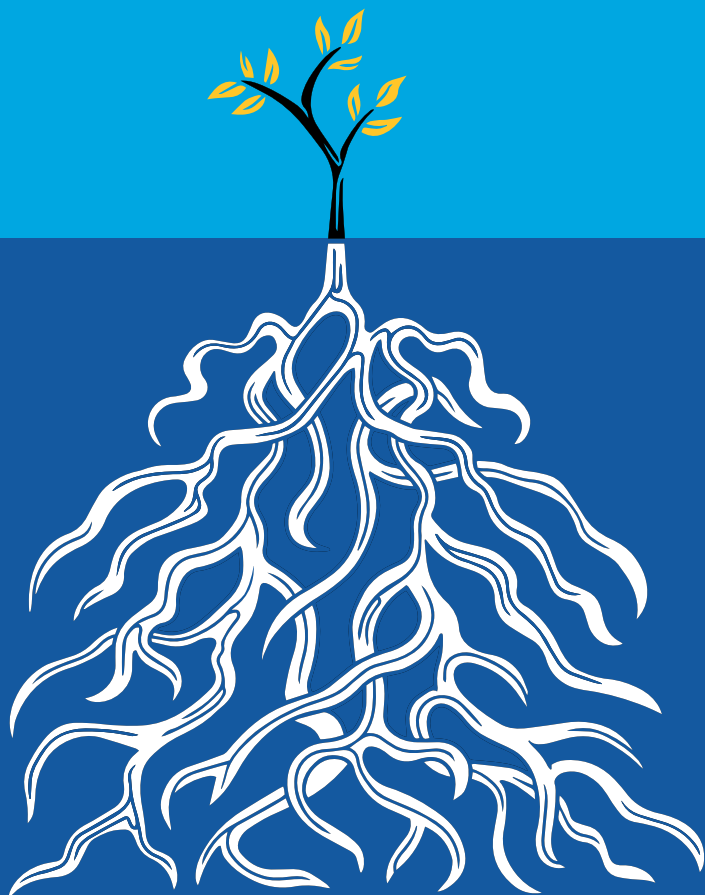


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DEEP LEGACY OR SHALLOW DIVERSITY?

HOW INDUSTRY DEI
STRATEGIES ARE
TAKING ROOT



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Double Shot was created by Toronto PR firm 1Milk2Sugars as a way to bring equal opportunity to under-represented talent.

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Retail innovators

By thinking outside (and inside) the box, brands like General Assembly and Duer emerged as pandemic success stories.

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Where are we at with DEI?

How brands and agencies are addressing a lack of diversity by rethinking recruitment, training and education.

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ON THE COVER:

As problem-solvers, marketing and advertising leaders are feeling pressure to dismantle systemic racism at speed. The instinct may be to fast-track diversity with quick fixes, but that won't create lasting change. So they're implementing strategies that can be sustained vs. a check-list of tactics. They want to create a legacy, not a moment. That means rewiring their organization, its culture, behaviour and thinking, using a DEI lens. Illustrator **Cecil Warner** created the cover art that speaks to the crossroads brands and agencies must face – go deep with foundational change at the roots or shallow with performative acts at the surface.

Getting to the core of the DEI issue

Ironically, as we were putting this issue to bed, Cannes Lions was being given a very public dressing-down by Abraham Abbi Asefaw.

"I have now been removed as a Dean at the Cannes Lions School. Making the list of Deans *all white*. Yes, even the Roger Hatchuel Academy, the most diverse place at Cannes Lions," he wrote on a blog in May after his initial Twitter post spread like wildfire. The Hyper Island lecturer said he had suggested a shortlist of other BIPOC experts to replace him with – an offer that received crickets for eight, whole, months.

In that moment, Asefaw's call to "hold Cannes Lions responsible for creating change not only in their content but deep within the organisation" tellingly illustrated the concerns of some marketers, advertisers and experts we spoke with for this issue.

Many believe that some public promises to be more diverse, equitable and inclusive do not line up with what's happening internally at a company. Unless there is an ingrained commitment to the cause, the truth of performative actions will always come out.

There is greater risk in being called out for window-dressing than there is of taking the time to create an honest-to-goodness action plan. That's why Dave Hale of Ottawa-based Craft&Crew chose not to share a public message of support for #BlackLivesMatter in the wake of the 2020 protests – even though he's a bi-racial man and co-founder of a minority-owned shop. He says that corporate solidarity statements for racial equality are fundamentally performative *unless* the company was actively supportive *before* it became a sensation.

Hale is the first to admit that his company did nothing to support these issues in the past, which is why he's pointing his resources internally before communicating them externally. (His mantra is "think, do, say," which he adopted from Church+State's Ron Tite.)

Our reporting of the industry's tangible efforts to address the issue of racial inequality one year after George Floyd's murder only scratches the surface. And in no way is it reflective of DEI progress across the board. In fact, only 39% of those who felt the industry had attempted to address systemic racism in a recent *strategy* survey said they were satisfied with its progress so far.

So there's still a long way to go.

We likely won't witness the complete shift to equitable workplaces in our lifetime as the world slowly unravels a generational legacy of racial and social injustice. But perhaps we'll see the day when companies that have nothing genuine to say about their actions, say nothing at all.

Jennifer Horn
Editor & Content Director
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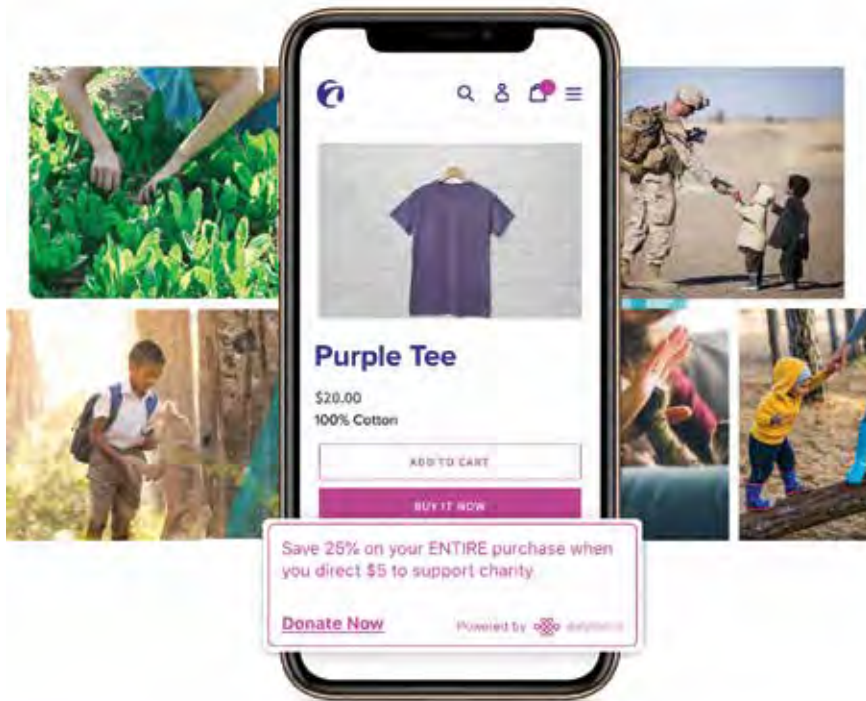
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L'ORÉAL FINDS BEAUTY IN OPEN INNOVATION

By Justin Dallaire

When it comes to innovating in beauty, it's "no longer David versus Goliath. It's David *and* Goliath," says Robert Beredo, L'Oréal Canada's chief digital officer. "We need to partner together in order to accelerate technology."

Above: L'Oréal will soon see ten startups, including DailyKarma, pitch their companies to collaborate with the beauty giant on innovation.

In 2019, Beredo spearheaded L'Oréal's first Canadian Open Innovation Program, backed by Bonjour Startup Montreal and aimed at helping the beauty giant identify and capitalize on emerging opportunities in ecommerce.

The inaugural year led to successful partnerships with five Montreal startups, among them livestream shopping platform Livescale – which Beredo believes stands as a shining example of the benefits L'Oréal can reap from partnering with startups. "It's not just about the technology. It's also about the way of working, the collaboration process, creating an accelerated path... That's a really important part of our approach to innovation."

Since Livescale launched a proof-of-concept with Urban Decay, L'Oréal Canada has used its tech to host more than 100 live events across nine brands, and there are plans to scale it globally. Tests have shown that livestream events generate conversion rates that are three-times higher than in other channels, and that 50% of customers are new to the brand, Beredo says.

The innovation program is now in its second iteration. Ten startups that were selected in May will pitch their concepts to L'Oréal execs during a virtual presentation on June 8. From there, winners will enter a proof-of-concept accelerator program this summer, culminating with a results presentation in the fall and, hopefully, a business proposal from the beauty giant.

