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**CANADA
HAS
CHANGED.
HAVE
BRANDS
KEPT
PACE?**



+

**The new rules
of attention**

Why creators, communities
and culture matter more
than ever

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What can marketers learn from the World Cup? Quite a bit, it turns out. Check the Upfront to find out more.

13

Change is the brief

How creators, communities and mobile-first media are reshaping the rules of modern marketing.

20

Canada beyond clichés

As Canada becomes more diverse and fragmented, brands need to move beyond one-size-fits-all narratives.

44

Molson at 240

Molson helped shape Canadian identity. Now it's adapting to a new version of Canada.

4 Editorial The Canada many brands grew up marketing to no longer exists • **6 Upfront** From communities to content, brands are finding new ways to earn participation • **10 The Anti-Polish Era** Why authenticity is replacing perfection in today's marketing • **11 Who do you believe?** In a disrupted search landscape, credibility matters more than rankings • **46 Back Page** Some audiences are easier to find than others...



ON THE COVER: Once upon a time, Canada was easy to explain. We liked hockey, drank beer, said "sorry" too much and quietly judged Americans (from a safe distance). The stereotypes weren't always accurate, but they contained just enough truth to stick. Today, the country is more diverse, more complicated and harder to define than ever before. As communities grow, identities evolve and cultural influences multiply, the old shorthand no longer works. This issue, we explore what Canada looks like now – and how the brands trying to connect with it keep pace.

THE A-LIST

With more data, ideas and opinions than ever before, judgment is becoming a competitive advantage.
SUPPLEMENT Page 27



EDITOR'S NOTE

Still Canadian. Just different.

A long time ago, I remember reading an interview with the CEO of an American big box chain operating here in Canada. She was asked to describe the difference between US and Canadian shoppers. I'll always remember what she said.

If you piss off Americans, she observed, they'll scream and shout and make a scene, but they'll be back in the store next week like nothing happened.

Canadians, on the other hand, will never say anything... but they'll never come back. And they'll tell all their friends. Your sales will suddenly take a hit and you'll never know what happened.

Canadians are just built a little different. We always have been. We have a remarkably strong identity and culture – and for those who don't understand it, it's like trying to explain water to a fish. It's all around you, even if you can't see it. (You're soaking in it, as they say...)

But the last decade or so has seen an evolution in what it means to be Canadian.

I am not Canadian. *We* are Canadian. And what that means has changed.

Culture doesn't stand still. The forces shaping how we live, work, shop, consume media and connect with one another are constantly evolving. Some changes unfold gradually over decades. Others seem to arrive overnight.

Keeping pace isn't easy. But neither is it optional.

We explore some of that this issue – from what it means to truly communicate with Canadians today, to the new platforms, voices and technologies reshaping how those connections are made. We can't predict the future, but we can better understand the present.

In that same spirit of change, I suppose I should also formally introduce myself as the new editor-in-chief of *strategy*. Although I've been lurking in the background, helping out for the last couple of years, this past month I've stepped up to try to fill the shoes of Jennifer Horn as she transitions full-time to the Banff World Media Festival. My goal is to live up to her example.

I'd also like to take this chance to start a conversation. If you have an idea for a story, a topic you'd like us to explore, feedback on what we're doing or simply want to connect, I'd love to hear from you.

Brendan Christie, editor-in-chief, *strategy*

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EXPERIENTIAL

FROM SPONSORSHIPS TO EXPERIENCES

The FIFA World Cup brought packed stadiums, global attention and a rare opportunity for brands to connect with fans in person. For marketers, it also offered a chance to transform the event into real-world experiences that fans could participate in, share and remember. While sponsorship logos were everywhere, some activations stood out.

VISA TURNS SPONSORSHIP INTO EXPERIENCE

Visa Canada drew nearly 500 attendees ahead of the tournament's opening ceremony with its "Tap In Studio" outside Toronto Stadium. Created with Imagination, the activation featured games, exclusive merchandise, creator-led artwork and photo opportunities tied to Visa's broader "Tap In" campaign running across Canada, the US and Mexico. The experience demonstrates a key lesson of modern sponsorships: fans increasingly expect brands to give them something to do – not just something to look at. In a crowded sponsorship landscape, participation is as important as visibility.

CANADA SOCCER EMBRACES DUAL IDENTITIES

Canada Soccer's "Jersey Swap" invited Italian-Canadian fans to trade their Italy jerseys for Canada kits ahead of the event, reframing support for the national team as an addition to – not a replacement for – their existing football loyalties. The campaign generated 1.1 million views and more than 34,000 engagements in its first 24 hours, proving that acknowledging complex cultural identities can be more effective than trying to compete with them.

COCA-COLA LINKS PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL FANDOM

Coca-Cola's Toronto Fan Zone combined giveaways and fan gear with a digital collectibles program tied to limited-edition country cans. Fans could scan QR codes to build virtual collections and unlock entries for prizes. It's a simple idea, but one that reflects a broader trend: the most effective experiential activations don't end when fans leave the venue. They create reasons to keep engaging long after the match is over.

WORTH WATCHING

THE CONTENT IS THE CAMPAIGN

Long before every brand had a content strategy, BMW Films gave marketers a glimpse of what advertising could look like when it embraced long-form storytelling in a compelling way. The early-2000s series didn't behave like a car commercial. It behaved like entertainment, with Hollywood directors, big-name actor Clive Owen and enough cultural cachet to make the brand feel like the producer of something worth seeking out.

Two decades later, that feels newly relevant.

As consumers skip, scroll past or tune out traditional advertising, more brands are looking for ways to earn attention by acting less like advertisers and more like programmers, publishers, educators or entertainers. The result is a new wave of non-traditional branded content: documentaries, podcasts, newsletters, creator series, behind-the-scenes programming and live screenings that give audiences a reason to spend time with a brand before they are asked to buy anything.



For example, Nespresso's recent Toronto screening of *Groundswell*, a documentary from filmmakers Josh Tickell and Rebecca Harrell Tickell, focused on regenerative agriculture and coffee farming. Instead of solely making a sustainability claim and running the risk of being accused of greenwashing, the brand created a space to educate consumers about regenerative agriculture and coffee farming. The value wasn't just exposure, but context.

Meanwhile, Moneris' in-house *Yes, We Are Open* podcast travels across Canada telling small business survival and success stories, giving the payment brand a credible role in the entrepreneurship conversation.

Canada Soccer took a similar approach ahead of the World Cup. Through a partnership with X, the organization launched a 10-part content series featuring long-form conversations with national team players about topics such as fatherhood, mental health and dealing with criticism. Notably, the series avoids talking about soccer altogether, instead using personal storytelling to help casual fans connect with players and build deeper engagement with the team.

For its 60th anniversary, Tim Hortons, working with GUT Toronto, turned a real Canadian snowstorm story into *The Last Timbit*, a full-length stage musical – ultimately winning gold in the branded content category at the 2025 Marketing Awards.



Groundswell and Canada Soccer's X series show how brands are creating value through storytelling, not just advertising.

And creator partnerships and Substack-style newsletters are doing similar work at a smaller scale, building trust through voice, usefulness and expertise. The common thread is that brands are finding ways to create value before asking for attention. Whether through education, entertainment or expertise, the goal is the same: give audiences a reason to engage on their own terms.

That doesn't mean every brand needs a documentary or podcast. But when the format fits the category, and when the content addresses a real curiosity, it can do something a traditional campaign often can't. It can educate, deepen credibility and make the brand part of the conversation.

So, are we heading back to the age of BMW Films? Probably not. The new era is less about blockbuster branded entertainment and more about useful, credible, context-rich storytelling. Bespoke content may not be king again, but for brands with something real to explain, it's becoming a more important part of the kingdom. **MC**

PACKAGING

SMALL FORMAT, BIG OPPORTUNITY

By Brendan Christie

As alcohol brands search for new ways to stand out, some are thinking small. Instead of larger cans destined for patios and parties, they're introducing miniature cocktails packaged in cans as small as 100 ml and often with alcohol levels above 20% – products positioned less like coolers and more like full-strength cocktails. Think Dillon's Sour Cherry Negroni Spritz (222 ml) and Whitebox's Straight Up Daiquiri (100 ml) – bar-quality cocktails in a convenient format.

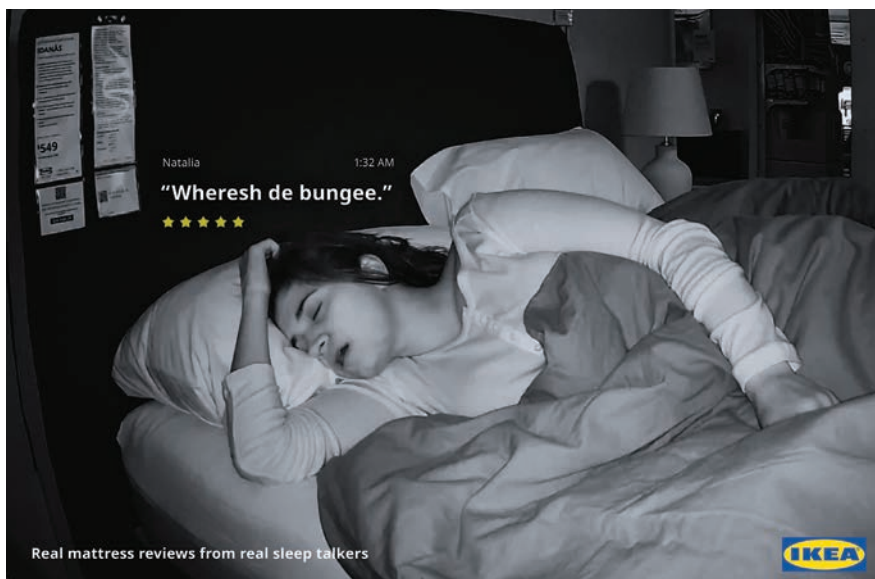
In fact, ready-to-drink (RTD) cocktails are one of Canada's fastest-growing alcohol categories. According to research from IWSR's *RTDs Strategic Study 2025*, RTDs now account for 8% of total beverage alcohol servings in Canada, placing us alongside the U.S. as one of the category's strongest global markets. While growth has cooled from the category's early boom years, RTDs continue to outperform the broader alcohol market and are expected to keep gaining share through 2029.

With shelves crowded by flavour extensions, celebrity-backed brands and increasingly similar products, packaging might be the new way to differentiate. And that's where miniature cocktails come in. The format taps into cocktail culture, premiumization and specific drinking occasions. The goal isn't necessarily to replace the traditional RTD, but to offer something that feels closer to a bar-quality serve.

As consumers pay closer attention to ingredients, authenticity and quality, packaging is doing more than catching the eye. It's helping signal whether a product should be viewed as a convenience drink, a craft cocktail or something closer to a premium spirit experience. In that context, a small can might feel less like a cooler and more like a professionally made cocktail.



If the first chapter of the RTD boom was about introducing consumers to the format, the next may be about redefining what the format can be. Miniature cocktails suggest brands are no longer just competing for shelf space. They're competing to shape expectations around quality, occasion and value.



AUTHENTICITY

THE ANTI-POLISH ERA

By Chelsea Clarke

Lately, some of the most effective creative looks like it barely survived the group chat.

It's blurry, oddly cropped, aggressively lowercase and occasionally feels one step away from being deleted by legal. Brand social accounts are unhinged, and entire marketing strategies are being built around the idea that the second something feels too much like advertising, to the scrap pile it goes. For an industry that spent decades worshipping polish, the reversal has been dramatic. The visual language that once signalled quality – pristine cinematography, overdesigned layouts, flawless copy – now frequently triggers the exact response brands are trying to avoid: the scroll.

"As attention gets harder to grab, we start to shift toward offbeat or less polished work that doesn't trigger the newly formed biological reflex to skip anything that has the scent of an ad," says Julian Morgan, partner and head of strategy at Rethink.

It's showing up a lot on social: Ryanair is the budget airline with nothing to lose; Merriam-Webster is a language troll; and McDonald's is the king of chaotic humour.

But the instinct has migrated from social feeds into larger brand campaigns too. IKEA has become particularly adept at weaponizing casualness. Its "U Up?" campaign borrowed the (unfortunately) universally recognizable language of late-night texting culture to sell mattresses, while "Sleep Talk Reviews" leaned into intimate, unconscious-thought nonsense. Neither felt heavily art-directed or overly manufactured, but rather, culturally fluent.

"That authenticity is what makes the work land," says Jonelle Ricketts, head of marketing at IKEA Canada. "It humanizes the brand, builds trust and opens up a more genuine, two-way conversation instead of simply talking at people."

But anti-polish isn't just reserved for meme-friendly marketing. Instead of corporate-style workplace safety messaging, Canac's "Injured Posters" featured handwritten posters from real construction accident victims.

