency to the growing LG2 Group, grew this year with the addition of Stein, partner and CSO Sophie-Annick Vallée and partner and chief business officer Mireille Côté. The LG2 Group currently comprises flagship creative agency LG2, plus LG2 Architecture, Dialekta and Varibase, Alinea (PR and public affairs JV with TACT) and REF Digital.

"Our ability to do many things well – design, advertising, digital, experiential – with all this expertise under one roof and all great people. That, for me, is a point of differentiation," Stein says.

For LG2, design is not decoration; it's a strategy expressed in every touchpoint. In Cordon Bleu's rebrand, that meant merging nostalgia with modernity to connect with younger Quebecers. For EXMURO, it meant building an identity that literally "never closes," reflecting the openness of public art. And for Halo, it meant positioning a $3,500 dental mirror as a revolutionary tool by borrowing cues from Silicon Valley startups.

"We believe in impact over everything," Stein says. "Our ideas need to change people's behaviour, the way they think and feel. That impact needs to be measured."

The agency is also focused on nurturing its people. "Number one, it's people… the passion here, the craft legacy and the talent across offices, it feels like we're just at chapter one," Stein says.

While 2025 has been "a hold steady year," as Stein puts it, LG2's philosophy of doing more with less continues to resonate. "We've never been an agency that needed a lot of money to do great things. Insightful, smart ideas solve problems and that hasn't changed."

That mindset, paired with independence, national scale and a design-first philosophy, positions LG2 as one of Canada's most formidable creative partners. Its Silver AOY Design recognition is less a culmination than a checkpoint – a signal that its blend of craft, strategy and cultural insight is setting it up for future success.

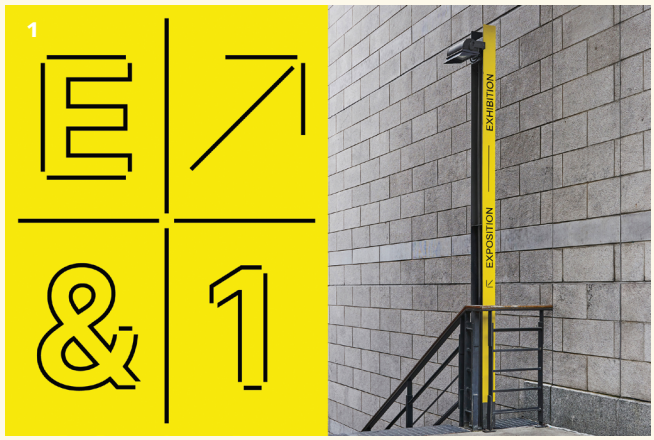
**NEW BUSINESS**
**2027 Canada Games, Attitude Living, Canada Growth Fund, City of Drummondville, Musée de l'histoire nationale du Québec, Oxfam-Québec, Shoppers Foundation for Women's Health**

**NEW HIRES**
**103 this year**

**OFFICES**
**Montreal, Quebec City, Toronto**

**STAFF**
449

## CASES







**1. Art that never closes its doors**

With EXMURO's new identity, LG2 built a brand that reflects the open spirit of public art. Inspired by the idea of "art that transcends," the system uses an always-open typeface and a vivid yellow signature to create space for creativity to breathe. Since launch, EXMURO has drawn nearly 100,000 visitors to its reinvented Aire Publique.

**2.** With LG2's identity for Halo Dental, the dentist's mirror became a symbol of progress. The brand fused empathy and innovation, presenting Halo as both tool and ally. A luminous logo, intuitive UX and interactive 3D demo helped the startup exceed pre-order goals by 40% and win a Red Dot Award.

For LG2's Design Campaign of the Year, see p.74-75



STARCOM

# A Canadian lens on the future of media

BY **ANDREA HERNANDEZ**

Since taking the helm of Starcom Canada in January, Veronik L'Heureux, formerly president of Spark Foundry Canada, has doubled down on building local talent and fostering a distinctly Canadian identity. But her vision doesn't stop at people – she's also integrating advanced technology across the agency, drawing on tools from acquisitions made by French parent company Publicis Groupe.

While AI continues to reshape the industry, L'Heureux remains clear-eyed: "It's important that, as a society, we don't start relying on AI and technology to do the thinking our brains should be doing," she says. "I'm more focused on how it can enhance our capabilities, not replace them."

Under her leadership, Starcom has spent the past year developing Publicis ID, its patented identity graph exclusive to the Canadian market. It launched in June 2024 alongside Growth OS, a data-driven marketing platform also built for Canada.

Working in tandem, Publicis ID and Growth OS now form the backbone of Starcom's audience-first planning approach. Designed to unify proprietary, third-party and partner data with digital signals and behavioural insights, Publicis ID offers a comprehensive, single profile of the consumer. Growth OS, meanwhile, functions as an end-to-end operating system, connecting agency teams and clients from the initial brief through to activation and measurement.

"We have a global group that is investing heavily in acquisitions, technology and AI," she says. "But sometimes that doesn't apply to all markets. That's why we're taking the best of what we have globally and localizing those tools."

For Starcom, the challenge is to retain its local identity even though it's viewed as a strong global brand. As part of its effort to localize global tools, Starcom has also integrated Culture Mapper, an AI-powered tool originally developed by the UK team. Now embedded within Growth OS, the tool analyzes social content to identify emerging cultural trends, allowing brands to engage with cultural moments in a timely and authentic way.

According to L'Heureux, combining Starcom's own identity

graph with tools like Culture Mapper has helped build stronger client trust and differentiate the agency by tackling fragmented data.

"We operate in an industry and market where the primary barrier is data inoperability, which creates silos across the marketing ecosystem – between traditional and digital activation, between walled gardens, and between media and CRM and even creative," she says. "While many companies have addressed parts of this challenge, we've bridged all of them to deliver a single view of the consumer and enable truly personalized content."

Recent acquisitions by Publicis Groupe have also expanded the resources available to Starcom. These include influencer marketing platform Captiv8 and Moov AI, a Canadian firm focused on AI and data solutions. These complement last year's acquisition of Mars United Commerce, a commerce marketing company providing retail consultancy, media expertise and shopper intel.

But technology alone isn't enough. So far this year, Starcom has grown its team by around 10% and promoted nearly 20% of employees as part of a broader plan to strengthen both technical expertise and strategic leadership. Two senior appointments have played a key role: Scott Glitz as EVP of data and product at Publicis Media and Stephanie Sousa as SVP of product lead.

At the same time, Starcom is investing in training and upskilling to ensure employees can connect that technical capability with business strategy.

"On one end, we have the engineers making the tech work for us. Then, we have AI automating the more analytical tasks, things like pattern recognition, optimization and process automation," she explains. "But at the top, what really matters to our clients is strategy: how this technology drives business outcomes."

To support this vision, Starcom's Learning & Development (L&D) programs target talent at every stage, whether through its Early Careers Program, leadership development tracks or initiatives for rising leaders. Beyond skills training, the agency is also funding research to better understand Canada's cultural diversity and build leadership around welcoming newcomers. That includes initiatives like We Are Canada, a long-term research project exploring evolving Canadian identities, and Roots and Wings, a custom study focused on the experiences and aspirations of women new to the country.

Looking back, L'Heureux points to a key decision that helped set Starcom's current course. "In 2017, I decided we should stop spending on big awards and instead put that money into AI and data. People laughed at us back then. But today, we're in the position we are because we made those tough investments early."