This year's finalists include social commerce tool ShopWindow, community building platform Viafoura, and cause marketing platform DailyKarma. Beredo says the selection criteria was left fairly open to avoid limiting entries; however, it did put extra focus on startups that facilitate social selling, as well as companies with purpose that can make a "meaningful social contribution to consumers in Canada."

As was the case in 2020, next year L'Oréal will not run a new cohort as it turns to focus on scaling the partnerships with the winners of this year's program. "It's not just about finding something shiny and new," says Beredo. "We want to make sure there's value in the new service, the innovation, the technology, and that we can actually scale them across Canada or the group internationally."

CANNABIS GOES CLASSIC

By Josh Kolm

In the spring, Tweed began promoting cannabis flower strains with names that so-called "legacy" consumers who previously used the illicit market (or those that still do) would recognize, including Afghan Kush, Skunk Haze and UK Cheese.

All of Tweed's dried flower is now being sold under the name of its strain (no longer using monikers like Penelope, Houndstooth and Argyle), with an accompanying campaign in social and retail letting consumers know that Tweed has the "classic" strains they love.

It's a big break in convention for recreational cannabis producers, nearly all of which refer to strains by a name they came up with. Part of the reason producers did that was so that they could create an ownable asset, driving consumer loyalty that has been hard to come by in the cannabis industry. For some brands, the name is also an educational tool, suggesting a usage occasion or desired effect to a consumer



who's new to the product.

Kelly Olsen, VP of the global flower business at parent company Canopy Growth, says "education is good for everyone, but we are [now] going to tie effects and occasions more directly to the flower itself."

Tweed certainly wouldn't be alone in shifting some of the focus from educating first-time cannabis buyers – the target most producers spoke to at legalization – to building connections to legacy buyers, an under-served segment that tends to over-index on interest in dried flower.



In March, a Flowr campaign told consumers they no longer had to keep cannabis stashed away in drawers or hidden in books. Hexo recently relaunched its UP brand with a campaign that responded directly to aficionados who would leave reviews on cannabis websites – many of which were not very flattering towards legal weed.

Olsen says “classic” strain names have some appeal to a legacy consumer, however price is still the biggest driver in converting consumers from the illicit market (which Tweed and other



producers have witnessed with the rise in new value brands over the last year). She says that Tweed’s renaming strategy will mostly help eliminate the confusion the industry’s naming convention has caused.

“The importance of genetics has become way more evident lately for all flower customers,” she says, something that correlates more with product preference than experience level. “The flower consumer wants to know the lineage of the product. Simply putting it on the product directly speaks to what the consumer is after in a channel they still find confusing.”

WHAT CAN BRANDS LEARN FROM FIN-FLUENCERS?

By Justin Crann



Above: Haley Sacks, Poku Banks and Humphrey Yang are among TikTok’s top personal finance-talking influencers that Gen Z have been turning to for advice.

The rise of TikTok has brought with it a wave of influencers who naturally speak to niche audiences, particularly within the Gen Z cohort. One of the platform’s subcultures has emerged into the mainstream in a big way, and that is the so-called “fin-fluencer.” These content curators dispense advice on complex financial concepts in quick and easy-to-digest portions. And on TikTok, where the overwhelming majority of users are young, they’ve found a large audience.

Part of the success of fin-fluencers stems from the fact that finance in general is a category where “young people have always been on the outside looking in,” according to Johanna Faigelman, cultural anthropologist and founding partner and CEO of Human Branding.

“There has always been this huge disconnect. [Finance is] almost like child-rearing. You just expect people to get to a certain age, have a kid and [know how to] raise the child,” she explains. “Nobody formally educates people on money, and young people going into their late teens and early twenties are suddenly expected to have some foundation for how to approach it.”

Faigelman does acknowledge that traditional financial institutions have tried to make inroads

with younger people, “but it’s been very unsuccessful.” When they have succeeded, it’s often been through partnerships with celebrities or other influencers, as BMO did when it recently enlisted *RuPaul’s Drag Race* Canadian winner Priyanka in a campaign to promote its millennial-first credit card.

Fin-fluencers, on the other hand, have had much greater success connecting with the cohort – establishing a model that delivers the relatability of a typical influencer along with content that is both informative and entertaining.

Max Valiquette, CSO at Diamond Marketing Group, suggests brands look to emulate how fin-fluencers have approached content on platforms like TikTok, offering consumers “entertainment and diversion and fun.” He adds that the “cost of entry is to be fundamentally more entertaining than anywhere else, which I think is important.”

“When you get into some of those categories in which the brand can take on a really good role – finance is one where educating young people really matters, which is what a lot of fin-fluencers are doing – you’ll notice that the very best balance of education and entertainment does really well.”



Left: Local artisanal goods have been flying off the digital shelves of Simons' Fabrique 1840 marketplace, which the fashion retailer has been investing in alongside continuous improvements to its ecommerce operations.

NATIONAL: SIMONS SAYS GO LOCAL

According to CEO Peter Simons, his department store has been creating dozens upon dozens of iterations of its website, ever since first launching its ecommerce operations in 2010. It's spent the better part of a decade regularly refining the online hub, and so when Leger surveyed 14,000 consumers last year, it came as no surprise that it was named the #1 retailer for the "best online experience in Canada," beating out 172 other brand sites.

Much of Simons success can be pinpointed to its focus on local as a value proposition through its marketplace Fabrique 1840 (named after the year of the retailer's founding) – a repository of craft home décor, modern art, accessories and stationery from more than 100 artisans. Simons' goal is to eventually have 500 vendors stocking its digital shelves as it expands beyond fashion.

Before the pandemic, Fabrique 1840 was experiencing triple-digital growth, according to Simons, and that success continued to accelerate during the outbreak as a result of a "conversation [around] supporting local, smaller businesses and artisans and retailers." Mid-way through the crisis in 2020, sales made through the platform skyrocketed by 800% to 1,000%, according to the CEO at the time.

Simons said that some of that growth came from fashion, particularly at-home workwear, but the bulk of it has been in the health, wellness and comfort categories as people looked to lower their stress and improve their immediate surroundings during stay-at-home periods. "My dream is really a destination for Canadian artisanal craftsmanship," said Simons, "and the more that we can group ourselves around that in Canada, the stronger it becomes."

BRITISH COLUMBIA: DUER RE-FOCUSES ON MADE-TO-ORDER

Many fashion retailers lost their shirts when COVID first hit, and Vancouver's Duer seemed poised to do the same, having shed 70% of its revenue when it was forced to halt shipments to wholesalers in March 2020.

Founder Gary Lenett credits its quick pivot to a "presell" model for helping to save its business during the first wave of the pandemic last year.

As part of its made-to-order "Next" program, Duer puts specific items (which is part of a dedicated collection) into production and delivery – but only if enough of a particular design is ordered by customers.

RETAIL INNOVATION IN A YEAR OF DIGITAL PIVOTS

SHOPPING IN 2020 WAS – FOR THE MOST PART – RELEGATED TO THE WINDOWS OF HOME INTERNET BROWSERS. SUDDENLY, TOP-NOTCH ONLINE SHOPPING PORTALS BECAME THE RETAIL HOLY GRAIL. HERE ARE SOME OF THE BEST SUCCESS STORIES FROM RETAILERS, RESTAURANTS AND BRANDS ACROSS CANADA.

BY **CHRIS LOMBARDO**



(The model reverts to its humble origins when the brand launched on Kickstarter back in 2013.)

Duer says the benefits of the new sales channel are that there is no wasted inventory or fabric – making it an eco-friendlier option – while production costs are covered because customers pre-pay. The products are also more affordable, as the brand passes savings from production costs onto customers.

According to Lenett, Duer is projecting 20% total growth year-over-year at the end of this fiscal, as well as a 60% growth in its ecommerce sales. The brand currently sells to 700 retail partners worldwide.

Duer is now building a larger flagship store in Vancouver, making it the fourth location for the brand, with stores in Calgary and Toronto. The brand is known for its in-store “denim playgrounds” where shoppers can test out its signature denim and sweats on monkey bars and swings.



Left: Duer escaped the pandemic's wrath with a new sales channel. **Above:** General Assembly began 2020 as a pizza joint and ended the year as a CPG brand. **Below:** AC Covert's Cooke Seafood products are making their way into homes as it adopts a new DTC model.

our pizzas to an audience who was ready for choice and change.”

Juma says the new offering meets the needs of a customer who had already embraced the “freezer-to-table” trend but was looking for a more premium option. Come January 2021, the subscription service had amassed over 2,000 subscribers. Part of the pizzamaker's pivot included transforming its downtown location into a production facility, where it produced up to 43,000 pies in March.