"In an era of polished misinformation and AI-

Brands like IKEA (left, below) and Canac (right) are proving that authenticity, not perfection, is increasingly what captures attention.

generated content, imperfection became proof of truth," says Nicolas Boisvert, partner and creative VP at LG2 about the campaign. Importantly, Boisvert says this kind of work is not about simplifying communication for audiences, but respecting

them more deeply. "Audiences increasingly value work that respects their intelligence enough to present evidence rather than instructions," he says. "The shift is away from seamless persuasion toward transparent truth-telling, especially when addressing serious issues."

The anti-polish era doesn't mean making ads look deliberately "bad." In fact, the brands succeeding in this space are obsessively strategic.

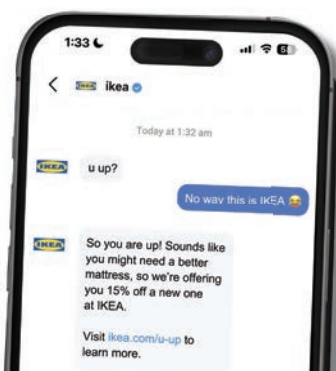
Morgan notes that the best work is possible when the brand logic is inseparable from the execution. "Good creative is when the 'why' is so baked into the 'what' that the brand is the protagonist, not just a logo slapped on the end of a trend," he says.

While work in the anti-polish era may look accidental, unserious or low-effort, the brands nailing it are operating with a sophisticated understanding of audience psychology, platform



behaviour and cultural fluency. Consumers are no longer automatically persuaded by refinement; instead, they trust what feels immediate, specific and human. "Some of the most effective work doesn't require high production value or big budgets, just something relatable that people immediately connect with and want to share," says Ricketts.

Brands aren't abandoning craft; they're redirecting it. "Knowing where a brand naturally plays and what space you already occupy in people's minds allows you to make things that don't need to appear completely perfect," says Morgan. "When the 'why' and the 'what' are perfectly aligned, you end up with work that feels spontaneous yet intentional. It looks like a lucky break, but it's actually part of the plan."



SOCIAL SEARCH

WHO DO YOU BELIEVE?

Remember when every digital journey began with Google? Lately, consumers don't. Depending on the question, they might head to TikTok for recommendations, Reddit for unfiltered opinions, YouTube for tutorials or ChatGPT for oddly specific (though somewhat dubious) answers. Discovery is splintering across platforms, forcing marketers to rethink a playbook built around search engines for more than two decades.

ecosystem of creators, communities and experts that you don't control, and AI is ingesting their content to inform on brands," says Juniper. "Think of social content not just as social content, but as search inventory. The only way to show up well is to both engage these stakeholders and be genuinely worth talking about."

That doesn't mean brands need to be everywhere. In fact, Juniper argues



But according to Praxis CEO Matt Juniper, marketers may be diagnosing the shift incorrectly. "The real shift isn't specifically about search at all – it's about credibility," he says.

Consumers aren't just looking for information anymore; they're looking for validation from sources they trust. That's changing what visibility actually means. Instead of asking how to rank higher, marketers may need to ask who's talking about their brand, where those conversations are happening and whether those voices are trusted by audiences they're trying to reach.

In that environment, discoverability is becoming less of a technical challenge and more of a reputational one.

"Discovery now lives in an

the opposite. Rather than chasing every platform, marketers should focus on earning credibility with the audiences and voices that matter most.

Praxis research found that seven in 10 Canadians lose trust in brands that jump on trends that don't fit their purpose. The smarter move, Juniper says, is to identify the creators, experts and communities shaping conversations in your category and invest in relationships with them.

As discovery becomes increasingly decentralized, visibility may have less to do with what brands say about themselves and more with what others are saying on their behalf.

"Ultimately, you can't optimize your way into credibility," says Juniper. "You have to earn it." **CC**

ASK THE CMO

"What do you wish agencies understood better about your job right now?"



Adrian Fuoco
Pizza Pizza, CMO

It's helpful when agencies, or any partner, work to consider the full scope of the CMO's role, because accountability can differ from one brand to another. Looking

beyond strategy and communications, a CMO could be expected to influence pricing, customer retention, digital performance, product strategy, profitability and more. The strongest partners understand our business model beyond the brief. Of course, the door swings both ways, and it's equally important for CMOs to consider the needs of agency leadership and how we can best support their success as well.



Daniel Shearer
Maple, CMO

As world-class talent continues to move in-house, the capability and ambition of internal teams has fundamentally changed.

The need for real

collaboration between in-house and agency has never been greater. The era of the walled-garden AOR relationship as the norm is over. What's emerging is a new kind of hybrid team, where in-house and agency teams operate as one. Not a handoff, not a hierarchy, but a powerful partnership where egos don't fly, the best ideas are made even better through collaboration, and both teams are enriched by the relationship. Agencies that understand this will be far more valuable, not just as vendors, but as partners in what's next.

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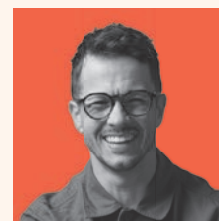
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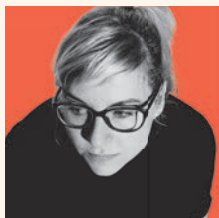
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CHANGE IS THE BRIEF

The Canadian marketing landscape is being reshaped by forces that are changing not just where audiences spend time, but how they discover, evaluate and trust brands in the first place. Consumers are becoming more skeptical, more selective and more influenced by creators, communities and algorithms than they are by traditional advertising alone. At the same time, platforms are accelerating toward vertical, mobile-first behaviour.

For marketers, that means the old playbook is becoming less reliable. Broad targeting, polished campaigns and predictable funnels are giving way to faster, more fragmented and more participatory forms of engagement. Relevance now depends on understanding how people actually move through culture, content and commerce in real time.

Canada itself is also becoming more layered, localized and culturally specific. As audiences fragment and communities become more visible, brands are being pushed to move beyond broad national narratives toward work that reflects lived experience, local identity and cultural nuance.

Whether through creator partnerships, vertical storytelling, trust-building or community-rooted ideas, the strongest marketing is becoming less about broadcasting a message and more about understanding the people already shaping the conversation.

THE NEW ROLE OF CREATORS

As audiences fragment and platforms evolve, creators are moving from distribution to development, influencing decisions long before a campaign goes live. By **Chelsea Clarke**



Brands used to treat creators as the final step in the process. Once a campaign was approved, creators were brought in to help distribute it, tasked with extending reach, adding social proof and driving engagement. It was a linear model: strategy, creative, production, then amplification. But that sequence may be doing more harm than good now.

Today, consumers move fluidly across platforms, formats and communities, discovering products in fragments and validating them socially before making decisions. A TikTok clip might spark interest, a YouTube review might build confidence, a Reddit thread might answer objections and a creator mention might ultimately tip the purchase. That shift is turning creators from distributors into strategic partners.

WHY CREATORS ARE MOVING UPSTREAM

Simply put: “influencer marketing” is out; “influencer building” is in.

As Jacob McCourt, Shopify’s creator partnerships lead, says, the shift mirrors the evolution of creators themselves: “We’ve seen 1.0 creator businesses that were just building media companies, to 2.0 where they started building businesses, usually around products. Now 3.0 creator businesses are creating conglomerates, and in some cases, holding companies. The sophistication of their business is changing alongside how they collaborate.”

If creators are now operating as multi-dimensional businesses, with Goldman Sachs projecting the creator economy will reach

US\$480 billion globally by 2027, it follows that their role in marketing has expanded beyond distribution.

For brands, this means that the goal isn’t reach anymore: it’s relevance. Creators are moving upstream, from execution into the earliest stages of development. The pivot is being driven by how audiences behave and how platforms reward content.

Audiences are more likely to trust personality over polish, particularly when the message is delivered in a format that feels native to the platform. When lived experience drives performance, the strongest campaigns are built around proof rather than promo.

Knix leaned into that with its “Period Sleep Staycation,” turning a product launch into something creators could experience firsthand. Instead of seeding product and hoping for content, the brand invited creators to an overnight hotel stay designed around a real consumer tension: the stress of leaks while sleeping. Creators tested the product in context, generating content rooted in firsthand use. The approach blended experience, narrative and proof. It also delivered commercially, with the product becoming a top seller online in its first week.

As Michelle Adams, senior director of brand marketing at Knix, notes, creators play a critical role in “bringing the product to life through real, authentic storytelling and sharing lived experiences, reviews and how the product fits into their everyday routines – while also feeding back to us valuable audience insights on what they want to see next.”

The Coca-Cola Company’s “World-Tested-Ready-For-Canada” campaign for Fanta Strawberry was created to travel through social,



not just run on it. The product had existed globally for decades but was only just launching in Canada. Instead of positioning it as "new," the campaign reframed it as something Canadians were "finally" getting. Creators who were already very familiar with the product abroad became central to the idea, sharing stories that others could respond to. That dynamic quickly moved beyond the brand itself, with audiences adding their own takes, reactions and experiences, turning the launch into something people wanted to participate in.

Platforms reinforce this behaviour. TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat all prioritize content that feels organic, participatory and culturally fluent. The performance gap is measurable: research from Snapchat, OMG and Eye Square found that creator-led ads capture attention 12% longer and drive 8% more play time than standard branded ads. In other words, content that feels native earns attention, while content that looks like advertising is easy to scroll past.

At the same time, culture is moving faster than traditional campaign timelines can keep up, with creators operating in real time, constantly testing, learning and adapting based on immediate

From left: Knix transformed product testing into a creator-led experience, UNO built its Diwali campaign around a creator's existing characters and voice, and Fanta tapped into global familiarity to fuel a social-first Canadian launch, illustrating how creators are shaping campaigns long before they reach audiences.

audience feedback.

But optimizing for reach and relevance is only part of the story. Creators are influencing decisions that happen before content is ever made. "We tap into our network of ambassadors and creator partners at different stages depending on the product and campaign. It's not one-size-fits-all," says Adams.

In some cases, she notes, that starts "early at the design phase, through wear testing and input on prints, colourways and product details."

McCourt sees the dynamic playing out in how partnerships are structured. "What used to be straightforward content integrations now run much deeper, extending into consultation, co-production and even product development," he says.

This is where creator partnerships are becoming even more valuable. The more embedded creators are in the process, the more likely the work is to land because it reflects how audiences actually think, behave and engage, not just how brands expect them to.



"THE MOST EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS COME FROM CO-CREATION, NOT CONTROL. WHEN CREATORS HAVE A REAL HAND IN SHAPING THE IDEA, THE OUTPUT FEELS MORE NATURAL, CREDIBLE AND ALIGNED WITH THEIR VOICE."

**MICHELLE ADAMS,
KNIX**

HOW TO COLLABORATE WELL

Brands are increasingly involving creators in concepting, tone calibration, cultural insight, storytelling formats and even product demonstration. But that only works if brands are willing to give up some control.

"Brands shouldn't tell creators how to do their jobs," says McCourt. "It's important that these partnerships are true collaborations." He describes the most effective partnerships as a balance between direction and autonomy, where brands set the parameters but don't dictate the play: "Brands should set guardrails but give creators the freedom to do what they do best."

Clear direction without overly burdensome control is where the strongest work happens. It's also what allows creators to move from execution into interpretation, bringing their own voice, context and credibility to the idea.

Mattel Canada's "Lights & Laughs" campaign for UNO is an example of what that looks like in practice. Instead of building a Diwali campaign and asking creators to deliver it, the brand partnered with South Asian Canadian creator Babbulicious and built the work around his existing characters and voice. UNO appeared naturally within family moments that felt familiar and authentic. That sense of realism drove resonance, with the campaign generating more than 3.7 million views and strong engagement. The point wasn't just to amplify reach, but to make the campaign culturally legible.

Adams reinforces the same principle from the brand side: "The most effective partnerships come from co-creation, not control. When creators have a real hand in shaping the idea, the output feels more natural, credible and aligned with their voice," she says. "We try to avoid over-briefing or being too prescriptive, and this approach ultimately leads to content that resonates more deeply because it's built with the audience in mind from the start."

WHAT BRANDS NEED TO RETHINK NOW

As creators move upstream, the challenges become less about execution and more about integration. According to the IAB, 32% of marketers say finding the right creator is a key challenge, while 39% say proving ROI is the hardest part post-campaign. These concerns are real but might reflect an outdated approach.

Brands are already adapting. Many are prioritizing mid-tier creators (those with 50,000 to 500,000 followers) because they offer a balance of reach, content quality and affordability. Selection is shifting from scale to fit, with an emphasis on creators who already resonate with the product.

“Brands should go out of their way to find creators who resonate deeply with their products,” says McCourt. That means seeking creators who already engage meaningfully with the brand, whether it’s a YouTube creator organically featuring the brand’s product in their content or creators whose interests and audience naturally align with its mission. Authenticity isn’t something you layer on after the fact; it has to exist from the beginning, McCourt notes.