**NEW BUSINESS**
Coca-Cola, AB InBev, Keurig Dr Pepper, LEGO, Elections Ontario, Cadillac Fairview, Sandals, Philip Morris International, Ubisoft, Titleist

**NEW HIRES**
Added 113 new team members

**OFFICES**
Toronto, Montreal, Windsor

**STAFF**
415

## CASES







**1. No excuses between buds**

For Budweiser, Starcom turned a friendship crisis into a cultural moment. Canadians were skipping hangouts, so it let fans expose every excuse on TV, social and arena screens nationwide. The result? Viral buzz, 51.5M impressions and hockey fans reminded that showing up is what Buds do best.

**2.** With Starcom, RONA rebuilt its bond with Quebecers by doing what no other retailer had: speaking their language. The DIYctionary added 150 slang terms to RONA's site, letting DIYers search the way they talk. From "grindeur" to "leaf bloweur," it got the conversation going, driving a 125% traffic spike.

For Starcom's Media Campaign of the Year, see p.74-75.



COSSETTE MEDIA

# Built to adapt

BY **CHELSEA CLARKE**

Speed and precision are the new currency of modern marketing, and Cossette Media has learned how to move fast within a complex network. Over the last few years, it has restructured around agility, innovation and data-driven independence. "We have the freedom and the talent to build what our clients need, when they need it," says Marc-Antoine Grenier, vice-président principal et directeur général of Cossette. "If we believe in an idea, we can develop and launch it in a few months. That's the kind of agility today's market demands."

Grenier, directeur général Québec et Est du Canada Martin Soubeyran and GM of Ontario and Western Canada Andrew Butts have been transforming Cossette Media into a faster, more inventive operation. Much of that evolution stems from the arrival of Plus Company EVP Karine Courtemanche, whose leadership has given the agency both clarity and momentum. Under Courtemanche's direction, Cossette Media underwent an internal reorganization that put a greater focus on client leadership, product development and technology as the engines of growth. The result is an agency that feels less like a division of a holding company and more like a collaborative innovation lab.

"We're able to remain globally competitive by either building or investing in technology ourselves," says Butts. "Coupling that with the independence and integration across our disciplines has created the momentum we're seeing today."

AI sits at the centre of that momentum. Cossette Media has developed a suite of AI-supported tools that drive everything from persona modelling and predictive analytics to automated optimization and dashboarding. Among those innovations are Smart Persona, which uses AI to simulate real conversations with data-driven audience profiles; AIOS, a full-funnel optimization platform that connects paid, earned and owned data to deliver real-time recommendations and stronger ROI; and MediaBox, which simplifies the media planning process by unifying calendars, budgets and campaign investments into a single platform. "AI has democratized innovation," says Soubeyran. "Before, only the biggest global networks could afford to develop tools like this. Now, with the right talent, we can build them ourselves right here in Canada."

Part of Cossette Media's philosophy focuses on understanding, proving and maximizing incremental value. "We're getting much more sophisticated in understanding attribution," says Butts. "That's media's modern role: not just buying impressions but delivering measurable impact." And, he notes, supporting Canadian media partners has become a strategic advantage, not just a patriotic choice. "The big challenge has always been proving that Canadian media delivers outcomes," he says. "We're now able to

### NEW BUSINESS

**Benjamin Moore QC, BRP, Université Laval, Rona, Hydro-Quebec, Energir (digital), St. Lawrence Parks Commission**

### NEW HIRES

**Marc-Antoine Grenier, SVP and GM; Guillaume Duhamel, associate VP, digital; Caroline Archambault, VP, media business lead; Brock Leeson, SVP, product and innovation**

### OFFICES

**Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Quebec City**

### STAFF

225

demonstrate not only that there's cultural and economic value in investing locally, but that it drives real business growth."

Cossette Media brought that notion to life in Decathlon's "Make Time for Sports" campaign, a Black Friday initiative encouraging Canadians to schedule time for physical activity during the shopping frenzy. The agency developed a media plan spanning paid social, programmatic and digital out-of-home, identifying high-intent segments and optimizing placements in real time. The campaign delivered a 25% increase in revenue, a 28% lift in branded search and a 56% rise in website visits compared to the previous year, with nearly half of participants engaging with Decathlon for the first time.

These days, clients increasingly seek simplicity: one partner to connect the dots across creative, data and technology, and Cossette Media's campus model makes that possible. "Many clients tell us, 'I work with four great agencies, but it's too complex,'" says Soubeyran. "At Cossette, we can bring everything together – creative, PR, production, martech – and move faster." That ability to pivot quickly across disciplines is especially important as marketing expectations evolve. "Clients aren't just asking where to spend," says Grenier. "They're asking, 'What should I fix before I spend?' Sometimes that means improving a website, optimizing a CRM or adjusting creative. Through Plus Company, we can bring the right experts to the table and give a full, strategic answer."

Internally, the agency's culture mirrors its work: creative, entrepreneurial and people-first. Butts describes it as "a culture of creativity and ownership," one that encourages experimentation and cross-pollination between teams. MediaBox exemplifies that approach – born from an employee suggestion, refined with leadership support and now central to how the agency operates. Cossette Media invests heavily in its people, offering training and opportunities to grow beyond traditional media roles. "We want them to grow," says Grenier. "If they want to learn AI, social or martech, we'll support that."

That investment is paying off. Cossette Media powers faster innovation, stronger client partnerships and growing momentum. "We're globally competitive, but we do it with Canadian independence," says Butts. "That balance – an entrepreneurial mindset combined with operational discipline – is what defines us."

For Soubeyran, who's had a long career in media, the excitement hasn't faded. "Everything changes so fast," he says. "That's what makes it exciting. Our job is to stay ahead, to keep learning, to be ready for what's next."

## CASES




**1. From Black Friday to Play Friday**
Cossette Media helped Decathlon turn the chaos of Black Friday into calm. Through #MakeTimeForSports, Canadians added workout sessions – complete with Decathlon invites – right to their calendars. The idea drove 25% more sales, 56% higher traffic and a 49% jump in new customers, proving sport beats stress every time.




**2.** With Cossette Media, Mentos turned its iconic cola reaction into Fizzooka – a real-and-digital Fortnite launcher that exploded across gaming culture. The campaign hit 25M impressions, 225K in-game activations and reignited Mentos' place in Gen Z's world.




**3.** With Cossette Media, SAQ didn't just promote wine – it rebranded Quebec's biggest radio station. For one week, Rouge FM became Rosé FM, complete with pink studios, custom jingles and on-air sommeliers. The bold media twist sparked cultural buzz and poured results – rosé sales jumped 47% and basket size rose 25%.




INITIATIVE

# When media thinks like creative

BY **JONATHAN RUSSELL**

Initiative Canada has been on a hot streak. The IPG Mediabrands agency won seven new clients over the last year, including giants like Unilever and Volvo, representing just under $90 million in new business assignments. Last year, the media agency won new business with the likes of Air Canada, Intuit and Destination Toronto.

Over the past year, Initiative Canada has won 56 awards, including a 2024 Gold in the Media category for Agency of the Year and seven *strategy* Awards (including the Grand Prix) last year. Beyond that, it has been recognized as the number-one media agency in Canada by the World Advertising Research Center (WARC) on its 2025 Media 100 list. Globally, it jumped 15 spots to rank 14th worldwide.

"It's been a pretty hot last 24 months," says Chris Gairdner, VP and head of creative partnerships with Initiative. He attributes that streak to the agency's focus on building a "strong and inclusive creative culture… this relentless focus on craft and seeing creativity as a differentiator."

"We've been on this journey to redefine the media agency role and move it from follower to leader," he says. "Media often plays second fiddle to creative, and I think a lot of agencies have internalized that. There is a bit of an inferiority complex sometimes in media. At Initiative, we believe media is magic. We're trying to make it just as exciting as the creative."