“I'd be lying to you if I told you that our e-commerce infrastructure was perfect, but what it did allow us to do was deliver a pizza box with more than one pizza in it – think about that,” Juma says.

NOVA SCOTIA: AC COVERT BRINGS MARITIMES TO THE REST OF CANADA

According to a recent University of Maine and University of Guelph study, while export-oriented seafood markets struggled during lockdowns, so-called alternative seafood networks (ASN) that distribute products locally flourished. Based on search traffic, Canadians are actually more interested in seafood than one might think, according to University of Guelph associate professor Philip Loring.

Nova Scotia-based AC Covert, a distribution company owned by Cooke Seafood, tapped into this sentiment last year when it pivoted to a D2C model. The company was originally created to cater to retailers, restaurants, and the tourism and hospitality sectors in the Maritimes. But when travel restrictions prevented people from visiting Atlantic Canada, AC Covert shifted its sales focus from wholesale to home delivery.

According to the company's VP of PR Joel Richardson, it saw an opportunity to make it easier for seafoodies to buy from the region. It created a host of seafood boxes with its True North brand products (some of which were curated for occasions like “Date Night”) and included a collection of recipes on its website. It now ships products to front doors outside of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island – including major cities in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Quebec and Alberta.

“In the Maritimes, seafood is a huge part of our culture, which brings comfort during challenging times,” said Richardson, adding that the seafood boxes were created as a “care package” for people to send to friends and families who have been separated during the pandemic. The company has since been struggling to keep up with deliveries in response to the demand for its products, and will soon expand into the U.S with its purchase of Mariner Seafoods in Massachusetts. ➦



ONTARIO: GENERAL ASSEMBLY SUBSCRIBES TO FROZEN TREND

When lockdowns first hit in early 2020, Toronto pizza joint General Assembly saw potential in the frozen pizza market (which according to Nielsen is up 20%) and course-corrected on two fronts. First it entered the freezer aisle in grocery, and then it launched a subscription service, going direct to its comfort-eating consumers during the pandemic.

“We leveraged our experience as a restaurant – a deep adoration of our customers and a commitment to true hospitality – and brought it forward into a digital space,” says General Assembly CMO Khaleed Juma. “We also focused our energy on introducing

FRictionless

ARE CONTACTLESS CONCEPTS AND STORES WORTH THE



The appeal of convenience has accelerated over the years, fuelling the burgeoning growth in frictionless shopping experiences. Barriers are being removed and innovation in retail is flourishing – particularly as the world is turned upside down by the pandemic.

With the drive toward frictionless shopping, retailers are better able to gather a wealth of information about consumers – their customers. From transaction logs to online shopping and loyalty programs, they’re finding out what people are buying, when they are buying, how they are buying and at what price point. Combined with traditional research such as surveys, focus groups and staff feedback, retailers are using frictionless retail tech to pinpoint the buying habits and behaviour of consumers store by store and region by region.

Take Grocery Neighbour, for example. The concept (featured image above) for the “grocery store on wheels” was born in March 2020 as a direct result of the pandemic and is set to hit the streets of Toronto this

Summer. The 18-wheeler trucks will stock a variety of products – including fresh produce, meats, fish, bakery and specialty foods – cruising around a neighbourhood like an ice-cream truck.

As the fleet rolls out, Grocery Neighbour will curate products for each neighbourhood it serves by partnering with local farmers, bakers, and butchers. Using an app, customers can flag down the mobile store, add to their shopping basket, as well as scan and pay for products. The in-app checkout will grant the retailer with data and insights on what customers are buying so that product assortments can accurately reflect the ethnic, cultural or seasonal needs of their customers.

In the past three years or so, there’s been the rise of a cottage industry of tech startups trying to get in on the contactless and cashierless craze, says Jason Dubroy, SVP, commerce and experience at Mosaic. A big player in the space is Adroit Worldwide Media (AWM), which has created a closed loop system that integrates cashierless shopping with in-store advertising via digital screens.

ES SHOPPING

INVESTMENT FOR CANADIAN RETAIL BRANDS? BY MARIO TONEGUZZI



"This is brilliant, as it not only controls the transaction, but powers a whole different notion of impulse buying by suggesting recipes or sale items in other parts in the store based on what you already have in the cart. And then, through the same signage system, it tells you exactly where in the store those complementary items are and even offer dynamic pricing. It's also interesting as the tech works directly with a local retailer app," he says.

While compelling to consumers and retailers alike, mobile stores like Grocery Neighbour and "just walk out" concepts like Amazon Go are currently still very niche, according to consultancy Strategy Analytics. They can be "exorbitantly expensive to implement and maintain," says the firm, and they aren't really suitable for verticals outside of grocery and convenience – electronics may do better with a concierge sales approach than shop-and-go, while apparel is better conducive to trying-before-buying shopping experiences.

Dubroy agrees that one of the things holding back

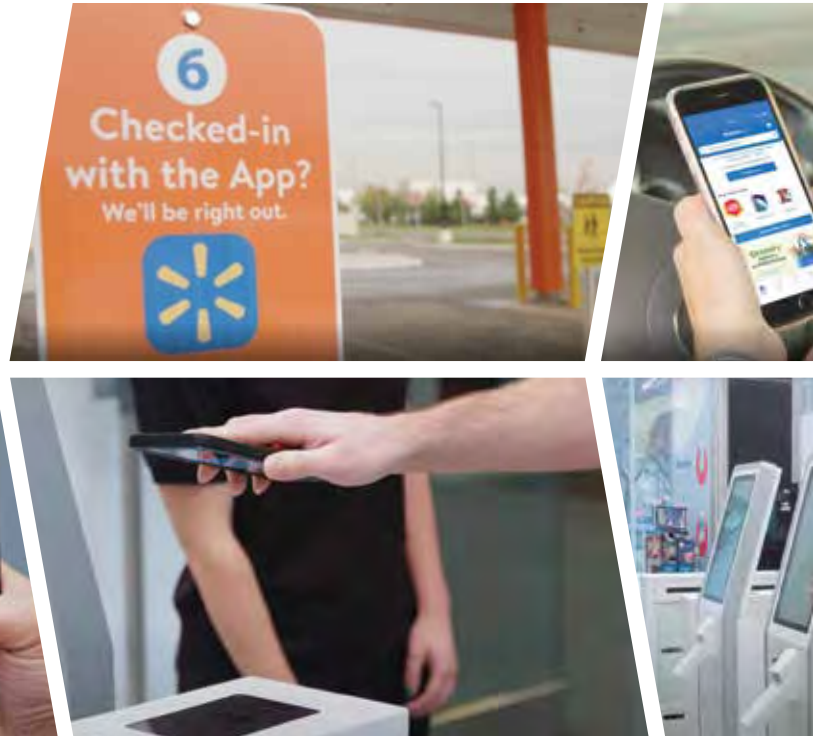
larger retailers from jumping on the contactless and cashierless trend is the cost of changing their legacy IT systems and infrastructure.

"As the concept of convenience itself is changing – from the advent of so-called micro-trips to click-and-collect sampling and Instacart – frictionless retail has the most growth opportunity in smaller format environments," he says. "Rather than spend big bucks to retrofit an entire store, we'll see more kiosks that unlock with your phone, more remote delivery options, and ironically more elaborate ways to make things seem easy."

And – as with many evolving technologies – there are also equity issues inherent in cashless concepts, says Dubroy. For example, in Amazon's case, up until 2019, cash was not accepted, nor were public assistance tools like food stamps for those with low income. People also needed an Amazon app-enabled smartphone to even get into the store. Some considered this discriminatory behaviour, and several U.S. cities passed legislation outright banning cashless retail stores. It will be

interesting to see how tech companies and retailers answer the call of social responsibility on their path to mass adoption, he adds.

So, as retailers grapple with the challenges around infrastructure and cost, the question is: do the benefits outweigh them? For Frank Sinopoli, CEO of Grocery Neighbour, the answer is a resounding yes, “because



regardless of how great your product is, if someone makes it easier for the consumer to buy equally great stuff, it just makes more sense for people to go in that direction.”

“The idea of having these frictionless environments and shopping experiences really gives [consumers] control. They’re on their schedule,” he adds. “It’s all about the ridiculous ease of use and complete convenience. It’s woven into society. People want things now. They want it easy and they don’t want to jump through any hoops. So the easier you can make it for them the better.”

Dubroy says that while shoppers were once mostly driven by price, there is now increased value on the worth of one’s time, putting a unique lens on the concept of convenience, which has become a competitive advantage.