**“THE DAYS OF
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AUDIENCES CAN SEE
THROUGH IT.”**

**JACOB MCCOURT,
SHOPIFY**

Measurement is evolving too. While views and engagement still matter, leading marketers are looking more closely at how creator content drives behaviour across the funnel. Snapchat, OMG and Eye Square research found that when creator ads are paired with brand ads, ad recall increases by 59% and brand awareness by 48%. Creator content also plays a measurable role in consideration and purchase, with 71% and 70% of users respectively saying it influences those decisions.

That level of impact makes it difficult to treat creators like a media line item. “The days of renting influence are over,” says McCourt. “Partnerships can’t be one-offs anymore. They need to be long-term, or audiences can see through it.”

What’s changing isn’t just where creators sit in the process, but how brands define value. When creators are treated as strategic partners rather than distribution channels, the work becomes more relevant, more credible and more likely to resonate. As brand intention and audience expectation continue to converge, the most effective work will come from those willing to close the gap together.

CREATORS TO WATCH

As brands look beyond reach and toward relevance, these Canadian creators offer something more useful than scale: clear audience ownership, distinct formats and communities that already know why they’re watching.



Nathan Kennedy

YouTube: @newmoneynate

14.8K subscribers

A personal finance creator, Nathan Kennedy speaks to a young, money-curious audience looking for advice on saving, investing, credit and financial confidence. With more than one million followers across platforms and strong average video performance, he makes finance feel accessible without flattening it. For brands in banking, fintech, insurance or career-building, he’s a creator who can translate complicated decisions into everyday language.



Scott Walsh

YouTube: @scottwalshwoodworking

226K subscribers

Scott Walsh’s woodworking channel is built around small-shop creativity, practical builds and the realities of making things in limited space. His audience is niche but highly engaged: hobbyists, DIYers and makers looking for instruction, inspiration and tools they can actually use. As brands seek creators with credibility rather than generic lifestyle reach, Walsh offers a direct line into a hands-on community where product fit can feel natural.



Makari Espe

YouTube: @makariespe

296K subscribers

Makari Espe’s channel blends self-improvement, movement and experimentation through formats like 30-day challenges, beginner fitness attempts and “feel better” lifestyle videos. Espe has built trust with her audience through curiosity rather than perfection. That makes her relevant for brands in wellness, sport, travel, outdoor, mental health-adjacent lifestyle and everyday performance categories looking for human storytelling.



Jake Tivy

YouTube: @jakkuh_t

671K subscribers

Part tech reviewer, part systems-builder, Jake Tivy has carved out a space in the enthusiast tech world with videos that blend networking, PCs, smart homes, servers and consumer hardware into personality-driven storytelling. Tivy makes complex infrastructure topics feel entertaining. For brands in networking, consumer electronics, smart home and computing, Tivy is shaping purchase consideration long before consumers ever reach a checkout page.



THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

The rise of vertical video is reshaping creative, collapsing narrative and putting pressure on the first second.
By **Will Novosedlik**

As shopworn as it is, Marshall McLuhan's most memorable aphorism, "the medium is the message," continues to find relevance as we cope with the blistering pace of technological change.

Whether it's the latest social app or everybody's favourite viewing platform, whenever a new technology approaches mass adoption, it not only gives rise to a whole new set of consumer habits and expectations, but also disrupts and reconfigures the strategic, creative and production processes required to deliver the goods. Enter vertical video.

Vertical video is a format designed for a mobile-first, 9:16 aspect ratio. According to *Marketing Week*, for the first time, more adults are accessing content on their mobile phones than on broadcast television. A 2025 study revealed that British adults (aged 15+) spend an average of three hours and 21 minutes on their mobile phones daily, compared

to three hours and 16 minutes watching TV.

Here in Canada, there are still more adults watching TV than consuming content online, but that's rapidly changing as younger viewers enter the market. Younger Canadians (18–34) are driving the shift, spending roughly 35% of their viewing time on streaming services, whereas those 55 and older spend only 11%, according to *Made in CA*, a consumer brand advocacy group.

There's no question that, for long-form video and film, larger screens are still preferred. But for short-form, on-the-go viewing favoured by younger cohorts, vertical video dominates. According to Alistair Leyland, CEO of fan engagement platform developer NVRSE, "YouTube Shorts now generate more than 200 billion daily views. As boomers age out and Gen Z and Gen Alpha viewers replace them, vertical is clearly set to become the dominant viewing format."

But it isn't just a format shift; it's a creative reorientation. The standard thought is that vertical video is a distribution decision: you shoot horizontal, then crop or reformat for mobile. That idea is increasingly wrong.

Vertical video imposes its own grammar, pacing and relationship between subject and viewer. Creatively, a whole new set of constraints surrounds the vertical viewing format. Horizontal video inherited the logic of cinema and television: the wide establishing shot, the environmental context, the subject placed within a world. Vertical video collapses that. The subject fills the frame immediately. There's no visual periphery to distract you, so you need to know what it's about before you shoot.

The camera-facing, portrait-orientation format – which vertical video normalized – has reintroduced direct address as a dominant mode. It feels confessional, direct and unmediated. Brands that have understood this have moved away from the polished, third-person observational ad toward something that feels one-on-one. Since younger cohorts tend to value grassroots authenticity over corporate slickness, the creative challenge is to make that short content feel genuine rather than performed.

High-production horizontal TVC required a serious investment. "Vertical video inverted that," says Katey Gault, VP strategy at UM Canada. "Overly polished content often underperforms because it reads as an ad, which triggers the 'skip' instinct. The creative implication is that intentional low-fi, naturalistic framing and ambient authenticity are now legitimate production choices, not compromises. That's a real shift in how creative is briefed and how budgets are allocated."

Perhaps the biggest difference is in pacing. Vertical video audiences – especially on TikTok and Reels – have developed an extremely fast editorial instinct. They're immediately deciding, within the first one or



"IT USED TO BE THAT YOU HAD FIVE SECONDS TO ESTABLISH A MOOD. WE NOW BELIEVE YOU HAVE ROUGHLY 500 MILLISECONDS TO STOP A THUMB."

**ALISTAIR LEYLAND,
NVRSE**

BUILDING FOR VERTICAL VIDEO

When Disney+ recently introduced Verts, a TikTok-style discovery feed that lets users swipe through clips from movies and series before jumping into full content, it signalled something bigger than another streaming feature update. Vertical browsing habits shaped by TikTok, Reels and Shorts are now influencing how audiences discover entertainment, news and brands, pushing more Canadian marketers and media companies to design specifically for mobile-first viewing.

The audience scale is already massive. Recent digital trend reports estimate YouTube reaches more than 80% of Canada's internet population, while TikTok now reaches nearly 13 million Canadians nationally.

Ultimately, Canada's transition to vertical video may still be in its early stages, but the shift is accelerating quickly. YouTube Shorts alone now generate more than 100 billion daily views globally, while platforms, streamers and Canadian brands increasingly adapt to audiences already trained to discover entertainment, news and products through swipeable feeds rather than scheduled programming.

By **Mike Connell**

Sportsnet

Sportsnet's NHL and Blue Jays feeds now incorporate vertical clips, rapid captions and tight player-focused framing built specifically for Reels, TikTok and Shorts, as younger sports fans discover games, players and highlights through social content before live broadcasts.



Aritzia

The Vancouver retailer helped prime younger audiences for vertical-first shopping culture through creator-led outfit videos, styling hacks and "haul" content that turned products like the Super Puff and Effortless Pant into recurring TikTok and Reels staples. Much of the brand's visibility now comes through vertically framed creator content rather than traditional campaigns.



Tim Hortons

Tim Hortons has experimented with TikTok-native product marketing and creator-style storytelling for years, using POV humour, influencer collaborations and quick-cut social content tied to launches and limited-time offers as legacy advertisers shift toward campaigns designed specifically for mobile-first viewing.

CBC

CBC/Radio-Canada CEO Marie-Philippe Bouchard recently pointed to the need for short-form, vertical video as the broadcaster increases its focus on mobile-native storytelling and social discovery. Bouchard also noted that *The National* now reaches larger audiences on YouTube than on linear television – a sign that vertical video is becoming as much an editorial shift as a marketing one.



"YOU STILL HAVE TO STRIKE THAT BALANCE BETWEEN THE SHORT BURSTS OF BRAND ENGAGEMENT AND THE LONG-TERM BRAND BUILDING. IT'S ABOUT BALANCING IMMEDIACY WITH MEMORABILITY."

**KATEY GAULT,
UM CANADA**

two seconds, whether to stay.

In fact, according to Leyland, "It used to be that you had five seconds to establish a mood. We now believe you have roughly 500 milliseconds to stop a thumb." This means that, creatively, the most interesting or surprising thing has to be the first thing you see. It's a fundamental inversion of classical narrative advertising structure.

Developing creative within that 500-millisecond window means any key messaging needs to appear on screen all at once. This is pushing creative development toward a more editorial model: smaller, more frequent outputs, faster iteration and content that responds to this week rather than this quarter. For many marketing organizations and agencies, that's not just a format change, it's a restructuring challenge.

"Consumers now have the control to not tolerate anything that is irrelevant to them," says Gault. "Before, watching a 30-minute YouTube video on how to cook steak meant you would have to sit through this 10-minute preamble of how much the creator likes steaks and how they've learned to cook steaks before you actually even get to what you went to that video for: a sizzling, succulent steak. Now you start with it."

So, what impact does this have on media strategy? Agencies and brands need to think about how content is made and consumed, and how they can be relevant to consumers by putting the hook up front without relying on long storytelling arcs.

The brands navigating this well tend to have brought some creative capacity in-house, built relationships with individual creators rather than just production companies, and accepted that not every piece of content needs to carry the full brand-narrative weight. The format has essentially forced a separation between "brand-building content" and "culturally present content" – and knowing which you're making and why has become a core strategic competency.

"I think you have to make sure that you're not just over-optimizing for short-term engagement," says Gault. "You still have to strike that balance between short bursts of brand engagement and long-term brand building. It's about balancing immediacy with memorability."

Which brings us back to the issue of relevance. Says Leyland, "From a media buying standpoint, we hear a lot of people say we need to keep it short because attention spans are shrinking, which is true. But ultimately, the question is: how can brands meaningfully collaborate with creators and storytellers to deliver value in places where it's going to be well received because it's relevant to the community it's seeking to reach?"



WHY SHOULD I TRUST YOU?

These are the biggest trends shaping consumer behaviour now.
By **Will Novosedlik**

If there's one thing that's shaping consumer behaviour in 2026, it's uncertainty. We are threatened by the concurrence of several distinct crises: consider economic instability, rapidly changing technology and geopolitical conflict as only the leaders in a very long list. As these pressures collide, what behaviours have consumers adopted that brands should be watching most closely?

BRIDGING THE TRUST DEFICIT

Sabaa Quao, president of PlusCo Venture Studio, puts a lot of emphasis on the word "trust." Says Quao, "There's concern about data manipulation. There are concerns about AI misrepresentation and distortion. There's concern about fraud, misinformation and misdirection. Then there's concern about the authenticity of creators and influencers. All of these lead to a crisis of trust. How many of us in the last month have seen something and said: 'Is that real?' How many of us have received a fraud alert that itself turned out to be fraudulent?" An increasing share of consumer decision-making is now shaped not just by what brands sell, but by whether people believe the systems, platforms and information surrounding them can still be trusted.

VALUE VS. VALUES

As a result of growing distrust in large corporations, Canadians are looking for brands closer to home, according to **Susan**



Sabaa Quao



Susan Seto



Luc Dumont

Seto, SVP market strategy at Environics. They're more likely to want to support local brands, which they see as being more authentic. They want to invest in brands that align with their values. But there is a tension between affordability and authenticity. Consumers are becoming more intentional and selective in their purchases, spending more time weighing the trade-offs between quality and price.

HYPER-INDIVIDUALIZED SELF-EXPRESSION

As evidence of the old saw that you are what you buy, consumers are embracing bold self-expression and personalization. Says Seto, "Personal display and expression are more about finding a way for consumers to express themselves individually, choosing brands that are smaller, closer to home, aligned with their own personal values, how they want to be seen and what brands they want to be associated with." According to research firm Escalent, self-expression and personalization are now table stakes, with consumers expecting brands to reflect individual identity, preferences and values at every touchpoint. Hyper-segmentation and personalization strategies powered by data, AI and behavioural insights are no longer optional; they're essential.

AN AI-FILTERED MARKETPLACE

According to **Luc Dumont**, SVP insights at Leger Marketing, "We're telling consumer packaged goods companies and retailers that they need to be mindful of the fact that, while consumers used to outsource their searches to Google, AI is now enabling them to outsource their purchase decisions as well. That means no more sifting through dozens of brands to see which one is closest to fulfilling your purchase criteria. AI reduces a lot of that friction by doing it for you. So, consumers are consulting fewer sources, considering fewer brands and trying to make their decisions faster. For brands, the risk is no longer lack of visibility. It's exclusion from the mid-funnel consideration set." As AI intermediates consumer decision-making, brands will have fewer opportunities to win people over through discovery alone and will instead need to earn a place in consideration before the process even begins.