One example is a recent campaign Initiative worked on for Destination Toronto called "Moving Monuments," an installation in New York City featuring a 10-foot-tall robotic percussion tower, built from salvaged materials from across Toronto, that played in tandem with Toronto rapper Shad's live performance. For the collaboration, travel publisher Atlas Obscura helped bring together the Juno-winning artist and roboticist-composer Danny Shaddick. The project also included a co-branded landing page on Atlas Obscura, a mini documentary on YouTube and TikTok, and an original music composition released by Shad on Spotify.

In another boundary-pushing work from 2025, Initiative teamed up with Globe Content Studio, the branded content

division of *The Globe & Mail*, to launch "In Good Spirit," a comic and audio series for Indigenous Tourism Alberta (ITA), Explore Edmonton and Tourism Calgary that aimed to bring stories about Indigenous travel in Alberta to life. The comic was illustrated by Edmonton-based Indigenous artist Kyle Charles – known for his work with Marvel and DC Comics – and featured in *The Globe & Mail* and at Toronto's Fan Expo.

That work attracted the attention of another client, Destination Ontario, which enlisted Initiative for a campaign that was "equally innovative but for Ontario," Gairdner says. "They wanted to spark curiosity, drive intrigue and build a cultural understanding for Ontario's tourism product. We were thinking about how food is often the first way that people connect with a new culture, and right now in Canada, there is obviously a huge 'buy local' movement."

For Initiative, the answer was to partner with meal-kit delivery service Goodfood Indigenous chef Joseph Shawana to create a limited-edition recipe box where consumers could make authentic Indigenous cuisine in their own homes, anywhere across Canada.

Of those three campaigns, Gairdner adds: "They're all examples of really unconventional work that you wouldn't necessarily expect to see from a media agency. All of these were done without a creative agency involved, which is uncommon, and I think they all live up to this belief that successful work shouldn't rely on hijacking attention – brands should try to earn it."

One way that Initiative is earning attention is by promoting creative values, systems and behaviours internally. Investment in the team is as important – if not more – than the agency's investment in tech, which is no longer a differentiator among media agencies, according to Sammy Rifai, CSO with Initiative. (Though, to be clear, there is still plenty of investment in tech, including AI.)

"In marketing and advertising, we're always surrounded by so much noise and so much tech," Rifai says. "The least controversial thing I could say is most people hate advertising, and I think right now, we're in a state where ads today are being built to serve algorithms over people. Despite us having more data and tech, we're kind of served this sea of boring ads."

To stand out in that sea starts with the team and continues through client meetings and, ultimately, the work itself, Rifai adds. "We don't want to be the media agency that presents a plan the last 10 minutes of a 60-minute meeting, following the creative and PR agencies. We want to put media at the heart of the idea to elevate the creative platform."

**NEW BUSINESS**
Volvo, Unilever, Ontario Power Generation

**NEW HIRES**
Jordan Lauper, VP strategy; Emily Morrison, group director; Devon Stephens, director of communications design; Tim Sarrazin, group account director

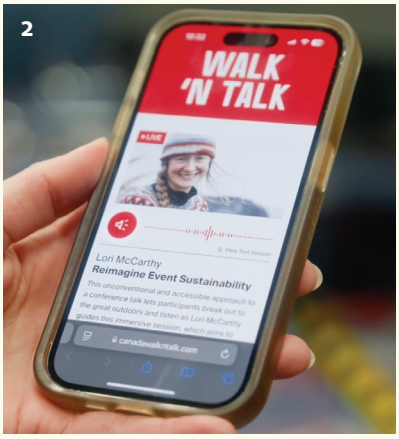
**OFFICES**
Toronto

**STAFF**
325

## CASES

**1. Outsmarting, not outspending**
Initiative and Wendy's took breakfast warfare to the streets with election-style tactics. Branded lawn signs lined routes between A&W and Wendy's, turning commutes into campaigns. Supported by geo-fenced media and contextual OOH, the effort transformed daily drives into a full-scale offensive that made breakfast impossible to ignore.




**2.** With Initiative, Destination Canada transformed corporate weariness into fresh inspiration. Leave Inspired, Not Tired replaced dull conference halls with outdoor adventures that spotlighted Canadian innovation, driving $19 million in potential event revenue and global buzz.

**3.** With Initiative, WWF Canada flipped retail's playbook to fight climate fatigue. Save Big borrowed urgency cues from shopping culture – flash-sale language, flyers and tap-to-donate ads – to spark real action. The result: 77 million impressions, 220% higher engagement and record donations.





AGNOSTIC

# Independent thinking, earned results

BY **VAL MALONEY**

When Sarah Crabbe co-founded Agnostic six years ago, she didn't set out to build a traditional PR shop. Her goal was to create an agency that thought differently about how brands earn attention. "Everything we do is rooted in strategy," says Crabbe, Agnostic's president. "It's insight-led, earned-first, with real business impact."

That ethos of "better thinking, better results" has guided the agency's growth from a one-person consultancy into a 28-person team working across PR, social, experiential and paid. As PR has changed, so has Agnostic, expanding its focus to prioritize cultural relevance, spark conversations and ensure earned attention delivers measurable results.

Agnostic's approach was on display in "Finish It" for the Terry Fox Foundation, which helped Canadians understand the organization's role in accelerating cancer research 45 years after Fox's historic run. The agency orchestrated a national moment on World Cancer Day by premiering a short film with his siblings. Set to a never-before-heard version of Gord Downie's "Courage," the film became a cultural flashpoint that dominated headlines, with 15M organic views and a 900% lift in web traffic.

Agnostic's rise has been built on both reputation and intentional reinvention. At its fifth anniversary, the team launched Agnostic Exchange, a model integrating PR with experiential marketing. According to Crabbe, it was built to remove silos: start from a single insight, then decide which tactics would deliver the most impact.

Led by Agnostic's new head of experience, Liza Baoukian, the unit brings experiential marketing into the PR orbit, activating campaigns in the real world, amplifying them through media and social. "With Agnostic Exchange, it feels like a very natural evolution of where we're going," Crabbe says. "After five years, we're building out. We've seen a gap, and it's proof the expansion is working."

Agnostic is proudly independent, holding its own against both global networks and boutique specialists. Its business model is flexible, tapping senior freelancers for specific mandates while maintaining a core team anchored in strategy and storytelling.

Recent work out of the Exchange for Kicking Horse Coffee turned the brand's 11 blends into 11 free tattoos at a sold-out pop-up with Toronto's Chronic Ink. The stunt proved fan loyalty by merging experiential and earned media, generating 24 media hits and 4.4M impressions.

**NEW BUSINESS**
Kicking Horse Coffee, Trillium, Health Partners Foundation, Canadian Blood Services, Sinai Health Foundation

**NEW HIRES**
Liza Baoukian, head of experience; Steph More, senior PR manager; Frankie Certosimo, senior account manager

**OFFICES**
Toronto, Halifax

**STAFF**
28

Another example is Toronto's Sinai Health Foundation's "Hot & Bothered" campaign, which turned the silence around menopause into a national conversation. Through celebrity advocacy, physician voices and cultural partnerships, Agnostic positioned women's health as a mainstream equity issue while helping Sinai surpass its ambitious $50 million fundraising goal.

"Instead of siloed partners, we start with one insight and build out from there," Crabbe explains. "That's where we see real engagement and results."

For Agnostic, placements are only the starting line; the real goal is building platforms that resonate and endure. The agency taps cultural currents, extends ideas across channels and always ties success to metrics.