“[The drivers are] threefold. The first is that we all live in an era of ‘exponential expectation.’ Anything that saves time or removes friction from a collective system or process must, by nature of expectation itself, continue to get faster or better,” says Dubroy. “Debit cards came out in the ‘80s, contactless payment came a decade later, and now there’s a myriad of ways to shop – from Google Pay to biometric devices and physical recognition systems to AI-driven technologies. Shoppers used to be patient, but the advent of one-click buying and same-hour delivery changed that forever.”

He says the second driver – the most relevant one

today – is the global pandemic. “Even though many say the physical role of the store is changing, the latest statistics show that almost 90% of Canadians continue to buy food in-store during the pandemic. So retailers are looking for ways to reduce vectors of transmission and risk to staff and shoppers,” says Dubroy.

“The third is a much more obvious goal: to reduce cost. In a period when many retailers are maxing out their ability to drive incremental revenue through grocery sales themselves, labour and benefits reductions are still very appealing.”

For years, giant retailer Walmart has spent millions of dollars, and continues to do so, in designing frictionless shopping experiences for its customers. In July 2020, the retailer made a \$3.5 billion commitment to modernize 150 of its stores in Canada – making up more than a third of its network in the country – over the next three years.

Lee Jeyes, senior director, store process and innovation at Walmart, believes the future of Walmart’s business will not be separated into silos. It’s not just about investing in ecommerce and also in its stores, but rather about blending the two together.

The retailer is doing just that by adding contactless systems, like tap-and-pay or “Check Out With Me” technology, where shoppers can pay mobile-toting floor associates anywhere in the store. It’s also upgrading aisles with electronic shelf labels and scanners, as well as AI cameras that keep track of inventory in



real-time. The recent commitment adds to previous investments like its Urban Supercentre in Toronto, an innovation lab where it's been testing some of this tech since 2019. "We're continuously looking at new ways to be able to serve customers in ways they would like now, and in the future," says Jeyes. "Convenience, speed, and saving customers money and time, is really where we spend



Above row:

Walmart Canada has been investing in omnichannel and frictionless shopping concepts, like click-and-collect, for years as it attempts to keep up with consumers' ever-growing demand for convenience.

Bottom left row:

Couche-Tard is working side-by-side with McGill University to test a data-fueled contactless concept store in Montreal.

Bottom right:

The LiVE app is how Cadillac Fairview is bringing brands into consumers' homes before they shop IRL.

most of our time as an organization."

Other retailers and organizations have been testing frictionless concepts, like McGill's Bensadoun School of Retail Management, which has been working with Couche-Tard in Montreal to create a store for autonomous and contactless checkout where customers can walk into a Couche-Tard location, grab the items they want, pay and leave using an app. As is the owner and operator of several shopping centres, Cadillac Fairview, with its LiVE by CF app, which gives shoppers access to more than 65 retailers and hundreds of thousands of searchable products in a single platform.

Jose Ribau, EVP, digital and innovation of Cadillac Fairview notes that the biggest challenge for retailers is figuring out how to "invest in a great digital experience without increasing the cost of your product in a way that you turn off the customer."

However, Professor Saibal Ray, academic director at McGill, believes technology is enabling growth in ways never before imagined, allowing companies to implement omnichannel innovation "in a financially responsible way." And Dubroy agrees – he says the industry is beginning to see more contactless concepts in market as it becomes less costly to implement.

"Amazon is now selling their 'just-walk-out' tech to other retailers, opening up the experience to those who don't have an Amazon account, including airport retailer Hudsons," says Dubroy. "In Europe, Netherlands-based Wundermart runs 70 cashierless 'grab-and-go' stores

that are between 50 and 200 square feet and found in offices, hotel lobbies, and transportation stations."

Lisa Hutcheson, managing partner of J.C. Williams Group, believes convenience-driven innovation in retail is endless and expects to see more opportunities in servicing customers around the clock. "The traditional model of retail, of their opening hours, is going to have to change and we're going to have to adapt to be able to service customers on a 24/7 basis. That may mean looking at more automated stores. Obviously, Amazon set the tone with it."

And frictionless shopping, says Bruce Winder, president of Bruce Winder Retail, is going to continue to expand simply because of the impact the pandemic has had on society. "I think there's going to be a number of people who are going to be a little gun shy now as it relates to touching things in store," he says. "Even though the pandemic will eventually end... there's still going to be that residual fear and residual consciousness of germs that is going to make a fair amount of the population want to avoid touching anything at retail."

"You're going to see this type of technology become ubiquitous... Grocery is one of the first to embrace it because it's such a low-margin industry and high-volume industry. I would imagine it's going to continue to grow and the cost to start these systems will go down as more people enter the market and the industry will learn how to monetize it so that the payback is even quicker and consumers will become used to it." ■

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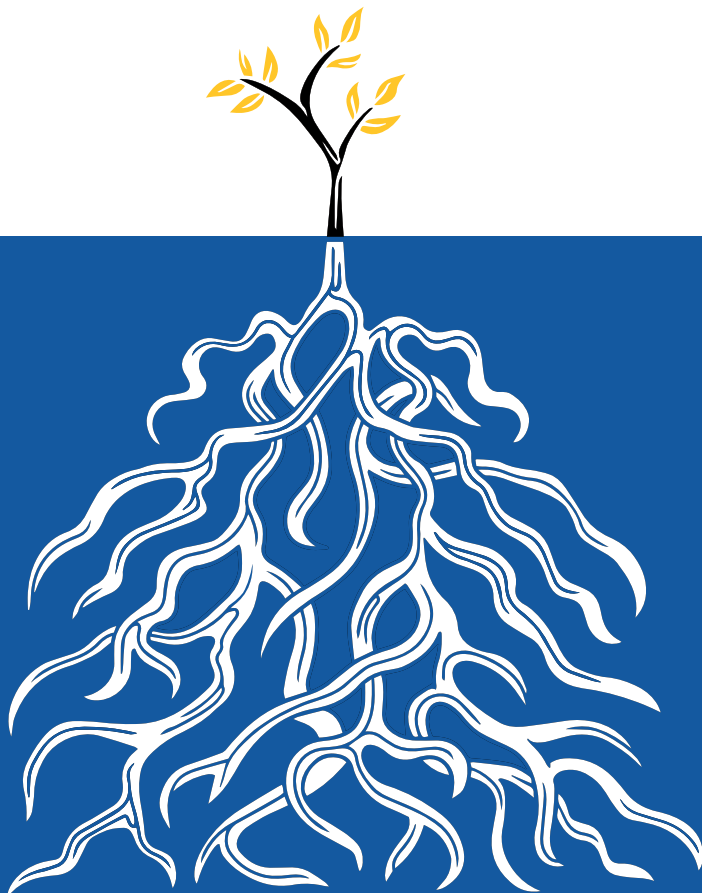
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Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

In the 12 months that have passed since George Floyd's murder, the DEI conversation has shifted. For brands and agencies, DEI has evolved from a nice-to-have that rested on proven-out business cases into a moral imperative in which all organizations are judged – by consumers, partners and society.

In the wake of tragedy, the voices of marginalized people who have long called for change became unignorable. That's not to say the world changed overnight. For organizations quietly doing DEI work before solidarity statements overtook social media feeds in 2020, the movement has re-energized and given their efforts new meaning. For others, it presented an opportunity to reflect and begin taking steps towards change.



In the pages that follow, readers will discover the breadth of the industry's DEI efforts, from mentorship, recruitment and training programs, to AI-based accountability tools and BIPOC-focused merchandising strategies. But if there's one thing that unites those serious about creating foundational change, it's the recognition that the work is far from over. In fact, it never will be.



BY JUSTIN DALLAIRE

Brands listen and learn

Milestones, even those as grim as the murder of an innocent Black American at the hands of police, are often a good time to step back and take stock.

But Dr. Richard Williamson, who leads the Leadership and Inclusion course at Centennial College in Toronto, cautions against measuring progress against the one-year mark of George Floyd's death. "We're thinking that somehow there's been all this movement or progress," he says. "Unfortunately, this is not quick work."

For years, Williamson has facilitated discussions on inclusive leadership among leaders from across Canada, giving him unique insight into their "thoughts, ideas, what they're doing... and where they want to go next."

From where he sits, a good number of companies have

been quietly doing the work of diversity and inclusion for a while, accruing best practices and organizational knowledge, often at a slow but steady pace. In a way, that's what worries him about the compressed timeline under which some companies reacted to Floyd's death with statements of solidarity and promises to do better.

"There's a huge risk that what they're doing is really just window dressing – they're not making structural changes," he says. "This work is serious, it's long term, it's structural – it's the entire culture of an organization. That doesn't shift quickly or easily."