MORE REASONS TO BELIEVE

Global uncertainty and daily stress are making consumers of every age more skeptical, less trusting, more selective and more community-oriented than they were five years ago. Despite these shifts, there is reason to believe humans will figure it out. Says Quao, "Remember how we used to all get overloaded with spam? And we said, 'Doesn't my telco or internet service provider have an obligation to solve spam?' And so, they solved it. Now we rarely get spam like we used to. There's no reason to believe we can't solve for the issues we face today. The brands that win will do it by being verifiably trustworthy and genuinely useful in people's actual lives."

DOES THE WORLD REALLY STILL NEED MORE CANADA?



As the idea of a one-size-fits-all Canada fades, brands are learning to reflect the way Canadians actually live.

By Will Novosedlik

Over the years, national brand studies of how Canada is perceived by the rest of the world have tended to land on oversimplified tropes like hockey, maple syrup and how damn friendly we are. In fact, we seem to have cornered the market on being “nice.” We’re the people everybody wants to be friends with.

But that idea doesn’t hold up particularly well under scrutiny. As author, marketer and researcher Max Valiquette puts it, “I’ve always pushed back against that idea that Canadians are nice.

“I know that we are generally quite polite, but it’s funny, we’re identified as two things in the world: nice and hockey. Watch Canadians play hockey and tell me again that you think we’re nice. Better yet, watch Canadian parents coach hockey or even cheer hockey

from the sidelines. And again, tell me that we’re nice.”

Something has shifted in the last decade. Canadians have become culturally specific in ways that brands are finally noticing. The country now has one of the highest per capita immigration rates in the world, reshaping how people cook, celebrate, code-switch, parent and consume. That evolution is compounded by a far more fragmented media landscape, city-driven identities and a growing distrust of large institutions, all of which make broad, generalized messaging feel less relevant.

A brand that speaks to “Canada” with a single, unified cultural voice is now speaking to no one in particular.

The smarter brands are finding ways to embrace that multiplicity without flattening it. As Ron Tite, chief strategy and innovation officer at Toronto-based agency Church + State, puts it, “We’ve gone from maple syrup to micro voices. The Canadian brand has gone from ultra-general to pretty damn specific. We used to capture Canada with broad strokes and overused tropes. Now we’re tapping into actual people.”

You can hear that shift as much as you can see it. How Canadians actually talk – the mixture of English and



French in Montreal, the Punjabi inflections in Brampton, and the specific cadence of Newfoundland speech – has all become richer and more particular than most marketing has historically bothered to reflect. When it does show up authentically, audiences notice immediately.

Look at the specificity of Sid Lee’s 2025 “DIYctionary” campaign for Rona. Aimed at Québécois home renovators, the campaign was designed to improve the shopping experience by incorporating Quebec’s distinctive construction slang, a unique combination of English and French called “Frenglish,” turning frustrating search moments into meaningful brand connections. Rather than simply claiming to understand Quebecers, the brand built that understanding into the experience itself.

For example, in formal French, a grinder is a “rectifieuse.”

In Quebec vernacular, it’s a “grindeur.” Rona added 225 of these Frenglish terms to its website so Quebecers could shop in their own language. As the brand says: “Chez Rona, on parle la langue de la réno.” (“At Rona, we speak the language of renovation.”) As Tite says, this is a brand that is “grounded in reality, not generality.”

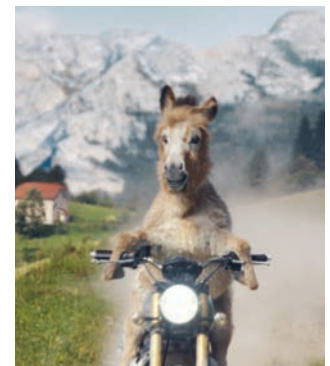
This kind of work is starting to shape how Canadians see themselves reflected back. According to Susan Seto, SVP market strategy at research firm Environics, the sense of national pride revealed in its *Canadian Brands: Built on Values 2026* report comes from seeing brands that reflect the diversity, understated confidence, inclusivity and compassion associated with Canadian identity. She cites brands like Farm Boy, Kicking Horse Coffee and Indigenous-led Cheekbone Beauty – all very local, grassroots and indicative of the growing trust Canadians place in homegrown brands as confidence in large corporations and institutions declines.

That’s not to say national brands haven’t attempted to adapt to these changes in Canadian culture. PC has probably done this longer and more consistently than most other Canadian brands. The “Memories of” campaign – which brought immigrant food memories into mainstream grocery culture – was an early and sophisticated example of using food as a proxy for lived Canadian experience rather than a performance of multiculturalism.

Food is where Canadian cultural specificity is most legible and least contested, and PC understood that before most. PC’s product development (the actual SKUs, not just the ads) has tracked demographic change in a way that is itself a form of cultural responsiveness – adding products that reflect what people in Brampton, Richmond or Scarborough actually cook, not just what a national ad planner imagined they might.

Interac is another underrated example. Its recent creative work has moved away from generic financial reassurance toward something that tries to capture how Canadians actually handle money relationally – splitting bills, e-transferring rent between friends, navigating the financial texture of shared urban life. E-transfer has

Right: Farm Boy, Rona, Interac and Kicking Horse Coffee reflect a broader shift toward cultural specificity, grounding their products, experiences and marketing in the communities, behaviours and identities that shape modern Canadian life.



become so embedded in Canadian social behaviour – arguably a cultural artifact at this point – that the brand has something real to work with. The creative has tried, with reasonable success, to reflect the specific social rituals around money in a country where those rituals cross cultural lines but feel distinctly local.

Even legacy identity brands are being forced to evolve. Roots occupies an interesting middle space. It has always sold a version of Canadian identity – the cabin, the beaver, the athletic heritage – but its more recent work has done something smarter: opening that identity up to who is actually inside it.

Campaigns that centre Black Canadians, Indigenous

Canadians and immigrant families within the visual language of what was historically a very particular (white, cottage-country) brand aesthetic represents a meaningful creative evolution.

Perhaps some of the most interesting examples of cultural specificity are those emerging in places like Toronto and Vancouver through the ecosystem of South Asian media, retail and food brands that are often invisible to mainstream marketing conversations because they don't travel through mainstream channels.

Brands like Sunrise Poultry, retailers in Scarborough or in Surrey's Payal Business Centre, and media properties like Red FM or OMNI television's *Hockey Night in Canada: Punjabi Edition* are doing highly granular, community-embedded marketing that reflects exactly the fragmented, lived identity Seto is talking about.

And when brands fail to keep up with that reality, the gap becomes obvious. What happens when a brand owns a cultural symbol but loses contact with the lived culture underneath it? Tim Hortons built one of the most powerful national identity brands in Canadian history – and then spent years hollowing it out through standardization, private equity ownership and campaigns that often missed the mark.

The tension in the Tims story is that symbolic Canadian identity (the double-double, the hockey rink, the small town) is not the same thing as cultural resonance. When the lived experience of the brand (the actual coffee, the actual stores) diverged from the mythology, brand equity eroded faster than the ads could patch it. Its more recent work has tried to return to specificity, leaning into particular communities and occasions.

These are some of the more honest and instructive examples: brands that have moved, with varying degrees of success, from symbolic Canadiana toward something more grounded in how people actually live. But most of what passes for culturally specific marketing is still brands responding to demographic data rather than genuinely reflecting lived experience. The difference shows up in the work: one feels observed, the other feels inhabited.

To give Tite the final word, "I think we're over the performative era of 'sounding nice.' Canadians expect tangible action. Take RBC's billion-dollar commitment to invest in Canadian businesses. Now that's what I call an ad. It's not just Canadian ideas that are driving marketing. It's Canadian action."

GOOD WORK, CANADA

The best work doesn't just get noticed. It gets used. Across Canada, brands and organizations are finding smarter ways to remove barriers, solve real problems and respond to what it actually feels like to live in Canada right now.

By Chelsea Clarke



CIBC: "Extra Bag" (Courage)

For many newcomers to Canada, strict baggage limits mean leaving important belongings behind. CIBC's "Extra Bag" gave hundreds of people an additional checked bag, helping them arrive with more of their lives intact while recognizing how central immigration and reinvention have become to modern Canadian life.



Rogers: "Welcome Card" (Publicis)

Moving to Canada can mean losing access to your credit history overnight. Rogers created a new approval model that validates international credit records, helping qualified newcomers access mobile services and credit faster. The work responded to a Canadian reality where financial systems are still catching up to the country's newcomer-driven population.



YWCA: "Rebook It" (Rethink)

When key cultural dates disappeared from digital calendars, YWCA created a one-click tool that let people add them back. The campaign turned a quiet rollback into a global act of protest, speaking to an evolving Canadian identity that increasingly expects inclusion and cultural recognition to be built into everyday systems.



SDC Village: "The Butterfly Effect" (Cossette)

For many trans and non-binary people, showing ID that doesn't reflect their gender identity can be a source of daily stress. So, SDC Village introduced a simple pronoun sticker for IDs, helping make routine interactions feel safer and more affirming. The work reinforced the idea that inclusion should be built into daily experiences, not treated as an exception or accommodation.



OH, CANADA. WHO ARE YOU, REALLY?

Is “Canadian identity” still a useful marketing lens? The honest answer is yes, but not in the way it has traditionally been used. So how do you market to a country that no longer sees itself through a single, unified story?

In his 2002 book *Souvenir of Canada*, Douglas Coupland writes, “Canada is a staggeringly young country, and we really ought to be easier on ourselves than we are. We beat ourselves up trying to define ourselves when, comparatively, we’ve generated more myth and identity in our short lifespan than many countries ever did before their 135th birthdays. There’s only so much national mythology that can be created in 135 years. Relax.”

At the time, that idea felt comforting. Canada didn’t need to define itself too rigidly because its identity still felt open-ended and unfinished. But the question now isn’t whether Canada has mythology, it’s whether that mythology still reflects the country marketers are trying to speak to.

Myths are often seen as lies dressed up as comforting fairy tales we tell ourselves to paper over the ugly parts of our culture and history. But when that veneer is stripped away – for example, when our sovereignty is threatened by a powerful neighbour – we’re forced to confront reality.

Church + State’s Ron Tite argues that the industry has become too comfortable relying on what he calls “the safety of the Canuck stereotype.” The problem isn’t simply that the stereotype is outdated, but that it reduces a complicated country into something overly neat and marketable. We’re neither the country nor the people we were even 50 years ago. Little wonder, then, that the stereotype is starting to feel out of date.

As traditional ideas of “Canadian identity” begin to fracture, marketers are rethinking what national storytelling actually means in a more fragmented, lived-in Canada.

By Will Novosedlik

According to Rethink global CSO Sean McDonald, another stereotype we need to put in the waste bin is that “the world needs more Canada,” because it misses the nuance of what Canada is: accepting, hardworking, outward-looking and highly educated. But we don’t talk about that.

And even that framing doesn’t go far enough. Luc Dumont, SVP insights at Leger Marketing, looks beyond the Canuck stereotype to remind us that 1.8 million Canadians are Indigenous. That’s 5% of the population. According to the 2021 census, the Indigenous population grew by 9.4% between 2016 and 2021, almost double the 5.3% growth rate of non-Indigenous Canadians. And yet Indigenous perspectives are still too often absent from marketers’ understanding of the country.

Which exposes the deeper problem with “Canadian identity” as a marketing construct: there is no longer a single version of Canada to reflect back.

As Hilton Barbour, VP marketing, Institute for Health and Human Potential, notes, “Whenever marketers talk about Canadian identity, I do wonder what they’re talking about. The momentary impulse behind ‘elbows up’ seems to have dissipated as Canadians moved on to more tangible and real challenges like inflation, shrinking economic opportunity and no immediate end to challenges around affordability.”

Reality 3. Mythology 0.

The friction runs through almost every perspective on the subject. It’s also hardly a new debate. Canadians have been questioning the coherence of their own identity for decades.

It seems like just about every celebrity we have ever produced, whether in academia, entertainment or literature, has been asked to define what it means to be Canadian. In many ways, uncertainty may be one of the country’s few enduring cultural constants.

Take Marshall McLuhan, who said, “You can be a French Canadian or an English Canadian, but not a Canadian. We know how to live without an identity, and this is one of our marvellous resources.”

Is that ambiguity our identity? Margaret Atwood, who has probably thought about this more than anyone else, once quipped that “the beginning of Canadian cultural nationalism was not ‘Am I really that oppressed?’ but ‘Am I really that boring?’” – perfectly capturing the understated, self-deprecating quality she saw as distinctly Canadian.

More recently, popular culture has offered its own interpretation. For Eugene Levy, the values embedded in *Schitt’s Creek* – kindness and acceptance – reflect what he sees as Canada at its best. The show’s fictional town and its portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters were groundbreaking precisely because of how normal it felt.

