

/profile

Sub Rosa

Michael Ventura of multi-disciplinary design agency Sub Rosa discusses embracing chaos, putting anarchy into practice and genre-breaking projects for the world's largest brands

www.wearesubrosa.com

Agency location New York

Team 21

Expertise Integrated design, branding, experience design, curation

Established 2005

Clients AT&T, FCUK, GE, Google, Kiehl's, Levi Strauss, Neiman Marcus, Nike, Syfy, Warby Parker

Q&A

.net: Tell us a little about your history.

MV: In our early days, we were completely focused on developing digital solutions for clients, which at our start in 2005 meant a lot of Flash, game development and the early days of social media. By 2009, we realised that what clients really needed was a strategic collaborator. We reorganised the company and set off to be a media-agnostic enterprise. We haven't looked back since.

.net: How did the name come about?

MV: Everything we do centres around conversation and relationships, so we wanted to find a word that connoted this sort of sentiment. Sub Rosa's direct translation is 'under the rose' – a phrase used in antiquity to describe conversations had in private. Most of our conversations with clients are very strategic, and very personal. The name felt right. We later learned that it also meant 'to be drunk'.

.net: What made you decide to present the About Us page on your site as a gallery of possessions?

MV: We all hated the idea of goofy photos, or worse, serious photos. We thought about

how interesting it would be if we showed what we would look like if we vapourised (and then arranged very neatly).

.net: Not every studio lists anarchy as one of its guiding principles ...

MV: Anarchy's definition is not as rogue as one might imagine. It's a word used to describe environments where force, authority and other controlling factors are suspended, while still ensuring the pursuit of productive and desirable outcomes. That's essentially how we use this principle in our work. One example of this is the Levi's Workshops. These spaces were designed to be leaderless. We even had an internal mantra that we always returned to: Facilitation Over Creation. It wasn't our job to create anything. We were there to provide the tools and lessons for others to create.

.net: And on your Work gallery, you praise Warby Parker's disruptive spirit. Do you seek actively to work with clients with a similar ethos?

MV: I wouldn't say we actively seek these clients out. It's more like a shared pheromone that we detect in each other early on in the dating phase of a relationship. Some clients aren't right for us, and we usually know it in the first or second meeting. Part of the thinking around staying relatively small in head count and independently owned was to also allow ourselves the ability to say no.

.net: Does that ever lead to problems with bigger, more corporate clients?

MV: Surprisingly, some of our most adventurous clients are some of the bigger corporate ones. We're like a weird intermezzo that shows up between global media planning sessions and eight-figure commercial shoots, to clean the palate and get them excited about the future. Disruption for us is part of what they are looking for when they call us, so we're happy to oblige.

.net: What kind of challenges does a highly collaborative social media project like the one you ran for the Levi's Bike Shop tour pose?

MV: A lot of the assignments we're asked to do are tightrope walks. This was no exception. It required a strong interplay between hardware and software, integrations with different APIs, a strong promotional presence via social media to drive participation and buzz, and of course, in-field logistics management to set up and operate activations. While each of these elements on their own has a complicated dependency on the other, when compounded it becomes a monster of an assignment. Thankfully, our producers can literally see around corners.



Michael Ventura: The Sub Rosa founder and CEO in person (photographed by Anthony Philip Festa: <http://anthonyphilipfesta.wordpress.com>) and in his visual biography from the Sub Rosa website. As well as the clothes, spectacles and notebooks he "chews through like a paper shredder", the quartz crystal is "to talk to the future"



1



2



3



4

.net: How tightly can you choreograph the results of a project with so many participants? Do you just have to embrace the chaos of whatever emerges?
MV: Embrace the chaos. Amen. That is exactly what we've learned to do. There's an analogy our COO Jeff Kempler uses: "We've been asked to fly a plane from point A to point B. We're going to hit some turbulence. We might have to refuel mid-flight. We might even run out of peanuts. But we'll be damn sure the plane lands safely at the finish line."

That's how we look at all of these projects. You can't solve everything in the planning phase, but with a cool head, great team members and a shared vision of the end state, we'll always get the project to its destination.

.net: What have been your favourite projects?

MV: I would have to say it's the assignments that let us create something brand new for a client. And that doesn't just mean something new for a big company like Levi's or GE. Sometimes it's a startup that catches our eye and lets us get in the trenches to work with them to make their business better. Warby Parker is a great example of that type of assignment. Those guys are great to work with, and I would bet that if you walked into a meeting with our teams you'd have a hard time figuring out who works for which company. When that's happening, when the teams are so interlocked that they aren't teams, but instead a singular organism, that's the sweet spot for me.

.net: What's the oddest request you've ever had?

MV: Yikes, we'll probably have to limit that question to this year! In the past six months we have been granted a license to operate carnival rides in four states, have had to create a contingency line-item for bail money on a project, and have been asked by a large government agency to help develop a concept for interstellar flight. But we are Sub Rosa, so alas, the rest must remain private. ●



5



6



7

(1) Sub Rosa created the 'Journey of an Idea' (<http://netm.ag/ted-233>) at the 2012 TED Conference with BBDO and AT&T. (2-3) The company brought Kiehl's history to life by installing a wall in its flagship store showing moments that shaped the brand (<http://netm.ag/kiehls-233>). (4) Google's 2012 installation was the

largest engineered space ever at TED, housing exhibitions of the company's innovations (<http://netm.ag/google-233>). (5) GE Garages (<http://www.ge.com/garages>), a nationwide program to reinvigorate America's interest in innovation and manufacturing. (6-7) Sub Rosa helped launch Levi's Workshops

(<http://workshops.levi.com>), a series of craft-based spaces designed to encourage collaboration. The workshops engaged participants with hands-on print, film, and photo projects, and are a powerful new type of campaign that is both digital and experiential, to bridge the gap between consumers and corporations.