That lens has fuelled bold, earned-first work like the recent Hayu Pride Month cookie collab with Toronto's Craig's Cookies. Together, they launched a limited-edition pink Hayu Pride cookie, driven by media outreach and influencer sampling. The campaign distributed 5,000 cookies in five days, generated 5M media impressions and raised $3,000 for Friends of Ruby, a 2SLGBTQIA+ youth support centre.

As title sponsor of the Jake Paul vs. Mike Tyson fight, CELSIUS tapped Agnostic to champion the moment in Canada through the Agnostic Exchange. By merging earned and experiential, the agency secured national coverage and 55M impressions across six provinces.

Both examples began with cultural insight and extended into influencer, social and on-the-ground activations to build organic momentum.

Agnostic's independent ethos informs its internal culture. Crabbe has shaped the agency around intentional growth, what she calls the "one coffee" approach, ensuring every hire and client relationship reflects the agency's values. "We like to meet people for coffee in real life and, over the years, have hired the majority of our team based on that. We know – and they know – instinctively whether the person is a fit for us and we are a fit for them based on that honest conversation," she explains.

That deliberate approach has helped Agnostic maintain a strong sense of identity as it grows, giving it confidence to compete nationally and internationally while staying Canadian-first.

"The moment for independent Canadian agencies has never been stronger," Crabbe says. "It's a good time to be independent. It's a good time to control your own destiny and a good time to try new things."

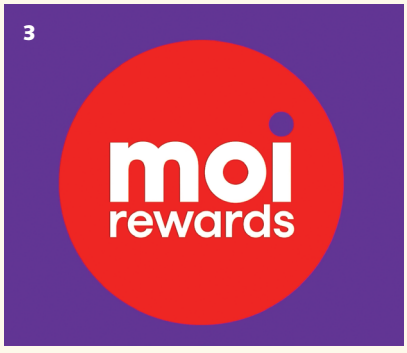
## CASES

**1. Terry's spirit, Canada's story**
Agnostic helped the Terry Fox Foundation unite two Canadian legacies – Terry Fox and Gord Downie – in Finish It, a campaign that reignited national pride and awareness for precision cancer research. The film's premiere sparked over 500M earned impressions, 20 media interviews and millions of organic shares from icons like Ryan Reynolds and Céline Dion.




**2.** With Agnostic, Sinai Health Foundation turned taboo into transformation. Hot & Bothered united celebrity voices, national media and everyday women under one message: it's time to talk about menopause. The campaign smashed goals with 40M earned impressions and over $50 million raised for Canada's women's health revolution.




**3.** Agnostic helped Metro reframe loyalty around people, not purchases. Celebrate Moi! turned a rewards launch into a feel-good movement, spotlighting Ontarians making a difference. The campaign sparked 104M impressions, flawless sentiment, and over a million sign-ups – proof that celebrating others is the ultimate reward.



**CITIZEN RELATIONS**

# Earning the right to lead

BY **CHELSEA CLARKE**

On a recent pitch, Citizen Relations heard what every agency craves: "That was the best presentation we've ever seen." For the team, it was validation of a model a decade in the making.

For years, Citizen has been working toward a model where strategy, creative and PR don't pass the baton but stand shoulder to shoulder, shaping ideas together. It's the product of an integration that began in 2014, when Citizen moved beyond its PR roots to bring strategy and creative in-house.

"Ten years ago, we had a client challenge us on whether we had done our own strategy. They couldn't believe a PR agency could produce that level of insight," says CEO Nick Cowling. "Today, that's the expectation. People expect us to be that strategic."

That cohesion has been built deliberately. Leadership made integration a priority, setting the tone in rooms where debate is encouraged but never entrenched, and where vulnerability from the top invites the same at every level. "It feels a lot more fluid now," says CCO Josh Budd. "There's no cheat sheet or shortcut to integration. It comes from time spent together. The chemistry, trust and respect develop over time."

But chemistry is only part of the story. Guiding it is Citizen's earn-first philosophy: a commitment to building attention, trust and reputation before anything else. "We want 100 people talking about our client, as opposed to our client telling 100 people about themselves," says Cowling. Across multiple disciplines, the nucleus is always the same: it must be earned.

That mindset has served Citizen well as AI changes how people consume information. For Cowling, the shift doesn't disrupt PR so much as reinforce it. "AI platforms look for the most trusted, authoritative content available, and that's what we create," he says. "Modern PR helps the brands we work with do the right things, as opposed to just saying the right things."

And the work reflects it. "SickKids' 150th anniversary was a great example of integration at work," says Budd. The campaign pulled every discipline into play: experiential teams staged balloon installations worldwide, PR navigated complex media and stakeholder relations, and strategy and creative sifted through 150 years of archives to shape celebratory stories. Each balloon marked a chapter in SickKids' global impact and invited people to share their own stories, Ryan Reynolds among them.

The result was the hospital's most ambitious PR effort to date, generating hundreds of millions of earned impressions and, more

**NEW BUSINESS**
Centre d'Art Battat, Huer Foods, Nespresso Canada, RBC Dominion Securities, Foundation de l'Université Laval

**NEW HIRES**
Kris Parlett, SVP; Dominic Cleall, VP; Om Khagram, director, digital strategy; Sarah Zajac, senior director; Bailey Moore, director, experiential; Kelsey Wheeler, director

**OFFICES**
Toronto, Vancouver, Montréal, Québec City, New York, Los Angeles, Orange County, Cincinnati, London, Berlin

**STAFF**
174

importantly, reversing a decline in charitable giving with a 44% lift in revenue and a surge of new donors.

For TurboTax, Citizen tapped another cultural nerve. Citizen's strategy, data, creative and PR teams turned the insight – that Gen Z's tax anxiety mirrors the tropes of horror – into *Undone*, a short film rolled out in theatres, on social and at midnight festivals. It was watched through to the end more than 1.7 million times and, crucially, delivered a double-digit increase in Gen Z sales.

Looking to the future, Citizen is investing in what it calls Reputation Plus. "Clients are looking for corporate reputation and consumer connection to be blended, rather than treated as two separate things," says Cowling. The push is reinforced by new AI-powered tools and capabilities that feed the agency's intelligence group, giving strategy and creative richer inputs with a "tomorrow first" mindset that maps how ideas can stretch three, nine or even 18 months into the future.

Citizen is also prototyping an AI tool that audits the content already circulating about a brand and shows what's being picked up by large language models. The goal is to flag what's accurate, where gaps exist and which phrases or themes are missing altogether to give teams a clearer sense of how to position content so that it performs in an AI-driven environment.

Citizen's leaders are clear that no part of its transformation has to do with becoming something else, but instead proving what a fully integrated PR agency can deliver when it commits to being greater than the sum of its parts. A decade ago, strategy and creative inside a PR firm seemed like an experiment, but today, it's the reason clients are coming through the door. The campaigns, talent model and even the agency's approach to AI all share the same through-line: integration done properly gives Citizen an advantage. "Earn-first doesn't put us in a box – it gives us a lens," says Cowling. That lens makes the agency's latest iteration complete.

## CASES

**1. 150 balloons, one big legacy**
Citizen helped SickKids celebrate its 150th by thinking big – 150 balloon sculptures across six continents, each telling a story of world-changing care. From a hot air balloon over Toronto to one renamed hockey arena, the campaign sparked 500M impressions and record donations, proving SickKids is still the hospital that changes the world.