If last year's events have taught marketers and brands anything, it's that achieving the foundational change needed – across hiring, retention, training, even marketing – will take time. It's a process that must start from a place of listening and learning, Williamson says. Only then can brands play a positive role in helping shape cultural norms.

"Instead of reacting quickly and doing a couple of high-visibility things, it's [about] committing to longer-term organizational learning. There really is a process of building through understanding.

Without that, a lot is going to get missed."

PUTTING SYSTEMS IN PLACE

A first major step for a lot of organizations has been to put systems in place to help facilitate strategy development and implementation. For many, it has been a matter of appointing new functional DEI leadership, often at the VP level or higher.

While roles such as the chief diversity officer have existed within many large U.S.-based corporations for years, they remain relatively uncommon in Canada outside of the big banks and consultancies. But within the last year, Canopy, Indigo and Lululemon are some of the brands that have hired leaders with DEI mandates.

Other companies, such as Aldo and Sephora, have set up advisory councils or committees to provide oversight and ongoing leadership. Unilever first brought a DEI lens to its brand work in the mid-2000s, but it wasn't until last year that it formed a DEI advisory council whose mandate spans employee training and development, supplier diversity, recruitment, employer brand and external partnerships, says Gina Kiroff, a director of marketing at the CPG.

Then there are companies like Hudson's Bay, which has established a number of DEI groups and committees. The country's oldest retailer hired its first divisional VP of DEI, formed a new DEI Council, created a DEI merchant group to improve representation of BIPOC designers and brands in its stores, and developed a marketing DEI committee to ensure its in-house talent, agency partners and marketing content reflect Canadian diversity.

With an eye to the future, a number of companies are also rethinking their recruitment and retention strategies. For Scotiabank, student cohorts are an opportunity to help recruit a more diverse employee base, says global CMO Laura Curtis Ferrera.

In May, the bank welcomed more than 400 students into corporate head office roles such as marketing, ensuring that 60% of them came from BIPOC communities and 55% of them were women. Ferrera says establishing such measures will help set up hiring practices on a go-forward basis and is a "singular opportunity to make a world of difference, since [the bank is] hoping to hire from those groups."

As part of its own talent strategy, Hudson's Bay wants to make it easier to attract, retain and advance top employees of diverse backgrounds, perspectives and identities, says president and CEO Iain Nairn. To that end, it has partnered with Equitek National Diversity Outreach, which helps Canadian corporations find qualified talent from underrepresented demos, as well as schools across the country.

Of course, recruitment is only the first step – creating and maintaining inclusive workplaces for underrepresented talent is equally important for retention. "There aren't a lot of racialized senior marketers in Canada, and there's always the argument,

'Well, I don't know anybody or there just isn't the talent,'" says Mangala D'Sa, VP of marketing, category and digital experience at Aegis Brands. "The talent is here. It just hasn't been elevated."

Having recognized a disconnect between the makeup of its customers, franchisees and corporate employees, the former Second Cup parent co. is looking to bridge those gaps, D'Sa says. It's a commitment that comes with looking at a much broader pool of candidates from different backgrounds and being as unbiased as possible throughout the recruitment process. "It's very intentional, versus it being almost a checkbox of actions."

ADOPTING A LEARNING MINDSET

Setting up an advisory council and DEI leadership is a great place to start, says Williamson. But, more broadly, leaders must start by doing "a lot more listening," he says. "We have to stop assuming our own thoughts, ideas and views of the world are the right ones."

Founded in 1972 on the values of "love, integrity and respect," Montreal-based Aldo is one company whose founder Aldo Bensadoun has long prioritized diversity and inclusion – even though "that's not what it was necessarily called back then," says Felisia Canedo, global PR manager, who also sits on the company's DEI committee, which was formed last summer.

Still, the company continues on its own journey of learning as it re-evaluates the effectiveness of its policies and practices, engaging with employees through quarterly pulse-check surveys that help inform the next steps it will take as an organization. "What we've learned, especially with D&I, is that for all the learning that you have to do, there's a lot of unlearning that also goes along with it," says Canedo. "This type of mental shift takes time."

Elsewhere, companies are learning to leverage their employee resource groups (ERGs) by involving them in an array of business activities. Originating in the 1960s in the U.S., ERGs were imported into Canada through large multinationals, gaining greater prevalence over time. But within the last year, they have taken on new meaning, with companies like Indigo, Hudson's Bay and Campbell either formalizing their resource groups or adding new ones. And leaders are recognizing how valuable of a resource they can be.



"There's a huge risk that what some companies are doing is just window dressing"

DR. RICHARD WILLIAMSON



Mieka Burns, VP of marketing at the Campbell Company, says the CPG is working to empower its resource groups to “develop their own content, voices, frequency and cadence of meetings and to engage the broader Campbell’s team, including marketing, to discuss topics that we never would have discussed before, like white fragility and the Black experience and equality versus equity.”

Another way Campbell’s Canadian marketing team is working to create a more open and welcoming environment is by incorporating what it calls “I&D moments” into its weekly huddles, Burns says. “It has been an incredibly effective forum to share experiences and learnings – as broad as that sounds – various snippets of learnings and sound bites or thoughts that provoke dialogue in a way we never would have before.”

Meanwhile, Scotiabank is learning to better leverage its ERGs to help shape internal programming as well as its marketing programs. For example, during Black History Month in February, nearly 4,000 employees participated in a session led by the Black Employee Network and the bank’s global diversity and inclusion team.

“It’s involving everyone in the conversation as opposed to the leaders leading the conversation,” Ferrera says. “Now the conversations are happening in the middle, they’re happening at the front lines, and it’s filtering up, it’s filtering down.”

Last spring, when the marketing team set out to manually audit its communications, it spent more than 20 hours engaging with the ERGs, Ferrera says.

“To a group, they all said, ‘Nothing about us without us.’ So that became a mantra in our marketing. When we do something, we involve them – could be at the brief stage, could be early in the creative stage, but we’re using them as a sounding board, even in the creation of the scope of a project.”

This approach to working hand-in-hand with ERGs is relatively new, though some companies have been doing it for some time in an “unconsciously skilled way,” says Williamson, describing the method as “inclusion in action.”

“You’re tapping into the knowledge and wisdom that employees have,” he says. “You can get enormous insights from people who may be further down that ladder, if you think of it in terms of a hierarchy. But

you’re really tapping into human experience and knowledge that can come from any corner of the [organization].”

FOSTERING A CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

In the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder last May, hundreds of Canadian organizations committed to work towards an equitable society. As pressure mounted on brands to declare themselves allies in that fight, signing one’s name on a pledge or call to action became a highly visible way of demonstrating a deeper commitment to the cause.

To date, more than 400 companies have become signatories of the BlackNorth Initiative, which takes a business-first approach to ending anti-Black systemic racism by committing leaders and their organizations to specific actions. In the world of advertising, more

than 90 agencies and clients have signed a Call for Equity circulated by the People of Colour in Advertising and Marketing (POCAM), whose goal is to “create omnipresent, meaningful conversations about equity, equality and diversity in the industry.”

“So much of what POCAM was recommending resonated with our strategy and aligned with our beliefs and the right intention, so it felt right to support their efforts,” says Burns, who personally signed the pledge on behalf of Campbell.



“It’s involving everyone in the conversation as opposed to the leaders leading the conversation”

SCOTIABANK’S LAURA CURTIS FERRERA

Beyond committing to change in writing, some companies are finding ways to create a culture of accountability within their organizations. At Campbell, for example, accountability is being built into each employee’s objectives – alongside business, project and performance metrics – based on the completion of training and education sessions.

“We want to make sure we’re establishing a baseline of common understanding, common knowledge, and common opportunity to learn more,” Burns says. Those accountability metrics are different for each employee, since part of the goal is for “everyone to build their own self-awareness and understanding of [DEI] concepts.”

Brands are also beginning to show their commitment by diversifying their product assortments through partnerships and pledges. For example, last year, fashion retailer Harry Rosen worked with Black designer Patrick Assaraf and Toronto Raptors president Masai Ujiri on a capsule collection, with proceeds going to Black Youth

Helpline. The retailer says it is actively looking to sign more diverse designers as part of an effort to make the fashion industry equitable.

Elsewhere in retail, Indigo became the first Canadian retailer to sign the 15 Percent Pledge, committing last October to increase the representation of books by BIPOC authors, as well as BIPOC brands across its lifestyle products, to a benchmark of 15%.


With the goal of further highlighting diverse creators, the book retailer launched Mini Marche earlier this year. The shop-within-a-shop experience highlights kids and baby products from local businesses that identify as being BIPOC-, woman- and LGBTQ-owned or that are sustainability focused or philanthropic.