Which brings us back to the core question: if Canadian identity still matters in marketing, what version of Canada are brands actually reflecting?

Canadian identity as a lens isn’t obsolete. But it needs to be held more lightly, applied more locally, and grounded far more in the texture of lived experience than in the iconography of national mythology. The strongest work isn’t trying to define Canada for everyone. It’s reflecting specific versions of Canadian life with honesty and precision. The brands getting this right aren’t the ones waving the flag more cleverly. They’re the ones paying attention to how Canadians actually live.

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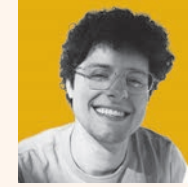
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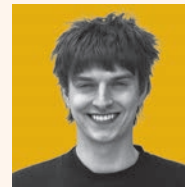
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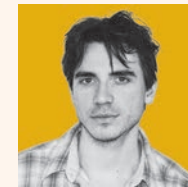
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Brands have access to more information, ideas and opinions than ever before. But more inputs don't always lead to better decisions.

The agencies attracting attention are helping clients question category conventions, pressure-test accepted wisdom and find opportunities others overlook.



Taking big swings

Pomp & Circumstance's rebrand reflects its rapid growth into a full-service powerhouse moving at the speed of culture



TEN YEARS AGO, LINDSAY MATTICK AND

Amanda Alvaro looked at the PR industry and saw a problem nobody was solving: Great ideas were getting slowed down by layers of bureaucracy and structures that rewarded specialization over collaboration. Pomp & Circumstance was their answer.

"Consumers experience brands as a single story," says Mattick, who serves as chief creative officer. "[But] too often, agencies were organized into rigid silos: PR over here, social over there, creative somewhere else."

Over the past decade, the Toronto-based independent agency has evolved from a boutique PR shop into a full-service creative agency with nearly 50 employees, offering expertise across earned media, influencer marketing, social strategy, content creation, experiential and creative production. Along the way, Pomp & Circumstance has amassed a roster of globally renowned brands, consecutively earning a spot on *The Globe and Mail's* Top Growing Companies list for the past five years. Running alongside Pomp & Circumstance, sister agency Bonus Track focuses on content, social media and creator-led storytelling. Together, they provide an integrated offering built around one founding belief: Brands earn attention when they bring their own truth to a cultural moment.

"The channels have expanded, but the mission hasn't: We help brands earn attention in meaningful ways," Mattick says. "So many ideas that make it into our client presentations are a direct

Above:

To celebrate its 10th anniversary, the indie agency launched canned beverage Pomp with longtime client Bacardi.

result of our team's global experiences, observing what is shaping culture in real time."

For Boursin, Pomp unlocked the cultural momentum of *Emily in Paris* by building a pop-up Parisian bistro that lets fans eat and drink inside the world of the show.

The brief for Asahi Super Dry called for something disruptive and hyper-local. Pomp's answer was a speakeasy-style dry cleaner pop-up that brought a taste of Tokyo's nightlife to Canadian neighbourhoods. Drawing inspiration from the speakeasy culture of some of the world's best bars in New York City, Tokyo and beyond, this activation is an example of the kind of cross-pollination Pomp actively cultivates.

"So many ideas that make it into our client presentations are a direct result of our team's global experiences, observing what is shaping culture in real time," Mattick says.

Another Boursin activation called "Little Window" – a large green wall with a small service opening offering complimentary cheese boards to be enjoyed al fresco – came from partner, SVP and creative director Rob Loschiavo's trip to Florence, Italy, where wine is served through small "bucchette del vino" windows in the walls of historic buildings. To encourage more of this kind of international trend-spotting, the agency sends its Pomp Postcard Award employee of the year on a trip of their choice and asks them to bring ideas back to the shop.

While Pomp's recent work with Skip ranges from an ad-supporting PR campaign to a Loblaw partnership and a Seth Rogen creative spot, these diverse executions share a singular concept, "Skip to the Good Part," which acts as a north star across every touchpoint. By contrast, the General Motors portfolio – spanning Cadillac, Chevrolet, Buick and GMC – demands another kind of discipline to keep the distinct brand identities from flattening into one generic story. Pomp's approach is to invest heavily in the upfront work for each brand. "Cadillac lives in the world of luxury; GMC is all about capability; Buick wants to connect with up-and-coming creatives," Mattick says. "There are four fundamentally different strategies, even though they all sit under the same parent."

To mark its 10th anniversary, the agency launched a canned cherry vodka spritz beverage aptly named Pomp. The product represents a full-circle moment, as Bacardi was Pomp's first anchor client. "It's a nod to taking chances, dreaming big, and never forgetting the hustle that got us here," Mattick says.

"Ten years in, what we're most proud of is not simply that we've remained independent, but that we've used that independence to build something distinctive and alive. We've been able to evolve the business when we saw opportunities, invest in new capabilities when clients needed them, and take creative risks without waiting for permission from a head office."



Left: 1 For Peroni Nastro Azzurro, Pomp hired Canadian TV personality and food expert Antoni Porowski to bring a taste of Italy home.

Below: 2 Pomp's work with the General Motors portfolio demands upfront attention to keep the four distinct brand identities from flattening into one generic storyline. **3 - 5** For Boursin, Pomp recently launched a ski-through tasting lounge, a Parisian pop-up dining experience set in the world of *Emily in Paris*, and a European-inspired cheese window in Montreal.



Above: 6 Pomp's "Skip to the Good Part" work with Skip included PR for a Seth Rogen creative spot. **7** Asahi Super Dry's speakeasy dry cleaner pop-up brought Tokyo nightlife to neighbourhoods across Canada.



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Turning heads everywhere

Fuse Create is opening more pathways for ideas and partnerships to grow

CAMPAIGNS NO LONGER MOVE

in straight lines. Audiences bounce between platforms, experiencing content across a growing mix of media, social channels, PR and experiential touchpoints. Creating work that turns heads remains important, but making sure it keeps turning heads wherever people encounter it is the new challenge.

This concept has shaped Fuse Create's recent evolution. In the past several years, the independent Toronto-based agency with 70 staff members has broadened its media capabilities, launched a dedicated PR practice, strengthened its U.S. footprint, expanded strategic

Left:

Fuse's holiday 2025 campaign for Soles4Souls Canada raised awareness for homelessness and earned more than 528 million impressions.

partnerships and built a more integrated operating model. The goal wasn't necessarily growth, but finding more ways for its clients to succeed.

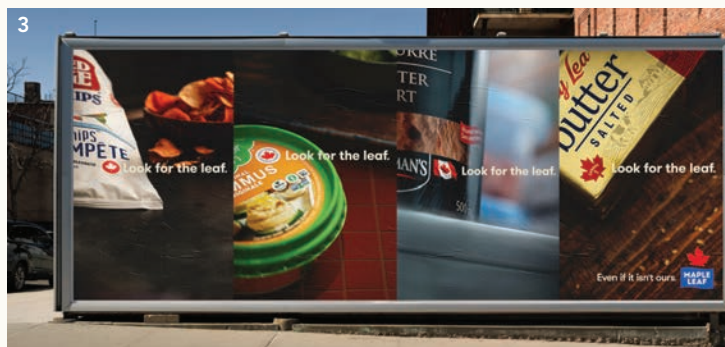
This integrated approach is gaining recognition across disciplines, landing Fuse on Strategy's Agency of the Year shortlists in both media and PR last year.

"We're always on the lookout for services we need to invest more in, or offerings we can enhance," says CEO Stephen Brown. "But that doesn't mean trying to do everything. We want to offer more robust solutions for clients while staying focused on our strengths."



Left: 1 The U.S. relaunch and rebrand of 70-year-old educational non-profit Britebound achieved 13% awareness in just six weeks. Fuse Create's remit has grown 3x since earning AOR status in January 2025.

Right: 2 When Miami Ad School Toronto unexpectedly closed its doors last summer, Fuse opened its own, giving displaced students a sense of community, opportunity and support that continues today.



As audiences become more fragmented, stronger planning and distribution capabilities create opportunities for campaigns to travel further. So Fuse diversified its media services, because bringing media expertise into conversations earlier allows strategy and creative to shape one another, rather than functioning separately.

As the agency expanded its capabilities, it also broadened the markets where it could apply them. Britebound, a U.S.-based non-profit that helps students navigate education and career pathways, became an AOR client in early 2025. This relationship – including work on Britebound's rebrand and relaunch – helped establish a foothold for Fuse's growing U.S. presence as it continues building partnerships south of the border.

"The U.S. offers an opportunity for many more clients, regions and categories," says partner, SVP and ECD Steve Miller. "It also gives us the ability to work across a wide range of scales, from smaller organizations to large national brands."

In a move designed to strengthen its influencer marketing capabilities, the agency recently formed a strategic alliance with a U.S.-based influencer agency. "There is a constant demand around the intersection between PR, social and influencer work," Brown says. "We specifically went looking for a partner in the U.S. because we wanted to be part of the process rather than handing work off."

Meanwhile, the decision to build out a dedicated PR practice reflected the core belief that drives many of Fuse's recent moves: Strong ideas become stronger when more perspectives shape them. As audiences continue to discover brands through creators, communities and conversation, earned thinking moves ever closer to the centre of campaign development.

"A lot of brands and CMOs are looking for earned-first creative," says Jenn Duggan, SVP and managing director, PR. "In this distracted economy, we want to earn the attention of consumers and make sure it's actually something they want to be part of."

None of Fuse's expansions was intended to exist independently. The real value comes from what happens when they all work together to create sharper ideas and deeper partnerships. "Collaborating with a production expert, a PR expert and a media expert allows us to do every job better," says partner, SVP and head of strategy Jon Crowley.

This may be felt internally, but it's really the clients who win, Miller adds. "It allows us to add value beyond the remit. We've got experts in many different areas, and that creates stronger partnerships and more valuable relationships for clients."

The result is often a relationship that grows well beyond the original brief. In the case of Soles4Souls – a non-profit providing shoes and clothing to communities facing economic hardship – a single assignment became a longer-term partnership. As trust grew, so did the scope of the work, with Fuse bringing additional capabilities to bear as client needs changed. This relationship eventually extended beyond campaign work as members of the Fuse team travelled to Honduras earlier this year to help distribute shoes to children in underserved communities.

For Fuse, the mission is to create more pathways for ideas and relationships to move forward – because if campaigns no longer travel in straight lines, neither can the thinking behind them. Work that keeps turning heads isn't simply the result of one strong idea; it's what happens when more people, perspectives and possibilities shape it from the beginning.



Left: 3 In 2025, Fuse's media division was shortlisted for Strategy's Media AOY, thanks in part to its 48-hour takeover media strategy and buy for Maple Leaf Foods' "Look for the Leaf" campaign. **4** Fuse has earned billions of engagements across every platform and in every major news outlet, turning heads – and turning brands into cultural icons. **5** Culture is the lifeblood of an agency, and part of Fuse's culture is giving back. With this in mind, the agency took 12 FUCRs to Honduras with Soles4Souls, to give struggling communities dignity and hope. **Right: 6** To entrench Ricola's position as a lozenge that soothes everyday voices (say from cheering on your favourite World Cup team), Fuse changed one letter in the logo to own the biggest sporting event to hit North America in 32 years.



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Built to think differently

Klick's hacker roots and entrepreneurial mindset are paying dividends



KLICK HEALTH MAY BE THE WORLD'S

largest independent health marketing agency, but it's tough to look at the Toronto-headquartered shop just through that lens. Especially when you consider that in 2025, Klick became the first healthcare-focused firm ever to be named Agency of the Year by both The One Show and the New York Festivals Advertising Awards.

"We've never wanted to just do the best healthcare work," says chief creative officer Rich Levy. "We want to do the best work in the world."

He credits that ambition in part to an unusual briefing process. Where most agencies start with a problem to solve, Klick starts with a different question: What is the injustice? "When you're dealing with someone's health and they're not getting the care they deserve, that is a huge injustice," Levy explains. "When you brief your team that way, all of a sudden everyone becomes a superhero. They want to right that wrong."

This approach is visible in the work. In one example, the non-profit Cancer Support Community was effectively invisible because nobody could remember how to reach out to it. Klick's creative solution: Change the phone number to 867-5309 – the most famous number in music history. With songwriter Tommy Heath from Tommy Tutone on board, the campaign earned more than two billion media impressions, generated a 216% increase in inbound calls and connected 497 people to cancer support in its first week.

For Ferring Pharmaceuticals' "Fertility Out Loud" campaign, research showed that many people disengage from fertility care not because treatment options are unavailable, but because the

Above:

Klick worked with Nestlé Compleat on Project Inchstone, a platform and short film that help families navigating child tube feeding feel seen, heard and supported.

journey becomes too overwhelming to continue. Klick's answer was "Trying," a campaign that turns empathy into action by meeting people in the unseen, emotional middle of trying to conceive, and connecting them to real support. This work embedded itself inside the trying-to-conceive community on Meta and Reddit, pairing emotionally accurate storytelling with immediate access to one-on-one coaching. Platform-native video assets lead directly to fertilityoutloud.com, where users can access free coaching, find medical specialists and explore next steps. The campaign has helped drive more than 45,000 reproductive endocrinologist visits, 4,200-plus fertility coaching sign-ups and upwards of 7,000 new patient treatment starts.