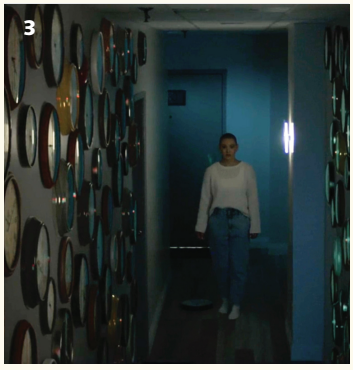
1



2

**2.** With Citizen, Coors Light became the hero no one expected. Fix Tixflation reclaimed overpriced tickets – earning 118M impressions, $81K returned and a 70% conversion rate. By summer's end, one in three Canadians linked Coors Light with music again.

**3.** TurboTax and Citizen turned Gen Z's tax dread into a gripping horror film, *Undone*. Screened in theatres and festivals, it earned 26M impressions, 1.7M video completions and boosted revenue 20% – proving even tax fear can fuel action.


3




HARD WORK CLUB

# Re-valuing creativity, one campaign at a time

BY JONATHAN RUSSELL

Creativity still brings value to this industry. It sounds obvious to anyone grinding away at a creative agency, but it was an outlook Cameron Stark and Meghan Kraemer found lacking – or perhaps forgotten altogether – when they co-founded Hard Work Club in 2021. Stark, who is also the Toronto-based agency's head of strategy, took it a step further in a recent interview, saying that "as an industry, we've been doing so many things to devalue creativity."

In founding the indie agency, the pair set out to reassert that creative work isn't just art, it's essential business value. "We wanted to say, 'creative work is hard work, it's valuable work, and eventually you get to the point where it is work that will return value to your business – if you're willing to invest in it,'" Stark says.

That belief has defined Hard Work Club's approach: one grounded in ambition, collaboration and long-term partnerships. And it turns out, brands are willing to invest. For some of Hard Work Club's biggest clients, they've made it clear they want to take risks and execute boundary-pushing work. "It definitely requires a values alignment to embrace the kind of stuff that we think works," Stark says of the client relationships that make their best work possible.

Case in point: one of Hard Work Club's first wins was Knix's "Every Body in Leakproof" campaign, launched in October 2021. The creative tackled bladder leakage, menstruation and perspiration – subjects that no longer feel taboo thanks in part to brands (like Knix) and agencies (like Hard Work Club) that were not afraid to take risks. The campaign centred around a music-style spot with the song "Blood, Sweat & Pee (Nothing to Hide)" by Toronto rapper Exmiranda and featured uninhibited women drumming, dancing and skateboarding.

**NEW BUSINESS**
Partake Brewing Company, Tropicana, Canadian Club, Ottawa Rapid FC

**NEW HIRES**
Cass Farry, VP and managing director; Carlos Game, group account director

**OFFICES**
100% remote across Canada

**STAFF**
11

That kind of cultural fearlessness also underpins Hard Work Club's work with DoorDash, whose long-standing collaboration with Hard Work Club includes a 2025 campaign under the brand's masterbrand platform, "Your Door to More," which envisions stressed parents, sick people and busy office workers (sort of) dancing their way to whatever they need. At the time of the launch, DoorDash said the spot leveraged dance as a strategic storytelling device to convey consumer emotion and experience, calling the iteration "just the beginning" of its global brand platform as it "continues to evolve."

For Stark, DoorDash has a brand ethos that aligns with Hard Work Club. "It's a client that has a level of ambition, and they're fighting against brands with celebrity power," Stark adds. "They need to rely on craft and storytelling and find ways to build people's attention. Even our latest campaign for DoorDash is still running nine months in. There are not a lot of campaigns that run that long."

The agency's client list also includes non-alcoholic beer brand Partake, financial services brand Money Mart and Canadian charity Fast and Female: organizations hungry to make a tonal shift, take a clear shot at a key demo or push for pay equity.

While the client list – and the creative – has been impressive, it's been a journey getting an indie agency off the ground during a tough few years, with shutdowns and shrinking budgets. "We started quite naively, without really any capital," Stark says. "We had no investors… We didn't really realize how difficult it was to build a client base, but we did it over time."

One reason Stark cites for the success is a key differentiator from larger agencies: agility. "It's really hard for a lot of these bigger, older agencies to turn around the ship," he says. "It's the aircraft carrier. Turning that around and innovating and adapting to the new way things are done is really hard for them."

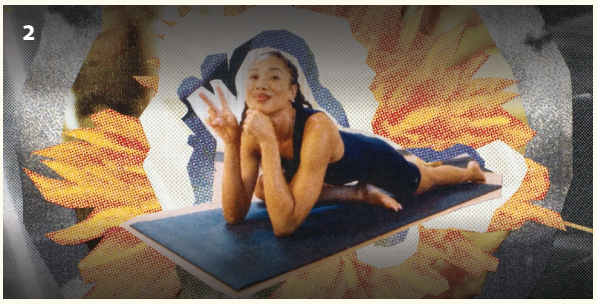
Another differentiator – and a move Stark is particularly proud of – was setting up a profit share as part of the agency's financial structure, meaning Hard Work Club shares a percentage of profits with its 10 to 15 employees based on years of service. "Last year, it was the first time we were actually able to do that. We shared a significant amount of money, and that's still the best thing that's happened to me," Stark says. "That aligns with a lot of my beliefs in fairness, equity and how we work."

But it's not over yet. Heading into 2026, Hard Work Club is continuing its mission to re-value creativity in advertising by focusing on long-term brand building rather than short-term novelty. The indie shop may be small, but its ambitions are big. "We are for people who want to do big brand platforms," Stark adds. "We're just drawn to things that are attempts at building bigger, long-lasting platforms."

## CASES




**1. Out of the lounge, into the club**
Canadian Club and Hard Work Club rewrote the rules with "The Official Drink of Unofficial Clubs." Gone are the fireside suits and smoky bragging rights – this is whisky made for real people and real moments. With fresh energy, rising sales and younger fans on board, CC officially became the drink of the unofficial.




**2.** Hard Work Club's "Make It Happen" made Partake the drink for doers. Real makers, bold design and zero hangovers drove 50% awareness growth and 150% more use.




**3.** With Hard Work Club, DoorDash turned delivery into emotion. "Your Door to More" captured the rush of anticipation when the doorbell rings – transforming convenience into joy. Set to a forgotten soul track, it broke through the noise and lifted awareness, love and orders nationwide.




THE LOCAL COLLECTIVE

# The power of personal

BY **CHRISTOPHER LOMBARDO**

Kaitlin Doherty admits The Local Collective can be its own toughest critic. But that high bar has helped the indie shop she co-owns with partner Matt Litzinger win clients from larger rivals – and ensures every campaign is approached with a deeper sense of ownership.

While Doherty valued her early experience at big holding companies, she says the reason the work at The Local Collective "feels so much more personal" is because the team is directly connected to the outcome in a way that isn't always possible at larger agencies.

When the agency is in a pitch room against the big guys, Doherty is unfazed. The agency's confidence comes from knowing that many clients are "actively evaluating big versus small" and often choosing the more hands-on approach.

One such client is Gilead Sciences Canada, which Doherty says is one of those "unlikely pairings" of small agency and big pharma. "They approached us because they were looking for an agency partner that could connect to their target in a way that was truly authentic," she says, one "that could be felt with more 'real' emotion versus the often stale traditional pharma approach."

As Doherty explains, the Pride campaign "Not a Real Doctor" used humour to encourage people living with HIV to speak with a professional about treatment options. Its title was a playful send-up of the fine-print disclaimer common in pharma ads.