Joining a group of companies that includes West Elm and the Gap, Hudson's Bay and Sephora Canada signed the 15 Percent Pledge in May, with the department store planning to have 15% of all new brands be BIPOC-owned or -designed by the fall. And by 2022, at least 15% of HBC's design talent for its owned brand business will be BIPOC. Meanwhile, Sephora Canada will strive to have 25% of its offering be BIPOC-owned by 2026.

Beyond product assortments and employee training, one area in which accountability has become more important is within hiring and retention practices, as well as diversity at the senior executive level. To address the latter, companies like Unilever have committed to publicly disclosing race and ethnicity at the senior leadership level. (It also collects employee census and self-ID data, but doesn't make those numbers public.)

Meanwhile, some brands are putting accountability in the hands of AI. Having completed a manual audit of its communications last spring, Scotiabank's Ferrera says the process is too onerous to be done on an ongoing basis. So instead, the bank has partnered with Brainsights to do an always-on audit of its marketing and use AI and neuroscience to help overcome bias.

Other brands have partnered with Toronto-based Diversio, which offers an AI-driven platform that pulls in anonymous employee data on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and mental health – tying it to data pertaining to employee experience and helping to identify systemic differences in the way employees experience the workplace. The software provides



“It’s not just throwing spaghetti at the wall and implementing whatever program happens to be top-of-mind”

DIVERSIO'S LAURA MCGEE

tailored recommendations – based on academic research conducted with the University of Toronto – that help address the unique DEI challenges the company might be facing. “Honestly, it’s not rocket science,” says Diversio co-founder and COO Anya Klimbovskaia. “But it keeps you accountable.”

In April, the company announced an inaugural cohort of 80 Diversio-certified companies, which includes Indigo, Hudson's Bay, OLG, Accenture and Interac. To obtain certification, companies must commit to collecting employee data to

identify bias and barriers faced by minority groups, measure and set targets to increase diversity at all levels, implement DEI-focused programs and policies, and commit to tracking results.

Diversio co-founder and CEO Laura McGee says the idea for the certification came after seeing “no shortage of pledges and commitments” from business leaders and wanting to make it easier to identify those that are walking the talk.

“Data tracking and programming is really what it comes down to,” she says. “Not just throwing spaghetti at the wall and implementing whatever program happens to be top-of-mind.”

The companies in the inaugural cohort have shown they understand where bias exists, and have laid out a plan with programs or policies intended to unlock those challenges, McGee says.

For Williamson, making DEI progress comes back to having the right leadership mindset, one focused on long-term learning and humility. He says it's about putting pride in its place and admitting, “I don't know. I'm not clear yet. I need to do tons of learning. That's what I'm going to embark on.”

“In Canada... there's this natural tendency to avoid uncomfortable conversation and expose some vulnerability,” says Burns of the challenges that lie ahead. “But the realization as a leadership team, as people managers and as an organization, is that if we want to grow, we have to have conversations, listen, create these safe spaces proactively and educate ourselves. The challenge we face [going forward] is helping teams find courage to lean into uncomfortable conversations and lean into discomfort to a certain degree in order to grow and ultimately become better.”



BY JENNIFER HORN

Creating a legacy, not a moment

"I've only been in one pitch in Canada so far. But I've also only been on the job for four months."

That's James Kinney, Ogilvy's global chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer. He's telling me about his new role after group CEO Arthur Fleischmann introduces us on a Microsoft Teams call in May. Curious to know why the HR executive – whose occupational forte is building organizational cultures using practices like neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and

performance psychology – has a seat in global business pitches, Kinney says it's simple: clients are demanding that agencies bring diverse POVs to conversations as early as the first meeting.

"Brands are having to take positions within society, whether that be the planet, racial justice, foreign affairs," says Kinney. "So we can put forth the regular team that may have a homogenous POV on how to solve problems creatively – or we can have people from those communities that we're addressing in the pitch."

On top of being the lightning rod for Ogilvy North America's DEI mission, Fleischmann says Kinney has also become an integral part of its business strategy. Marketers' desire for cognitive diversity has steadily grown over the years, but Kinney says it's now become a prerequisite. On another call with Juniper Park\TBWA, president David Toto echoes Kinney's statements from a Canadian perspective: "Having clients on both sides of the border, diversity and inclusion

used to be more of a subject for our U.S. clients. But now it's definitely becoming a shared subject."

Kinney describes the shift from diversity as a want to a must-have as a byproduct of the last 12 months – when the industry was awakened to issues of inequality and systemic racism following George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020. Those days and weeks were marked with public statements of solidarity, support and promises to address inequality and racism against Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC). Many of Canada's ad agencies signed open letters from organizations advocating for BIPOC – including People of Colour in Advertising & Marketing (POCAM) and the BlackNorth Initiative – making a commitment to improve diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) at their organizations.

According to the agencies interviewed for this article, all of them are attempting to implement DEI strategies that can be sustained versus creating a check-list of quick-fix tactics. FCB Canada's president Bryan Kane



explains that his agency's goal is to create a "legacy, not a moment" – which has meant completely rethinking and remapping its processes, programs and policies, as well as its culture and behaviour, using a DEI lens.

"Every time [FCB staff] get together as an agency now, there's a component of our DEI program integrated," says Kane. Speakers, at least two each month, continue to educate the agency on racial and social issues, even a year later, while 50% of the time spent in weekly all-staff meetings is dedicated to DEI topics and its committee's plans and actions. That's on top of it having teams – like many agencies – complete unconscious bias training, and rebuilding its recruitment model.

FCB's management team also enrolled in a 12-week course through the University of Alberta on Indigenous Studies, because racism against Indigenous communities is a "Canadian truth that is not talked enough about," says Kane. "We have the incredible privilege of being able to influence culture through our work, and it's important to focus on creating the change we want to see in the world... If it's constantly in our conversations, then you can see it reflected in our thinking about the work. [That education and dialogue enables] the team to not only create, but [also] evaluate work where biases are not represented, and stereotypes are challenged."

Many agency leaders fear the conversation will fizzle out if DEI isn't treated as a constant, active value. That's one of the reasons Toto says JP\TBWA and Le Parc created Trampoline, a division of the agency that's part-incubator for BIPOC talent, part-accelerator for BIPOC-owned businesses.

Starting in 2021 and rolling out every quarter, Trampoline pairs a brand with paid interns, having them work (alongside a CD mentor) on branding and/or communications on a pro bono basis.

JP\TBWA had three BIPOC students from OCAD, Miami Ad School and Ryerson University under its wings when the idea for the two-sided initiative was born. Trampoline's first client was Neale's Sweet n' Nice (an ice-cream brand with roots in the Caribbean), for which the interns created a social and digital awareness campaign. Toto says it's currently in the process of signing another brand for this quarter, but it's also looking to work with cultural and advocacy groups.

Trampoline solves an HR need, says Toto, as it grows a stronger pipeline of diverse emerging talent. But it also strengthens the shop's own business strategy, with the initiative becoming central to the agency's creative culture. He calls it "DEI by design," which he hopes will also help to inform the shop's thinking about its work.

"The reality is that our Canadian society is a mixed ethnic culture," adds Toto. "And while we've been working on consumer insights that are more culturally relevant for years, [it's] being requested more and more by clients who did not have this conversation before."

Of course, brands looking for diverse representation in their marketing is not new, but Priya Chopra, founder and president of Montreal PR agency 1Milk2Sugars, says their needs are evolving to now include "equal opportunity." Brands have been casting the same BIPOC influencers over and over, she says, which is fueling a sense of tokenism from the consumer's perspective.

"[The industry] has been diverse in its selection of talent, but the opportunities are going to the same people. For BIPOC influencers, it's the same pool of candidates," says Chopra. "So that was sort of the premise of why I launched Double Shot."

An influencer rep agency that operates under 1Milk2Sugars, Double Shot hit the market in November 2020 and Chopra says it has already paired under-represented influencers with major brands like Maple Leaf Foods, Estee Lauder, Mattel's Barbie and Perrier – many of them having never worked with 1Milk2Sugars before, directly reaching out to Double Shot to access its roster of "emerging talents" and "everyday people, such

Top left: Double Shot was created by 1Milk2Sugars as a way to help brands access a larger pool of diverse influencers. **Bottom left:** Emerging influencers Liv Tsai and Lelo Nuth are represented by talent agency Double Shot. **Right:** One year after its inception, Black Taxi is becoming a feeder system for the industry as it attracts hundreds of Black talent looking to enter advertising.



as moms, fitness coaches, nurses," she says. "So many different categories of brands have taken interest in Double Shot right out of the gate. It's sort of been beyond my expectations."