Klick's campaign for adoption non-profit Second Nurture included a short film called *18 Months*, based on the true story of a baby found on a New York City subway platform. Created with two Oscar-winning animators using handcrafted puppets, the film challenges documents a gay couple's personal, legal and societal challenges in their journey to adopt the found newborn. Since its debut last spring, the film has won 61 trophies, including two Bronze Lions, 20 Clios, nine ADC Annual Awards Cubes, six D&AD Pencils, five The One Show Pencils (including a Yellow Pencil) and two Webby Awards.

Add in the agency's ongoing double-digit growth and numerous best workplace accolades, and it's easy to see why Klick is turning so many heads as a top creative shop. Nearly three decades in, the company still runs on the same values its founders installed when they were hacking computers together. "The second you walk in the door, [you think], 'yeah, this is different,'" says Levy. "That entrepreneurial spirit, that hacker mindset, it's real."

These qualities sit at the core of the five Klick founding principles that have driven every hiring decision, promotion and recognition from the outset: embracing hacker roots; entrepreneurial spirit; outcomes over optics; playing the long game; and being people-first. These same values reshape how Klick operates internally. Last year, the Klick Prize awarded \$1 million to Klicksters who submitted the most game-changing AI idea for clients. The Grand Prize-winning idea was Klick Guardrail: a glass-box AI tool that applies complex reasoning to pharma compliance submissions, showing its logic and providing full traceability so clients can greenlight bolder creative sooner. Now used by several pharma clients, Klick Guardrail was recently profiled by *Medical Marketing + Media* magazine as an AI tool that's actually being used.

Underwriting everything is Klick's fierce independence, says chief people officer Glenn Zujew. "Being independent allows us to make decisions and experiment in ways you might not be able to elsewhere."



Left: 1 Klick made the Cancer Support Community phone number more memorable by changing it to the most famous seven digits in music history, increasing cancer support for those who need it.

Right: 2 Klick's campaign for Ferring Pharmaceuticals challenges the stigma around infertility while connecting people with support, resources and community.



Left: 3 For adoption non-profit Second Nurture, Klick created *18 Months* – a short film rooted in a true story about the journey one couple took after finding a baby in a New York City subway station.



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The next-generation agency partner

Pendo challenges perceptions to uncover new opportunities



Left: Pendo repositioned Manukora as a wellness-focused Manuka honey brand, creating an apothecary-inspired platform that fuelled growth and a successful global market expansion.

FOR MANY BRANDS, the speed of execution that today's market demands leaves little room to step back, gain perspective and ensure the focus is in the right place. Yet moving fast requires clarity – identifying a clear direction, aligning people with it and building shared conviction around how to execute it.

Vancouver-based independent agency Pendo solves for this by embedding itself as a

partner – close enough to understand the business, but far enough removed to challenge assumptions and identify opportunities. "We're a focused team of seasoned senior creatives, so we don't have the layers larger agencies do," says brand director and co-founder Don Cleland. "We trade scale for clarity. There are no spectators here; everyone is deeply involved in solving the right problems from the beginning."

Pendo's process starts with building context: meeting stakeholders, understanding ambitions and surfacing perspectives that might otherwise stay buried. It's not just about gathering opinions; the ultimate goal is to build enough alignment that organizations can make stronger



decisions. "We create an environment where people can put real viewpoints on the table," says Cleland. "We find clarity before we move forward, because when we do, we can move faster."

This approach often reveals hidden opportunities that could be easy for brands to miss, as Pendo encountered with Manukora when the New Zealand-based Manuka honey producer was preparing to expand into new markets in the U.S., Asia and Europe. The category had become crowded, making it difficult for brands to distinguish themselves in meaningful ways. Rather than fighting harder within an increasingly commoditized space, Pendo shifted the conversation entirely, repositioning Manukora around health, wellness and daily rituals while simplifying how consumers learn about product benefits and ingredients. "The wellness element was already there, but the brand wasn't telling that story," Cleland notes. "The opportunity was to bring that meaning forward."

More than a visual refresh, this campaign gave Manukora a clearer story to grow into. The brand went on to increase online sales, achieve top-seller status on Amazon and execute its market expansions successfully.

Similarly, Pendo questioned the conventions of the orthopaedic market when it began working with Stoko, a medical-device company developing a knee brace to help people return to the sports and activities they love. Instead of recreating what already existed in this saturated category, Pendo identified a larger opportunity. "We started looking for contradictions, where the category was saying one thing but people were feeling something else," says Cleland. "What we found was an audience driven by aspiration rather than rehabilitation. We saw right away that this was a category-changer."

Instead of behaving like a traditional orthopaedic brand, the agency repositioned Stoko to be more akin to an athletic apparel company – shifting the conversation away from injury and toward possibility and empowerment. The opportunity was not in redesigning a brace, but in reframing recovery altogether. Since launch, the product has gained traction as a category leader while earning endorsements from NFL, NHL and Olympic athletes.

Pendo's work often creates internal outcomes as well. Rather than handing over a finished piece of creative and walking away, the agency leaves client teams with something more enduring: a stronger foundation for growth. As conversations happen and assumptions get challenged, internal alignment improves. Teams develop clearer language around what the brand stands for, and a clearer path for turning those ideas into action. "We're helping brands succeed in the market, but their teams often come out of the process stronger, too," says Cleland. "They align more closely and develop the conviction to carry the brand forward."

With brands generating more work than ever before, strong creative is only part of the equation. The harder challenge is knowing which ideas are worth the investment, and how to build enough alignment and conviction to act decisively once a direction becomes clear. That's why Pendo focuses on becoming a trusted guide that helps brands move faster, think bigger and see opportunities before everyone else does.

"Clients need an agency that's going to tell them the truth, challenge them and help them achieve their goals," says Cleland. "Pendo's agility means we can drop into a client's team, bring an outside perspective and move quickly. The creative gets attention, but we don't get there without doing the groundwork first."



Left: 1 Through a comprehensive rebrand, Pendo gave Stoko a clearer way to communicate its mission of getting active people back to the sports and activities they love. **Right: 2** Pendo helped Dickie's Ginger stand out in a category dominated by tradition, creating a bold new DIY-inspired identity that targets a new generation of ginger beer drinkers.



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Commit harder

Diamond refuses to accept the limits of an agency



WHEN ITALY FAILED TO QUALIFY FOR

the 2026 World Cup, Diamond saw an opportunity. Within 24 hours, the agency had an activation live in market, inviting Italian-Canadians to trade their Azzurri jersey for a Canada one. By midweek the story was running internationally, generating more media engagement than the World Cup draw itself.

That is how the agency works: fast, culturally fluent, with a platform already in place when the moment arrives. Diamond helps brands uncover conviction and express it boldly through enduring platform ideas, using them as springboards into high impact activation so brands can participate in culture in unexpected ways.

Over the past two decades, Diamond has grown into one of the most capable independent agencies in the country, with a single operating principle: refuse to accept the limits of what a creative agency can be.

"What makes Diamond Diamond is the talent," says president and co-founder Josh Diamond. "The most talented people in the industry, committing harder than the brief asks for, with the urgency that only independent ownership and a flat operating model make possible."

Above:

The Embrace, part of Diamond's "Who's Saving Who?" campaign for Canadian Blood Services, leans into the reciprocal benefits of becoming a donor.

Founded in experiential, every discipline since has been built to the same standard, none subordinate to the others. The result is a unified culture that refuses to default to safe choices, committing to making itself and its clients beautifully uncomfortable to deliver breakthrough results.

Canada Soccer's "Our Game Now" platform reflects a truth at the centre of Canadian sport: Soccer, not hockey, is now the most-played game in Canada. The jersey swap was one such moment. Since then, the work has expanded into a manifesto film on CBC, running across broadcast, OOH and digital ahead of Canada's World Cup debut on June 12. The World Cup did not create the story. The platform did.

The same instinct runs through the work for Canadian Blood Services. Rather than leading with "You can save a life," Diamond asked what the donor gets from giving. The "Who's Saving Who" platform reframes blood donation as an experience of human connection, while the Donation Hoodie in partnership with Peace Collective features a zipper along the arm so donors can give blood without taking it off. "We landed on the ultimate humble brag," says CSO Lori Davison. "A Canadian Blood Services hoodie, worn as a badge of honour by the donors who give."

That willingness to ask different questions also drove the TD Insurance Pole Pillows campaign, part of the "Here When You Need Us" platform. Using precise collision data to identify accident prone parking lot pillars, Diamond wrapped them in branded, shock-absorbing plush cushions. It was a brilliantly tactile demonstration of care for the agency's 20th year with the financial institution.

A similar posture took Pizza Hut to the Blue Jays' 2026 home opener without a sponsorship. Capitalizing on a loophole allowing fans to bring outside food into the stadium, Diamond launched "Uninvited." The stunt successfully smuggled Hot Dog Stuffed Crust pizza into the park on opening day, hijacking the conversation, making Pizza Hut the most talked-about brand at the game and earning a shoutout on *Saturday Night Live's* Weekend Update.

Anticipating marketing's most significant shift, Diamond also launched Bold AI, a sister company giving clients true technical execution rather than superficial prompt engineering. "Clients don't need an AI extension. They need real capability," says Diamond. "A year in, our most important clients are already building inside it, and the momentum has surprised even us."

The brands that win the next decade will commit to a point of view and stay with it long enough to keep it alive. The agencies that build those brands will commit alongside them, move with urgency, and refuse the limits of what a creative agency is supposed to do. That is what Diamond has been doing for 20 years.

Clockwise from upper left:

1 To build awareness and increase blood donations among Gen Z, Diamond partnered with Peace Collective to create a special edition Donation Hoodie as a reward.

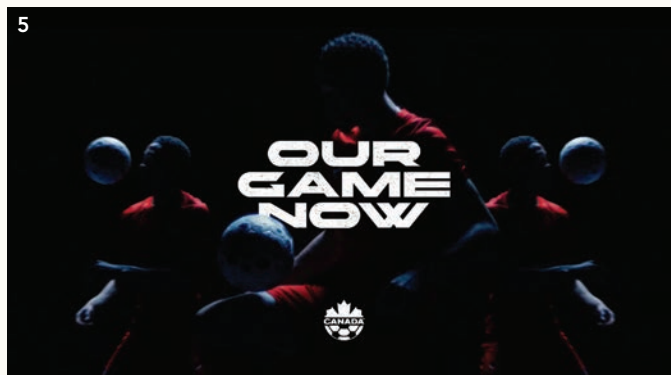
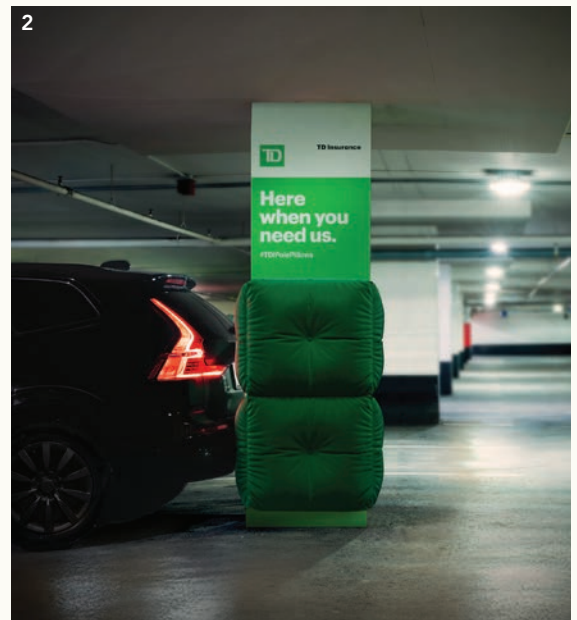
2 After identifying the parking lot poles most likely to be hit while driving, Diamond cushioned and branded them for TD Insurance.

3 Diamond's commitment is reflected in its 20-year partnership with TD, which has played a major role in shaping the agency's growth.

4 When Italy didn't make the FIFA World Cup 2026, Diamond saw an opportunity and invited Italian-Canadians to swap their Azzurri jerseys for Canadian kit in an activation for Canada Soccer.

5 Diamond launched "Our Game Now" with Canada Soccer, designed to unify Canadians around the men's team ahead of the World Cup.

6 For Pizza Hut, Diamond launched "The Inside Job" to get the brand into the park on Blue Jays opening day.



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Building a (people) movement

Starcom Canada is thriving in a slowing market by betting on people



Above: Starcom turned a snowstorm into a brand activation for Stella Artois, building a 12-foot chalice in downtown Toronto that slowly filled up with snow, creating a "Perfect Serve" moment.