Because living with HIV no longer means a terminal prognosis, it was important for the client to show up at Pride in a way that was celebratory and even light-hearted, rather than somber. The work extended into real life, with chiselled "doctor" models from the campaign appearing at Pride parties to dance the night away, complete with medical regalia.

The community's response was the best part, Doherty

says, noting that the client was flooded with messages celebrating the idea of the community being seen and able to have some fun, especially during Pride.

"In just four weeks, we crushed every metric set for a four-month run, delivering 13x the anticipated conversion rate," she says.

The Local Collective has also brought its personal touch to Toronto-based organization Safehaven, a not-for-profit that provides care for kids with complex medical needs.

"We launched a seek-and-find book – *One in 100* – that brought to life the statistic that one in 100 Canadian children are medically complex," Doherty says. The initiative drew six million impressions from a charity that lacked awareness, even with its west-end Toronto small business neighbours.

"We followed that up with a mass campaign in the fall, which was led by a beautiful cinematic spot showcasing that these children are hiding in plain sight, that we need to look at them and find them," she says.

The campaign delivered a 400% increase in donations, doubling its KPI (based on YoY Safehaven data), as well as a 350% increase in website traffic, beating the target by 150%. And on the media front, it delivered over 728,000 video completions – 340% above plan – at 80% lower cost per view.

Safehaven, a local organization with support from a small agency, was able to go big in a charitable landscape that Doherty calls "outrageously competitive," with bigger and more well known charities such as CAMH, SickKids and UHN having millions of dollars at their disposal.

Doherty says it's not a "big holdcos versus indie fight," but rather a moment where Canadian independents are shining. "I think there's a lot of really exciting [work] being produced in this country, and I'm really proud that we're a part of producing some of it."

While Doherty focuses on results, co-founder and CCO Litzinger says the agency's approach is rooted in balancing creativity with structure. "It takes a healthy dose of 'art' and constant attempts to make it 'science,'" he says. "As an agency we have always been excited by the process of creativity. The beautiful messiness of it. For us, that's the juice. So, we've developed a way of working that protects that magic while giving it real direction."

For Litzinger, collaboration is key: "We love the perspective that every person involved, from strategy to creative to client, is playing an instrument. The magic happens when everyone's truly playing together."

**NEW BUSINESS**
Gilead Sciences Canada, Gallo Wines, Jamieson Laboratories, Kawartha Dairy, MacKenzie Health Foundation, Tours By Locals

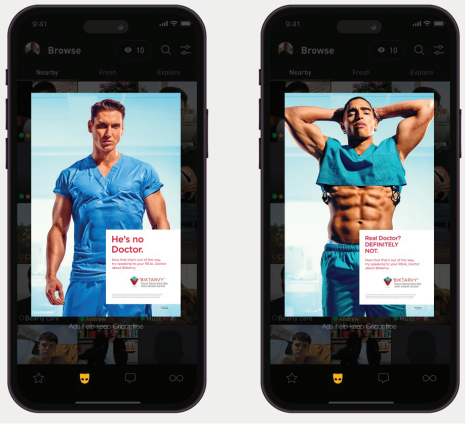
**NEW HIRES**
Siobhan Skene, art director; Tori Bradbrook, copywriter

**OFFICES**
Toronto

**STAFF**
14

## CASES

1




**1. Pride, not prescription**

With The Local Collective, Biktarvy showed up at Pride like never before. The campaign flipped pharma convention with latex scrubs, cheeky copy and a "wildly hot doctor," proving HIV care can be empowering. By celebrating people living with HIV instead of stigmatizing them, Biktarvy delivered 13x conversions and a community that finally felt seen.

2




**2.** Farber and The Local Collective turned financial stress into something tangible. By transforming ordinary household items into icons of invisible debt, the campaign created empathy at scale, outperforming every benchmark and reminding Canadians that even constant pressure can have an off switch.

For the Local Collective's PR Campaign of the Year, see p.74-75.




LIFELONG CRUSH

# How to turn a crush into devotion

BY **WILL NOVOSEDLIK**

Everybody knows what it's like to have a crush. It's that warm, fuzzy feeling you get when the object of your desire enters the room. Your heart beats a little faster, you go all weak in the knees and you feel as though you could be knocked over with a feather.

It rarely lasts more than a moment, unless the memory of it stays with you long enough to make you want to keep it going. For Lifelong Crush, it's definitely a case of the latter.

If you visit the agency's website, you'll see that it wears its heart on its sleeve. Lifelong Crush uses terms like "building long-term brand devotion," "deep connections" and "where culture meets human experience." Agencies are good at using this kind of aspirational language. It's what they get paid for. But scratch the surface and you'll likely agree that Lifelong Crush really does deliver.

For instance, when it comes to client relationships, most have been with the firm since its inception – and in many cases, have worked with key members of the leadership team while they were at previous agencies before the firm's launch. As EVP and managing director Caroline Kilgour puts it, "People who have been in the business for a long time know that relationships are the foundational fabric of this industry. A huge part of our client base is made up of returning clients. So, whether they worked with Christina [Yu] when she was at Rethink or with Derek [Blais] at BBDO or Geoff [Gingerich] when he was at Cossette, they're coming back to work with us." As CCO Derek Blais says, "We have lifelong crushes on our clients and, so far, the feeling seems to be mutual."

One of the things that keeps the feeling mutual is a shared ambition to generate real results. "The thing that connects everyone here is that we are really rooted in delivering sustained impact for our clients," says Kilgour. That means delivering creative that changes hearts and minds, and connects with consumers in the real world to drive noticeable business results. "That's something this whole team is very like-minded about," says partner and CCO Christina Yu. "As a team we want to spark long-term brand devotion."

Take the "Kickstart Your Heart" brand identity and campaign for Kicking Horse Coffee. "This falls right into our notion of 'unconstrained ideas,'" says SVP strategy Geoff Gingerich. "Kicking Horse is in a category with very rigid rules, very tight expectations. We brought them a badass approach that's unshackled from traditional media – one that blows the doors off the category." The results? Kicking Horse outgrew the category by a factor of six, increased direct-to-consumer sales by 68% and clocked over 365 million national impressions.

**NEW BUSINESS**
Destination Toronto, Pancreatic Cancer Canada, Nature's Way

**NEW HIRES**
Krista Blaylock, group business lead; Geoff Gingerich, SVP, strategy; Terri Vegso, head of production

**OFFICES**
Toronto

**STAFF**
25

To sustain the brand love, the agency quickly followed up with its "Canadiano" campaign. At the company's café, the brand has never had 'Americanos' on the menu: for years it has offered 'Canadianos' instead. When the US began imposing tariffs, the creative team designed a window sticker that said "Proudly serving Canadianos" and invited coffee shops all over Canada to put the sticker in their windows, too. And they did, even if they weren't selling Kicking Horse. With no media buy or budget, it spread like wildfire and became an earned media sensation.

It's a great demonstration of what Gingerich calls "strategy with soul." That may sound like something you see on a coffee mug at some new age shop, but with a background in anthropology, Gingerich understands the importance of empathy: the ability to really listen to people, to see the world from their perspective. "We want all of our work to speak to people's hearts first, and then their minds. We start by asking 'What is our audience's media diet? What are the truths they believe in? What are some of the influences playing on them from the category?' And we try to find something original to say by triangulating those three things, always keeping emotion at the heart of it. That's what we're aiming for."