Like JP\TBWA's Trampoline, Chopra says Double Shot – and the efforts her agency is doing to support under-represented groups, like pro bono consulting for BIPOC entrepreneurs such as Toronto's Tianna McFarlane, who recently launched a line of bandages for black and brown skin called Heal in Colour – sits at the core of 1Milk2Sugar's business strategy and creative culture. She's even looking to expand Double Shot from talent agency to platform, launching a podcast to foster conversations, as well as hosting a D&I marketing conference this Fall (if all goes to plan).

Chopra opened the doors of Double Shot with the mantra for it to be an "agent of change" – an approach that some of the holding co.'s, like Publicis and WPP,



Does the industry need to open more doors?

Zak Mroueh is still holding onto a Marketing Awards annual from the late-80s as a reminder of harder days. He tells me that it's marked with pencil scribbles where an untold number of Canadian agencies are listed in the appendix, a sort of Yellow Pages for the ad world.

"When I was starting out I didn't know anyone in the business, so I had to knock on hundreds of doors before I finally got my foot in one," says the founder and CCO of Zulu Alpha Kilo. He was turned down again and again for two years until, one day, Saatchi & Saatchi opened the door. The copywriter finally got his break in the agency's mailroom.

That lived experience – "of perseverance and endless cover letters" – is what motivated Mroueh to create the 20Doors Scholarship Fund in May. Each year, for the next five years, Mroueh has promised to cover the tuition of a year-long post-graduate program in copywriting or art direction for four candidates who are Black, Indigenous or People of Colour. On top of that, his agency will mentor them as they launch their career in advertising.

"[20Doors is] just one example of a concrete way to help fix this problem once and for all, rather than an easy short-term fix where you simply check off a box to show you've done your part," says Mroueh. "I wanted to do something meaningful, and hopefully, substantial... I hope in some way this inspires other agencies to create sustainable long-term plans to address this issue."

Substantial, meaningful, sustainable – these are words that Taxi's creative operations manager and a POCAM founder Stephanie Small wishes she'd hear more from agencies that publicly expressed intentions to improve diversity after last year's resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Small feels more initiatives that break down barriers to entry for young BIPOC are needed and is even willing to hand over the strategic deck she created for Black Taxi – a talent incubator and employee resource group with the goal to find, hire and retain Black talent through programs like paid internships. More than that, she's hoping to place some of the candidates that come through its doors at other agencies, even brands.

"We had almost 130 applications the first time we posted for the internship. This year, we have over 100, and some even reapplied for the second round," says Small. "So I've been sending some over to Juniper Park\ TBWA because they have [Trampoline], a BIPOC initiative for businesses and talent. And because we're under the VMLY&R umbrella, we've been in talks with their offices to take our framework [to the U.S]."

The team is also having conversations with its clients who may be interested in drawing from Black Taxi's talent pool to fill their own open positions, adds HR director Kimberly Chomut. "We want to make sure these applicants still get access to the industry even if we can't hire them," says Chomut, adding that Taxi and WPP hired four of the interns from the 2020 cohort as full-time employees.


Initiatives that help remove entry barriers, particularly financial ones, are more important now than ever. According to Mroueh, "the current recession has forced many young Canadians to think twice about investing further in their education because they worry whether there will be a job available for them at the other end." These opportunities are a solution that will pay dividends in the long run, as they help to raise the confidence of young BIPOC to choose a career in advertising, says Mroueh.

solving real problems," says Kinney. "That's where the real change happens, right? We're actually trying to change behaviour within corporations."

Most, if not all, agree that DEI needs to infiltrate the bones of their agency in order to maintain the momentum that began 12 months ago. Publicis, among others, has baked DEI into its strategic plan and considers it a business goal, which the executive team is measured against. And Kane says progress on DEI has become a fairly significant part of the executive compensation at FCB. It's like any other KPI, says Bruce, adding that it's not just a necessity from a moral

standpoint, but also a business perspective: "This isn't extracurricular. This is hardwired into our system – can you imagine one day deciding to take it out? Once it's in, you can't take it out. What kind of a human being would ever take it out?"

It's important to remember, though; no matter which policy an agency corrects or initiative it launches, achieving diversity will be a never-ending journey. "There is no in-line or destination," says Kinney. "Diversity is a social, judicial, economic and creative science. So you can create one solution within science, but will science ever end? No."



Your mental health, or working in advertising: Pick one.

In an industry that already has higher than average anxiety and stress versus the national average, a recent Forbes¹ magazine article reported that 83% of marketing and communication professionals are experiencing burnout.

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1. Montañez, R. (2020, July 12). "83% Of Marketing And Communication Professionals Now Report Burnout - Here's Some Career Advice." Forbes.



How Canada's top agencies channeled creativity and grit to master a year of non-stop challenge

Last year, we introduced our A List prognosticating, "It will be a year like no other." Given the pandemic had the world in its viral grip, it wasn't a hard prediction to make.

For an agency to stay at the top of its game required staying power that's built on solid fundamentals. As the A-List qualifying criteria includes taking top honors on the global, national or regional awards stage, each of these firms was already on a strong trajectory. And while the whole industry has had to make tough business

decisions, staying true to their core values allowed these companies to not only keep the lights on, but prosper in the face of uncertainty.

While others were trying to figure out what the new normal would look like, these agencies were busy creating it. Whether that meant reshaping future work environments and keeping virtual cultures vital, or doubling down on originality and strategic acuity, these A Listers have demonstrated how to adapt and create new opportunities. So read on, and see how it's done.



From strength to strength

How Zulu Alpha Kilo's core value helped it prosper in a time of crisis

IN A HEALTHY ECONOMY, IT'S EASY for companies to hide their weaknesses. But when faced with a global pandemic and massive downturn in the economy, those weaknesses are often painfully exposed.

For trailblazing independent Zulu Alpha Kilo, the socio-economic challenges triggered by COVID-19 have shone a light on the agency's strengths. That's been reinforced by placement on the list of Canada's Best Managed Companies for the fourth consecutive year, as determined by Deloitte. This year, the agency has been elevated to gold status on one of the country's most prestigious business rankings. "We were told that what struck this year's vetting committee is that we managed a once-in-a-lifetime crisis and came out even stronger," notes founder & CCO Zak Mroueh.

This should be no surprise for an agency whose culture is built on the core value of bravery. Its fiercely creative culture has inspired several former employees to return. After 11 years at New York-based Smart Design, Stephanie Yung has come back to Zulu as head of design, and Jessica Hill returned as business group director after running her own successful business for 10 years. Ex-Ogilvy Canada CCO Brian Murray comes in as a key new hire, taking on the ECD role.

They join a firm that continues to challenge cultural and creative conventions. Take its current campaign for RATESDOTCA, a website that helps users compare car insurance rates. Depicting a car jacked up on a hoist for repair, the launch video features a cereal-eating mechanic as he directs the car owner's attention to a cow's udder hanging from the vehicle's underside and warns, "There's your problem – you're

On behalf of the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas, Zulu Alpha Kilo dramatized the plight of small businesses shut down because of COVID-19 while big-box stores were allowed to remain open. The agency placed "out-of-work" mannequins along the busy Toronto commercial streets, calling for a level playing field for all businesses.

getting milked on your car insurance." He then milks the udder into his cereal bowl. The campaign was quickly recognized by AdAge as editor's Pick of the Day.

Zulu is also not afraid to bust a few taboos. Its bold "Go Love Yourself" campaign for Consonant Skin+Care leverages the scientific evidence that orgasm is good for your skin. Partnering with Fortnight Lingerie, Consonant released limited-edition undergarments that feature sewn-in messages encouraging the wearer to pleasure themselves. The company also partnered with sexologist Taylor Nolan on a podcast that explores female solo sexuality called *The More You O*.

In its second year of helping HomeEquity Bank support the Royal Canadian Legion's Remembrance Day digital poppy campaign, Zulu got gamers globally to stop play and observe two minutes of silence to "Pause to Remember" our war veterans. This year, however, they added a new twist: "Team Legion." With play paused, four WWII veterans appeared on screen to share their stories of what a real war is like. The powerful campaign won a Grand Prix at the Drum Awards for

Digital Advertising, beating out 5,000 global entries.

Closer to home, Zulu helped local small Toronto retailers mount a campaign against the unfairness of allowing big-box stores to open during the COVID lockdowns, while they couldn't. "Out of work mannequins" were posed in front of stores up and down the street, holding signs with messages such as "think outside the big-box" and "hungry for customers." The campaign for the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA) made the front page of *The Globe & Mail's Report on Business* and the CBC national news.

It has also been a year of investment. Inspired to take even greater control of its own post-pandemic future, Zulu has taken an equity stake in Consonant Skin+Care. It will not only act as in-house creative agency but participate in its growth and development.