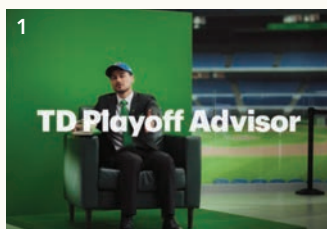
IN A MEDIA INDUSTRY THAT'S increasingly defined by automation and optimization, Véronik L'Heureux has a more balanced approach to growth. "People are not just data points," says the CEO of Starcom Canada. "There are certain things that can make people act on something which can only be determined if you look beyond the numbers."

This understanding sits at the core of Starcom's positioning statement: "Move People. Move Business." It's a tagline L'Heureux treats as a belief system, and the results back it up.

Despite a slowing market last year, new business (including Coca-Cola and Mars) and organic expansion with existing clients drove Starcom to double-digit growth, and the it's now projected to move from nine to four in national new business rankings in a single year. The firm also won Strategy's Media Agency of the Year award and was the most shortlisted agency for the Media Innovation Awards.

"Our growth is directly linked to our clients' growth," says L'Heureux. "We need to stay on our toes to continue to invest in what our clients need."

Much of the technology underpinning Starcom is deliberately Canadian. Publicis ID, its patented identity graph, was built from the ground up in Canada. The reason is straightforward: "Owning our data solution wasn't optional. It's what allows us to stay platform-



agnostic and deliver deeper insights, with stronger connectivity across the entire ecosystem than anyone else. It had to have privacy at its core and be future-proof – not dependent on third-party cookies or partners."

The result is a single consumer profile that unifies proprietary, third-party and partner data with digital signals and behavioural insights, giving Starcom's planners a foundation that most competitors cannot match. And Publicis Groupe's acquisition of Lotame last year further enhanced the Publicis ID offering.

How did this show up in the work? When the Toronto Blue Jays reached the World Series for the first time in 32 years last fall, TD Bank had a problem. After more than two decades as a team sponsor, the brand had become easy to tune out amidst a sea of partners. "Closer to the Game" was something fans heard, but not something they felt. Starcom's answer, developed in partnership with creative agency Leo, was digital OOH placements noting the exact distance between each billboard and home plate. This campaign expanded to include live broadcasts, social takeovers on game days and digital trucks circling the stadium.

By the end of the World Series run, TD had increased ad recall and purchase intent among Blue Jays fans. Outcomes included a 10% increase in brand search and a 4% lift in brand association with the Blue Jays – the highest result for customers and non-customers combined since 2022.

The Jeep Cherokee brief presented a different kind of reframing challenge. Returning to market after a four-year absence, the Cherokee needed to prove that its quieter hybrid powertrain was evolving the vehicle's rugged identity rather than compromising it. Starcom and creative agency Publicis partnered with *Canadian*

Geographic and *National Geographic*, commissioning award-winning photojournalist Patricia Homonylo to document the new Cherokee being powerful enough for the backcountry, but silent enough to get closer to skittish wildlife than a conventional engine would allow. Positioning the powertrain as the proof point instead of the obstacle led to a 54% increase in leads month-over-month.

In the case of Stella Artois, the opportunity arrived with a weather forecast. The brand's "Perfect Serve" campaign needed a quintessential Canadian moment, and the biggest winter storm of 2026 provided one. Working with Pattison and Kadence, Starcom built a 12-foot chalice in less than 48 hours and installed it at Front and York streets in downtown Toronto the morning the storm hit. As the record snowfall accumulated, it filled the chalice like foam.

Filmed throughout the day and amplified through creators and social media, the campaign generated a 96% positive sentiment on Stella Artois' socials, breaking the brand's previous organic record.

The common thread running through all of these examples is putting consumers ahead of channels, says L'Heureux. "There is no better place than media to have the best consumer insights right now. We continue to feed that understanding to creative teams, and together we figure out how and where to bring it to consumers."

This people-oriented approach also extends inside the agency. While many competitors have cut headcounts in response to AI, Starcom has expanded its team. Retention also remains strong – and less turnover not only gives clients more stability, but more importantly, ensures that talent maintains a consistently high level of engagement in their business.

Across the board, Starcom is proving that moving people really does move business forward.



Left: 1 - 3 As a long-time sponsor of the Toronto Blue Jays, TD Bank had a problem standing out amid the noise when the team reached the World Series last fall. Starcom's answer was to take the brand and fans "Closer to the Game" with activations including digital OOH placements that calculated the exact distance from each billboard to home plate. **4** To prove that Jeep Cherokee's quieter hybrid powertrain was evolving the vehicle's rugged identity rather than compromising it, Starcom partnered with *Canadian Geographic* and *National Geographic*, commissioning award-winning photojournalist Patricia Homonylo to document how the silent engine allows it to get closer to wildlife. **5** Starcom treats its "Move People. Move Business" tagline as a belief system. **6** Starcom's first-place 2026 Star Awards winners, recognized for their work on AB InBev, pictured with CEO Véronik L'Heureux. **7** True to its people-first philosophy, each year Starcom hosts the Star Awards – an internal initiative to celebrate its people, their work and overall achievements for the year. **8** In 2025, Starcom took home Gold for strategy's Media Agency of the Year.



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Outside the lane

Spark Foundry Canada takes on a founder-led mindset



ALMOST FIVE YEARS AGO, MARYANN

Rusnak became a triathlete at roughly the same time she joined Spark Foundry Canada as an executive. In working her way up to her current role as president, she has come to see these two pursuits as complementary. The idea of training across disciplines with the goal of becoming incrementally better at all of them is the closest analogy she has found for what she is trying to build at the agency.

"Don't be scared to move outside your lane," she says. "That is what I keep bringing back into how we think about things."

As the fastest growing agency in Canada, with a talent base of nearly 200 across Toronto, Montreal and Windsor, and client partnerships such as MolsonCoors, Kimberly Clark and Home Hardware, Spark Foundry Canada is not a startup, but it has the soul of one. And that's what the agency is determined to protect as it grows. "That startup mentality – the agility, the thinking, the lack of fear about breaking things – is so important for us to maintain,

Above: To create a 'Wow' moment for Hot Wheels fans, Spark brought the Mercedes-Benz CLA art installation to life, turning heads and driving brand impact at the 2026 Canadian International Auto Show in Toronto.

regardless of how much we grow or what size we become."

The practical expression of this mindset is a deliberate restructuring of how teams are built. Rusnak has been moving Spark away from the traditional planner model toward creating "multisport athletes": people who can speak to the totality of a client's business – from data and technology through to channel planning and measurement – rather than a team where each person specializes in only one thing. Research, insights and analytics, long treated as peripheral supporting roles, are now embedded at the core.

This shift is driven by what clients are asking for, even when they can't articulate it precisely. "They might have five agencies or one agency, but at the end of the day, they want one integrated marketing strategy and plan grounded in identity to drive their business forward," Rusnak says. That has put Spark in a natural position of influence within inter-agency teams, the multi-partner structures brands like Kenvue use to orchestrate across creative, media, influencer commerce and PR. Rather than waiting for direction, Spark shows up having identified the central business challenge to work with all partners to solve it together.

Spark Foundry's recent work with Starbucks illustrates what this model looks like in practice. Rather than measuring success through impressions or click-through rates, Spark rebuilt its go-to-market approach around loyalty membership growth, tracking frequency of purchase within specific cohorts as the primary KPI. A recent spring campaign grew loyalty membership 12% year over year and increased spend per member by approximately 11%.

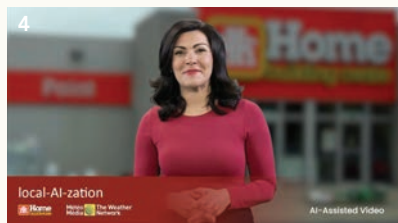
"A lot of agencies talk about effectiveness," Rusnak says. "The key difference is the action behind it. To us, it means focusing on what we are delivering to the client business." That commitment has been formally recognized through Spark's APG effectiveness certification making them one of the first media agencies in Canada to receive the accreditation, following deep investment in WARC and IPA training across teams.

The culture that makes this possible is built around permission to fail. Rusnak calls all-staff meetings "bonfires" and holds regular fireside chats at every level of the agency, explicitly encouraging people to challenge existing models and propose solutions beyond how things have always been done. This approach was shaped in part by her time at Expedia, where she learned to move fast, test and adapt.

In a media industry being reshaped by fragmentation, AI, and clients who want business partners rather than channel executors, Rusnak is betting that an agency is built to last when it never stops behaving like it has something to prove.

Right: 1 For Home Decoors, Spark took a bold alternative to the Big Game, driving breakthrough awareness, viral momentum and 100% positive sentiment through interactive experiences with the brand.

2 For Sour Patch Kids, a Toronto-wide, glow-powered OOH takeover, anchored by Canada's first-ever illuminated streetcar, transformed transit, nightlife and entertainment corridors into a sharable Gen Z experience. **3** For Starbucks, Spark focused on loyalty membership growth, tracking frequency of purchase to increase both membership and spend per member by double digits in a spring campaign.



Above: 4 AI-powered "Weather Person Rachel" delivered more than 422 hyper-localized videos, scaling Home Hardware's national reach with the same community-first precision as its stores. **5** Spark's 10K team sweated it out at the annual Publicis Fun Run.



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Start with intent

Bruce Mau Design works from the inside out to understand a brand from all angles



Left: To appeal to those unsure about attending the National Ballet of Canada, BMD created a wordmark that doubles as a storytelling device, with vibrant jewel tones and a strong yet beautiful font.

DESIGN HAS A PROXIMITY problem: The closer you are to your own brand, the harder it becomes to see what it is actually signalling. Bruce Mau Design (BMD) has built its practice around solving that problem, starting before a single design decision is made.

"We begin every project with deep immersion," says Laura Stein, chief creative officer and partner. "We often embed ourselves with our clients in a pop-up studio for an intensive period of discovery. We engage stakeholders across the organization, analyze internal materials, and uncover the insights and dynamics that are shaping the customer experience."

That inside-out methodology is what separates BMD's definition of strategic design from the industry's more generic use of the phrase. For Stein, strategic design means using brand as a tool to create meaning and drive real business outcomes. "We don't start with aesthetics," she says. "We start with intent."

This approach is visible in the breadth of what BMD delivers. Where many design practices build visual identities, BMD builds holistic brand systems, designing

Right: 1 & 2 Infiniti engaged BMD to elevate its brand while engaging a younger audience. BMD refreshed Infiniti's wordmark, which had become disconnected from the brand's aspirations. The new look also included a traditional Japanese colour approach, along with new typography and photography styles, for a brand that signals luxury and lifestyle. **3 & 4** For Toronto Pearson International Airport, the mandate was to bring clarity back to a brand that had fragmented, without touching the existing logo. The result was a refreshed identity that included a flexible grid system, reminiscent of flight paths and vector lines.



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everything from identity to digital, spatial and service touchpoints so brands show up consistently in every environment. In Stein's framing, identity is not a visual expression but a cultural and experiential system that drives how an organization behaves, communicates and connects.

In the case of Toronto Pearson International Airport, the brand had fragmented over time into a tangle of sub-brands, each with its own logo and visual language. The mandate was to bring clarity back without touching the existing logo. BMD developed a refreshed brand identity that included a flexible grid system inspired by flight paths and vector lines; a modern typographic approach that balanced function with warmth; and a colour palette that built on Pearson's existing hues while adding more energy and optimism. The new brand voice was designed to feel approachable and empathetic to the traveller's experience.

The harder challenge was making the system work across every application, from bold welcome signage and social media to operational safety notices. "Design systems most often fail in everyday applications – high-volume, low-visibility communications that teams produce every day," Stein says. BMD guards against this breakdown by pressure-testing unsexy applications during development, including forms, templates and wayfinding. "By building in flexibility early, we ensure the system remains robust, usable and engaging over time."