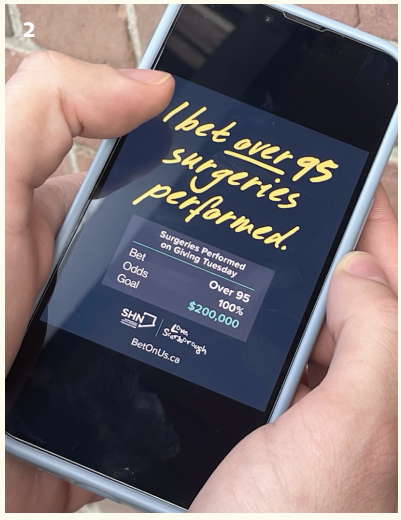
The success of that approach is evidenced by new business wins and new hires. This year has seen the agency add M&M Food Market, Nature's Way, World Wildlife Fund, Canadian Women in Sport, Peace Collective, Pancreatic Cancer North America and Protein Candy to their client roster.

Staff has expanded by 25%, with each new hire possessing what Kilgour calls a "big multi-hyphenate toolbox" of skills, including copywriter and AI innovator Mike Appleby, who joins as creative director, Deena Archibald as integrated producer, Anna Ira as strategist and Mary Claire (MC) Barlow as creative operations manager. Rounding out the talent roster are Jonathan Cafarelli as account supervisor and Sara Terwindt as account executive.

## CASES

**1. Wake up. Kick ass.**
Lifelong Crush helped Kicking Horse Coffee shake the industry awake with Kickstart Your Heart, a full-throttle campaign that swapped cozy mornings for chaos. With roaring visuals, rebellious headlines and a donkey on a bike, KHC boosted sales +68% and brand awareness to record highs.




**2.** Lifelong Crush helped Scarborough Health Network flip its fundraising odds. Bet On Us reimagined charity through a betting lens, letting donors "bet" on hospital wins like babies born and surgeries performed. The result: +46% donations, 45% first-time donors and a city rooting for its own.



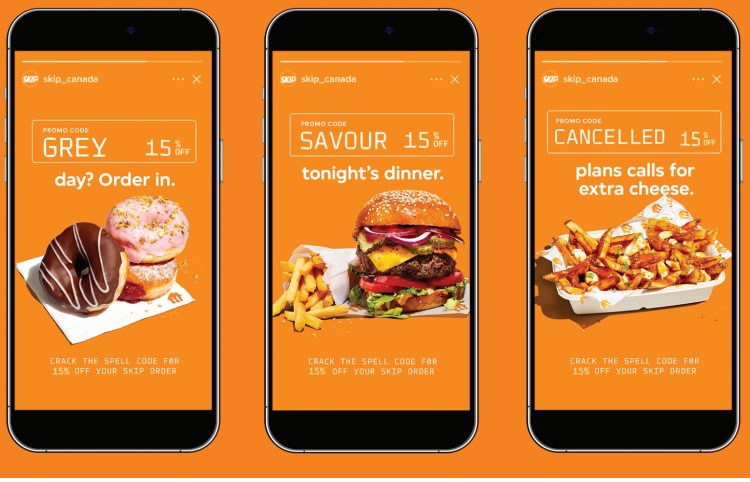

**3.** Lifelong Crush and Destination Toronto launched 100%, capturing the city's culture, grit and confidence. Produced entirely in-house, the campaign spanned 14 locations and five business units, giving Toronto a platform as dynamic as the city itself.

## AGENCY

### SUMMER'S UNLIKELY HERO

Heinz and agency Rethink hijacked the hottest blockbuster of 2024 without ever signing a partnership. When fans noticed Deadpool and Wolverine's suits looked exactly like ketchup and mustard, the brand ran with it. Flashing bottle cameos in faux trailers, out-of-home takeovers and cinema stunts turned a Marvel moment into a Heinz one — boosting sales and earning 1.58B impressions no one could unsee.




## DIGITAL

### PATRIOTISM, SPELLED PROPERLY

When Trump raised tariffs on Canadian goods in March 2025, national pride spiked. Courage and Skip — the only major Canadian-born delivery app — responded with "Skip Spell Codes," rewarding Canadians for spelling words like "colour" and "neighbour" correctly. Daily TikTok and Instagram codes offered up to 75% off. With no paid media, the idea earned 50,000 redemptions, a 15% lift in new users and 2.3M organic impressions.

## DESIGN

### REVIVING A QUEBEC CLASSIC

Cordon Bleu had heritage but had become invisible. To win back young Quebecers without losing loyal fans, the 91-year-old brand worked with LG2 to lean into a modern truth: in an anxious world, a stocked pantry feels like self-care. Without changing a recipe, they redesigned everything else — packaging, colour palette, storytelling — turning nostalgia into comfort culture and driving double-digit lifts in awareness, trial and purchase.



## MEDIA

### SEEN BY THE UNSEEN

Most banking platforms exclude people with colour vision deficiency, and TD knew a tool alone wouldn't fix that if no one knew it existed. So, instead of talking about accessibility, they worked with Starcom to prove the point with a billboard only colourblind people could see. Installed in Toronto's Distillery District and amplified by creators, it sparked 102M impressions and drove a 300% spike in downloads.







## PR

### THE GOALIES' MOMENT

As Alex Ovechkin closed in on Gretzky's all-time scoring record, every brand lined up to celebrate him. Budweiser Zero and Veritas flipped the script and honoured the ones who stopped him: 28 goalies who kept him at zero. Each received a custom can with their stats. With one earned-first idea and perfect timing, the campaign generated over a billion impressions and became Bud's most successful launch ever.

## SMALL

### BRING HIDDEN LIVES FORWARD

Safehaven had never advertised in 35 years, yet suddenly needed millions to build a new facility for medically complex children — a group few knew existed. Competing with mega-charities and a tiny budget, they and agency The Local Collective reframed care as a human right. A seek-and-find book and cinematic film made invisibility impossible to ignore, driving a 983% donation increase and turning quiet care into a national call for inclusion.





**THE 2025 AWARDS PROGRAM BEGAN** with an open call for Canadian agencies to submit their best campaigns from the past 12 months. ➤ All eligible creative, media, digital, PR and design agencies entered the program with comprehensive campaign, program or project case studies – five for AOY and three for Media, Digital, PR, Design and Small Agency. ➤ Separate cross-industry and cross-country jury panels then marked the work online and in isolation. Each campaign for the agency, media and digital competitions was given two marks from one to 10 based on strategy and creativity, while judges scored the PR campaigns using the same criteria, as well as a score for impact. Design was judged on creativity, technical challenge and impact. Judges with conflicts were omitted from scoring on the applicable cases. ➤ The top-scoring agencies made up the shortlists, based on a natural drop-off point in the scoring. Scores were averaged with equal weighting and the agency with the highest marks was the winner. One case from each category with the highest points was named a Campaign of the Year. The finalists, in winning order, are listed below.

| AGENCY | DESIGN | DIGITAL |
|---|---|---|
| Rethink | Cossette | Rethink |
| Leo | LG2 | Courage |
| Courage | Rethink | Cossette |
| Sid Lee | VML | FCB |
| Publicis | Leo | LG2 |
| FCB | Bruce Mau Design | Zulu Alpha Kilo |
| Diamond | One Twenty Three West | Leo |
| Zulu Alpha Kilo | Publicis | We Are Social |
| Broken Heart Love Affair | Zulu Alpha Kilo | McCann |
| McCann | | |
| LG2 | | |

| MEDIA | PR | SMALL |
|---|---|---|
| Starcom | Rethink | Hard Work Club |
| Cossette Media | Agnostic | The Local Collective |
| Initiative | Citizen Relations | Lifelong Crush |
| UM | Veritas | Wunder |
| OMD | Zeno Group | Berlin |
| PHD | Craft Public Relations | Angry Butterfly |
| Spark Foundry | Narrative XPR | Mackie Biernacki |
| Touché! | Heads + Tales | Blackjet |
| FUSE Create | Pomp & Circumstance | Juliet |
| Media Experts | Edelman | Daughter Creative |
| EssenceMediacom | Middle Child | Berners Bowie Lee |
| Cairns ONeil | Weber Shandwick | Here Be Monsters |
| | FUSE Create | Will |