For the National Ballet of Canada, the mandate was more fundamental. Tying into its 75th anniversary, the remit was a full brand identity redesign under incoming artistic director Hope Muir, with a brief to shift perceptions of the organization from exclusivity to openness and relevance. BMD's anniversary campaign paired

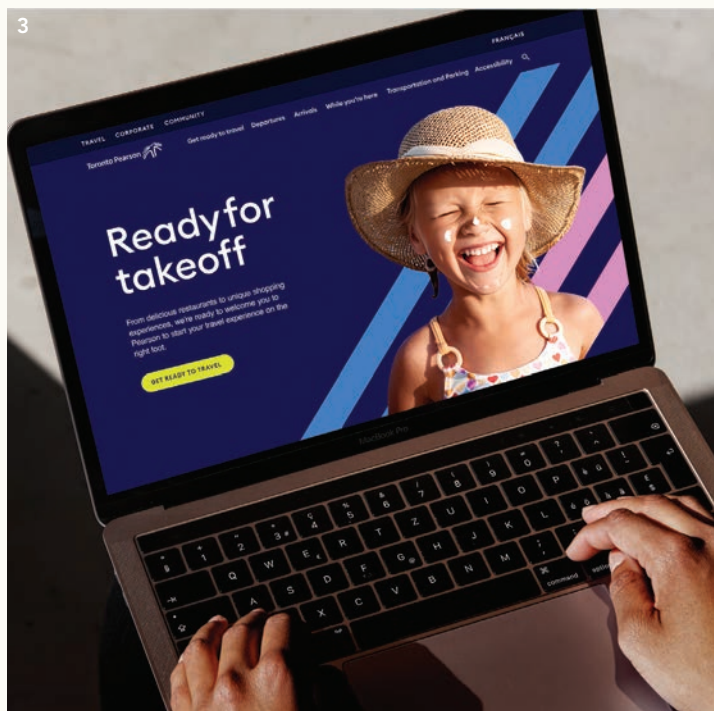
portraits of historical figures with images of younger dancers to signal continuity – an extension of a larger system already built for long-term adaptability. "We built a flexible toolkit combining bold colour, expressive typography, dynamic imagery and motion principles that can scale across every touchpoint without becoming repetitive," Stein says. This system also includes motion templates and modular tools designed specifically for the in-house team.

The question of brand drift sits at the centre of BMD's ongoing client relationships. Stein says the signs are consistent: a brand that no longer reflects current strategy, inconsistency across touchpoints, internal teams that find the system rigid or uninspiring, and an increased reliance on campaigns to compensate for foundational gaps. "A common mistake is assuming a new campaign will solve deeper brand issues," she says. "If the underlying brand platform isn't working, no amount of marketing activity will create lasting impact."

Being part of the 72andSunny Creative Collective has expanded what BMD can offer clients without changing how it works, says Diane Mahony, partner & VP client services. "BMD remains a distinct practice, but we also collaborate on work across our teams. Clients benefit from our focused expertise, but they can also access the broader capabilities of the Collective when needed."

Organizations looking to define a brand identity and activate it at scale benefit from the combination of BMD's systems thinking and 72andSunny's strength in unlocking possibility through rigorous optimism and cultural storytelling.

"For the world's most ambitious brands, we're designing lived experiences that drive how organizations behave, communicate and connect."





1903

1950s

STILL CANADIAN AFT

AT 240 YEARS OLD, MOLSON HAS SPENT NEARLY A QUARTER OF A MILLENNIUM HELPING DEFINE CANADIAN IDENTITY. NOW, AS IT MARKS ITS TEN-24 ANNIVERSARY, THE BREWER IS FINDING NEW WAYS TO STAY RELEVANT IN A COUNTRY THAT LOOKS VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE ONE IT HELPED BUILD.

BY LANA CASTLEMAN

It's not every day a Canadian brand gets an unsolicited nod from a global superstar like Drake, let alone twice within the span of a few years. Then again, with 240 years of history in Canada and counting, there are few that rival Molson in terms of cultural heritage.

In July 2023, Drake was spotted wearing a vintage 1998 Molson Canadian baseball jersey which Molson turned into a viral award-winning digital campaign that drove an estimated 2.5% bump in sales.

More recently, newly appointed Molson Coors marketing director of trademark and economy brands, Eric Kouri, and his team found themselves pleasantly surprised on the morning of Friday, May 15, 2026 – a.k.a. the drop date of Drake's first solo album in three years. There at centre ice stood Drake, in his "Slap This City" video, draped in a fur coat that featured a classic Molson Canadian logo patch, alongside ones for other well-known brands including RBC, Canadian Tire, Manchu Wok and Sleep Country.

"That was a roller coaster of a Friday, if I've ever had one," recalls Kouri. "But we relish being in those moments and it speaks to the power of [Molson's] credibility and the trust we have built with Canadians." Molson immediately took to its social channels and started riffing with the other brands, even taking a straw poll on whether to reproduce that coat.

"People are still looking for ways to have dialogue with brands.



ER ALL THESE YEARS

Above: The story of Molson is the story of Canadian marketing. From horse-drawn deliveries and early brand building to landmark contemporary campaigns like “Since 1786” and “I Am,” the brewer has spent generations reflecting – and influencing – the country’s evolving identity.

Especially now. More than ever, they want to participate versus being told,” he adds.

First established in Montreal as a brewery by John Molson in 1786, the brand was Canadian before Canada officially came into existence 81 years later. It’s been a leader in beer advertising and marketing since 1807, when John bought and placed his first newspaper ad.

Arguably, Molson’s marketing has done as much to shape ideas of Canadian identity as it has to reflect the country’s evolution over the past two-plus centuries, helping keep the brand top of mind among beer consumers.

There’s no better example of that than the groundbreaking “I Am” campaign (from MacLaren McCann) that launched for Molson Canadian in 1995 and reached its zenith with 2000’s “The Rant.” Recited by Joe Canada (actor Jeff Douglas), the 30-second tongue-in-cheek spot recounted what Canada was and was not, including our belief that the beaver is a “truly proud and noble animal.” It ran in theatres, on TV and Douglas even appeared in character at hockey games. It was hugely

successful and continues to influence marketers today.

But the beer industry at the time was also becoming distinctly less Canadian. The 2000s marked a period of amalgamation that saw Molson merge with U.S. beer giant Coors in 2005 to remain competitive with growing international conglomerates.

At the same time, beer as a category has been in decline. In fact, beer sales in Canada have been steadily declining since 2004, falling from roughly 49% of all alcohol sales to 35.1% (CDN \$9.1 billion) in 2025, according to Statistics Canada.

It was in this environment, around 2019, that Molson began rebuilding its brand platform with AOR Rethink.

Recognizing that core Molson beers – Canadian, Export, Dry, Ultra and non-alc Exel – and the “I Am” positioning were no longer connecting with consumers as strongly as they once had, the company set out to create a marketing platform that would uphold Molson’s legacy while attracting a new generation of drinkers.

The idea behind it was to move away from the



singular “I” positioning to the Canadian collective “we,” using the brand to bring people together rather than define them individually.

The new brand platform “Everyone In” launched in March 2023 with a spot that featured “One Dance,” a track by (who else) Drake, and depicted people enjoying Molson brews at Vietnamese restaurants, salsa clubs, drag brunches – not just the neighbourhood local – showcasing the breadth and diversity of Molson consumers.

It also brought all five beers under one umbrella for the first time and featured branding that drew inspiration from the original Molson script logo, while introducing a modern hexagon to create visual consistency across packaging and marketing executions.

“‘Everyone In’ embodies what this brand has always stood for, which is bringing people together, bringing Canadians together, rallying people behind the country that we call home,” says Kouri. “It really has been a great unlock for the brand in terms of bringing forward creative ideas that have had some really strong cultural resonance.”

The 2023 “Everyone In” launch campaign earned Molson a *strategy* Brand of the Year title. It also helped drive a 4% growth in volume over the prior year as well as an 8.4% jump in revenue.

And the innovation continued.

Kouri points to one 2024 campaign in particular that

he describes as a “culture drop,” one that leaned into Molson’s longstanding relationship with sports while solving a real-world problem.

“See My Name,” helped to establish Molson as a beer for all hockey fans, spotlighting the issue of name visibility on PWHL (and later non-pro) jerseys. Positioned at the top of the jersey, not only were female players’ names less recognizable than their NHL counterparts’, they were also often obscured by their ponytails or braids. Molson stepped in, teaming up with the PWHL to redesign the back of the jersey, placing a Molson logo at the top and the player’s name across the bottom, where it would be clearly visible.

The campaign launched on Women’s Day 2024 across TV and digital platforms and resulted in a 75% increase in PWHL player name recognition, generated 2.9 billion impressions and sits as the most-shared campaign in Molson history.

Another standout was “Paid Through Parents,” which found a novel way to get money to woefully underfunded amateur athletes competing in the 2024 Summer Games by essentially turning the parents of nine athletes into legal financial intermediaries.

Molson gave the parents \$15,000 each to pass along to their children, no strings attached. A full TV, digital, social and PR campaign supported the effort, starring



Above: While Molson's roots stretch back to 1786, campaigns such as "See My Name," "Paid Through Parents" and "Made by Canadians" show how the brand continues to evolve its role in Canadian culture, finding new ways to connect with consumers through participation, purpose and shared experiences.

the parents themselves. It generated more than 389 million impressions across media, connected TV and OOH, while owned channels delivered another 19 million. The initiative increased athlete compensation by 15,000% compared with previous Olympic Games.

The next year saw the "Since 1786" campaign with a 30-second spot that echoed "The Rant" in sentiment, with the focus instead on the collective. It featured phrases like "Since when were Canadians not sorry... Since 1786," all backed by Rush's iconic "Closer to the Heart." It was followed by "We've Been Everywhere" that featured Men Without Hats' 1980s banger "Safety Dance."

Kouri says the ad was designed to celebrate Molson's deep roots in Canada and the many ways beer is enjoyed across the country, reinforcing the "Everyone In" platform. Molson Canadian's sales grew by 2.9% in volume in 2025 vs 2024 and the Molson Canadian brand also grew total market share by over a quarter of a share point in the same period.

To celebrate its 240th, Molson closed the circle and handed the "I Am" campaign directly to consumers with "Made by Canadians." Taking an intentionally analogue approach, Molson placed disposable cameras across Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, then sent followers on a treasure hunt to find them and submit photos of what they believe is uniquely Canadian.

"The Canadian identity can't be defined by one voice, and that's part of the reason why we decided to do this," explains Kouri. Success, he says, will be measured by the number of submissions and the extent to which the final crowd-sourced portrait, created by Rethink, is shared and discussed.

"We look at our history and legacy as a superpower. It's not a constraint," he says. "That legacy and credibility have allowed us to be a part of a lot of these cultural moments that not all brands would be afforded the opportunity to dive into."

Beyond structured campaigns, Kouri says Molson's history gives the brand permission to be more reactive and opportunistic – an increasingly important advantage in today's digital-first marketing environment.

Storytelling, he says, needs to inform, reward attention quickly and stop the scroll. Molson focuses on simple narratives that tap emotional levers such as humour and reflection, while recognizing that the brand itself can still play a meaningful role in cultural conversations when the moment is right.

He points to a recent activation in Buffalo that turned a viral NHL playoff moment into a cross-border extension of the brand's "Cheer Canada" platform.

Buffalo Sabres fans stepped in to finish singing "O Canada" when the microphone cut out during the anthem before a playoff game against the Boston Bruins. Within a week, the Molson team had transformed the moment into a cross-border activation, buying Buffalo fans a beer at the next game – and at 17 bars across Upstate New York – while supporting the effort with OOH billboards reading "This Playoffs, Cheer Canadian" throughout Buffalo.

The activation was delivered with support from multiple agency partners. Zeno Group led PR and earned media efforts in Canada and the U.S., while Publicis Connect handled media planning and buying. Creative support came from The Team.

As important as agility is today, Kouri says the focus for the next decade will be on occasions – maintaining existing beer-drinking moments while helping create new ones. To that end, Molson plans to become more present wherever beer naturally fits into people's lives, from major celebrations and sporting events to weekly rec-league meetups and summer barbecues.

"We still have big ambitions for the Molson brand. We're going to stay focused on growing it through connecting with more consumers and finding new occasions for the brand," says Kouri. "Our job isn't just to respect our 240 years of history. It's to make sure Molson still matters 240 years from now."

"That will mean continuing to champion our role in Canadian life while also finding ways to evolve alongside changing consumer preferences." 🍺

Your people are hiding in plain type.

J S J W E P P I C K L E B A L L E R X R T J B V V P B V Z U I O
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Almond Mom

Beer Leaguer

Boy Mom

Car Guy

Clean Girl

Disney Adult

Doomscroller

Extreme Couponer

Finance Bro

Former Gifted Kid

Hard Launcher

iPad Baby

LinkedIn Poet

Live Laugh Lover

Nepo Baby

"Nice" Guy

Pickleballer

Pilates Princess

Podcaster

Raya Regular

Runner

Sephora Kid

Silver Fox

Trad Wife

Type A

Type B

Vaper

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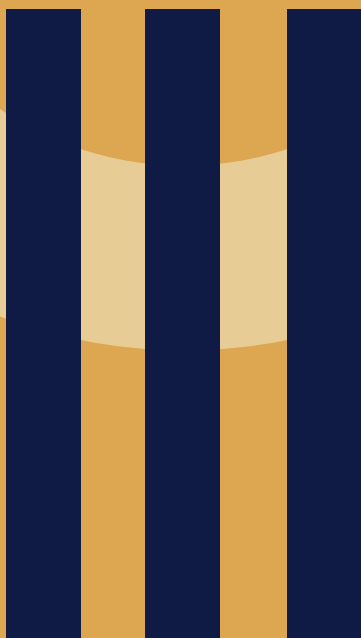


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