This is the seventh year in a row Rethink has landed Agency of the Year Gold. Second spot went to Leo, while Courage took third. To see all of the winners, visit agencyoftheyear.strategyonline.ca

**1990**
Gold: McKim Advertising
Silver: Cossette Communication-Marketing
Bronze: Baker Lovick Advertising

**1991**
Gold: Chiat/Day/Mojo
Silver: Baker Lovick:BBDO
Bronze: MacLaren:Lintas

**1992**
Gold: Chiat/Day
Silver: Ogilvy & Mather
Bronze: MacLaren:Lintas

**1993**
Gold: Geoffrey B. Roche & Partners Advertising
Silver (tie): McKim Baker Lovick/BBDO, Taxi
Bronze: BCP

**1994**
Gold: MacLaren:Lintas
Silver: BBDO Canada
Bronze: Geoffrey B. Roche & Partners Advertising

**1995**
Gold: MacLaren McCann
Silver: BBDO Canada
Bronze: Leo Burnett

**1996**
Gold: Leo Burnett
Silver: Palmer Jarvis Communications
Bronze: BBDO Canada

**1997**
Gold: Roche Macaulay & Partners Advertising
Silver: Palmer Jarvis Communications
Bronze: Leo Burnett

**1998**
Gold: Roche Macaulay & Partners Advertising
Silver: BBDO Canada
Bronze: Palmer Jarvis DDB

**1999**
Gold: Palmer Jarvis DDB
Silver: Ammirati Puris Lintas
Bronze: Young & Rubicam

**2000**
Gold: Palmer Jarvis DDB
Silver: Taxi
Bronze: MacLaren McCann

**2001**
Gold: Palmer Jarvis DDB
Silver: Ammirati Puris
Bronze: Taxi

**2002**
Gold: Taxi
Silver: Bensimon-Byrne
Bronze: Zig

**2003**
Gold: Taxi
Silver: Palmer Jarvis DDB
Bronze: Downtown Partners DDB

**2004**
Gold: Taxi
Silver: Zig
Bronze: DDB

**2005**
Gold: Taxi
Silver: Rethink
Bronze: BBDO Canada

**2006**
Gold: Rethink
Silver: DDB
Bronze: Lowe Roche

**2007**
Gold: DDB
Silver: Ogilvy & Mather
Bronze: Taxi

**2008**
Gold: Taxi
Silver: BBDO Canada
Bronze: DDB

**2009**
Gold: DDB
Silver: Rethink
Bronze: Zig

**2010**
Gold: DDB
Silver: Taxi
Bronze: Sid Lee

**2011**
Gold: BBDO
Silver: DDB
Bronze: Taxi

**2012**
Gold: DDB
Silver: John St.
Bronze: Taxi

**2013**
Gold: John St.
Silver: Taxi
Bronze: BBDO

**2014**
Gold: Leo Burnett
Silver: Rethink
Bronze: DDB

**2015**
Gold: Leo Burnett
Silver: J. Walter Thompson
Bronze: Taxi

**2016**
Gold: Cossette
Silver: Leo Burnett
Bronze: John St.

**2017**
Gold: Cossette
Silver: J. Walter Thompson
Bronze: Lg2

**2018**
Gold: Cossette
Silver: John St.
Bronze: Zulu Alpha Kilo

**2019**
Gold: Rethink
Silver: BBDO Toronto
Bronze: John St.

**2020**
Gold: Rethink
Silver: No Fixed Address
Bronze: BBDO

**2021**
Gold: Rethink
Silver: Zulu Alpha Kilo
Bronze: Ogilvy

**2022**
Gold: Rethink
Silver: Zulu Alpha Kilo
Bronze: BBDO Canada

**2023**
Gold: Rethink
Silver: Zulu Alpha Kilo
Bronze: McCann

**2024**
Gold: Rethink
Silver: Courage
Bronze: BHLA

**2025**
Gold: Rethink
Silver: Leo
Bronze: Courage

# DESIGN FOR GOOD

Each year, *strategy*'s **Design Agency of the Year** finalists turn creativity into impact through a poster auction for charity at the annual awards gala. For 2025, the theme is "Take care of what takes care of us." Proceeds will support the Haliburton Highlands Land Trust and its work to protect the forests and wetlands that help fight climate change.

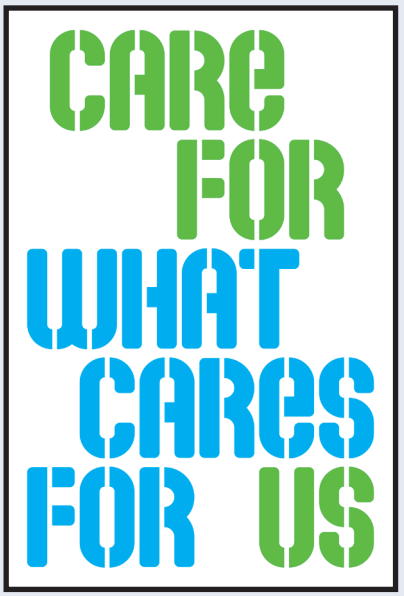
**Top left to right**
One23West
Bruce Mau Design
Rethink

**Middle left to right**
Cossette
Leo
Zulu Alpha Kilo

**Bottom left to right**
Publicis
LG2
VML

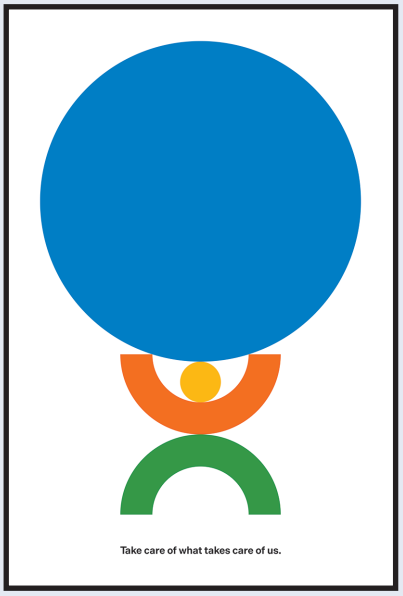






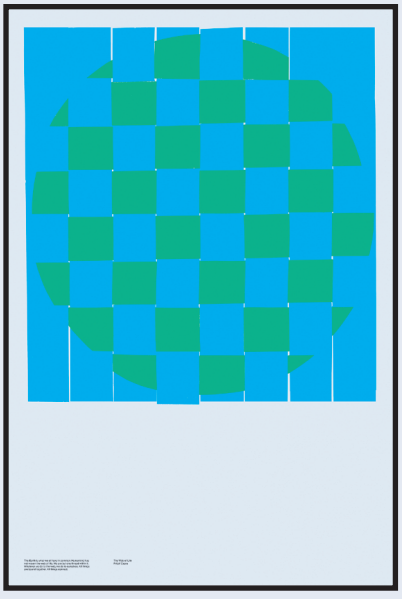














More **effective reach.**
More **efficient spend.**
More **exceptional outcomes.**

ENVIRONICS
ANALYTICS

Start now.

Marketing Awards



# THIS WILL FIX IT.

FILL THAT M-SHAPED HOLE.
EARLY BIRD DEADLINE
NOVEMBER 17 2025.