A year that has unfortunately taken many agencies backwards has been for Zulu Alpha Kilo a year of progress. It has added to its growing pile of awards with six CMA Golds and a Best of Show for its Subaru "Greatest Outback Of All Time" campaign. The UK's Creative Pool awarded it 2020 Independent Agency of the Year. *Forbes*, *Fast Company* and SXSW recognized the agency's creative work as "game-changing" and amongst the "most innovative" of the year.

Business wins included Campbell's Goldfish, Harry Rosen, online learning platform D2L and the Ottawa Senators.

And now that it's proven you can work remotely with minimal disruption, the shop is planning to expand its creative talent pool by entering other markets in Canada and the U.S. Success rewards the brave.



Gamers paused on Remembrance Day and met WWII vets in a campaign sponsored by Home Equity Bank for the Royal Canadian Legion.



Interac’s “InLife” platform tells the stories of people chasing their passions, all while taking advantage of Interac offerings such as Flash and e-Transfer.



Zulu slyly approached the launch of Subaru’s new Crosstrek, personifying the vehicle as a teenager whom its “parents” love despite its transgressions.



Who knew masturbation was good for your skin? Zulu used the science of solo sexuality to promote skin care brand Consonant’s newest product line.



For the #FeedImagination campaign for Campbell’s Goldfish, Zulu placed kids artwork on billboards, in digital storybooks and in an interactive experience.



For RATESDOTCA, surreal humour alerts Canadians to how easy it is to overpay for auto insurance, visually conveying getting “milked.”



Zulu created an Instagram campaign for Interac to demonstrate virtual ways to engage in Lunar New Year traditions, such as exchanging gifts of money.



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Natural born storytellers

Newfoundland's Target reels in national brands with humour, humanity and fresh ideas

ACCOUNT PLANNING PIONEER Stephen King had a rule for successful advertising: it must have a combination of sensory, rational and emotional appeal.

Target's long-running "Find Yourself" campaign for Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism has all three: the sensory appeal of Newfoundland's dramatic coastline and colourful architecture; the rational appeal that makes you ask, "What am I waiting for?"; and the emotional appeal of its famous humour and humanity. These powerful ingredients have won the campaign 400 awards since 2005.

Target remains proudly rooted in Newfoundland. Fiercely independent, it avoids the well-worn path of other agencies that start out regional, relocate to Toronto or New York, and sell out to multinationals. "We still report to nobody but our moms," says Noel O'Dea, who founded the shop in 1980.

"Newfoundland itself is our secret ingredient, our most powerful differentiator," says O'Dea. "We can see things differently here. And that changes how we think and how we go about solving clients' problems." Over the past 40 years, that unique point of view has attracted clients such as Unilever, Maple Leaf Foods, Rogers, Bell, Molson, Labatt, and Air Canada brands Tango, Zip and Jazz.

Target may be small and nimble, but it's plugged into the zeitgeist. One headline from its latest campaign for Newfoundland and Labrador asks, "On a scale of 1-10, how happy are you working from the kitchen table?" A stunning shot of exotic coastline is followed by the tagline "Embrace a new normal. Work Remote."

Even a client as formal as Canada Revenue Agency leverages Target's creativity and quirky humour. Its "Voice of Reason" national TV and online campaign drove 5.6 million YouTube views in 10 weeks, and generated over 80 million impressions. Storytelling gets attention, and results.

Reflecting the humanity Newfoundlanders are famous for, Target's "Inuit Child" campaign for Indigenous Services Canada makes a

"Stay Curious" is the latest chapter in Target's much-awarded "Find Yourself" campaign for Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism. After 16 years of off-kilter storytelling, the campaign has become one of the most successful tourism positioning and advertising programs in North America. During the pandemic the message is to "Stay curious everyone, and visit when it's safe."

strong emotional appeal to young Inuit parents and grandparents. Demonstrating cultural sensitivity and respect for Indigenous culture, Target executed the multi-media campaign in the Inuktitut language as well as in English and French, generating a 1,700% increase in month-over-month website visits.

All this humanity and humour has earned Target significant industry recognition, including bragging rights as *strategy's* inaugural Small Agency of the Year in 2019, and a long-standing berth on *strategy's* Creative Report Card. It's one of few Canadian agencies to win a Cannes Gold Lion, and it's won multiple Gold CASSIES for advertising effectiveness, including the Grand Prix.

Seems like taking the road less travelled leads to impressive results, for both Target and its clients.



Fraudsters pretending to be government employees scam \$100 million a year from trusting Canadians. Target's national TV and digital campaign responded with humour: if that tax refund sounds too good to be true, well, listen to your "voice of reason."



To launch Crooked Dory cannabis, Target mounted an actual dory on a blank billboard. One week later, it posted the "Sailor" headline. Social media lit up with banter, memes, and TikTok videos (with 360,000 followers). Result? Line-ups, and all SKUs selling out in five days.



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Ready for whatever's next

doug&partners resets with a fresh focus on the future

OVER A YEAR INTO A PANDEMIC THAT SENT employees to home offices, it might seem unusual that Doug Robinson is energized by his agency's new space. But sitting in doug&partners' freshly renovated digs in Toronto's Junction neighbourhood, he's ready for what comes next.

The new office, which is a total overhaul of an old autobody shop, represents not just a new space for d&p, it's reflective of a new way of thinking about the future. In fact, the move from downtown to a West End enclave symbolizes a restart – and when colleagues do eventually pass through the 16-foot glass garage doors, it won't be business as usual.

It's all part of a plan to retool the 19-year-old, 38-person shop into the country's leading independent agency. "Moving to a space of our own allowed us to reallocate capital to what is important," Robinson says. "And that's the work and our people."

Recognizing young employees are struggling working at home in isolation, Robinson is eager for them to benefit from in-person collaboration and mentorship in an inspiring new setting. But the changes go deeper.

doug&partners has also articulated a set of values, focusing on teamwork, respect, positivity, accountability and creativity. Robinson says the values already existed within the company and it was time to more deliberately commit to them. "It's simple stuff, but it's also vital that we're building off the same foundation" he says.

Those values attracted Christine Scott, who assumed the managing director role in March.

"In this time when so many agencies are talking about the importance of diversity and inclusion in their corporate mandate, the values of doug&partners were the seal on what I was looking for," says

doug&partners just finished the complete transformation of an autobody shop in Toronto's Junction area into a "forward-ready" flexible creative space.

Scott, who has held senior roles at Community, Citizen Relations and Cossette. "That foundation of respect, especially as a BIPOC woman, was 100% mandatory. Doug instilled in me a strong confidence that he's looking to evolve as an agency and keep moving forward."

All this has reenergized the agency. Robinson says the vibe is that of a start-up – fiercely independent, focused on partnerships, entrepreneurial and flexible – and with great clients. All qualities that were essential during a year marked by the need to pivot.

ECD Matt Syberg-Olsen says the past year put the agency's motto of "creativity for commerce" to the test. "This notion is not just about using creative thinking in our work, but also in how we service our clients," he says.

For example, doug&partners won an assignment for Plan International Canada in a virtual pitch. To this day, the agency and client teams have not yet met in person. That hasn't stopped them from creating a successful campaign for the charity's holiday fundraising drive.

Plan was forced to pivot from its usual multimedia approach to an entirely digital campaign – all in a climate where donors were feeling economic pressure. To stimulate giving, the agency created a charming, animated campaign featuring Plan's well-known goats – a tangible representation of the effect of donations of all sizes.

Even though the charitable sector saw donations decline 16% (according to Imagine Canada's Ongoing Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic study), Plan saw a 34% revenue increase (vs. 2019) driven by the campaign, which Syberg-Olsen adds was well above projections.

The agency also added a new note to its popular Wildhood campaign for Go RVing. Shifting from the nostalgic tone of previous work to an aspirational message, "Live your Wildhood" connects with young adventurers looking for a safe way to enjoy the outdoors. "We're telling people, 'Don't wait to get outside,'" says Syberg-Olsen, noting that early results show performance substantially beyond projections.

Elsewhere, recent work for the University of New Brunswick promotes graduates' global impact, while a project for autoTRADER.ca brings the brand into more emotive territory. The agency is also in the midst of launching a new campaign for Reliance Home Comfort and ongoing assignments for telco Distributel, in addition to projects for the city of Sault Ste. Marie, another client added during the pandemic.

Reflecting on the past year, Robinson draws on a sports analogy. "There's no question that this year has entirely changed the playing field for us," he says. "But it's given our team the opportunity to re-evaluate how we play and recognize where our strengths are. We've never been more ready for what's to come."



If we say “period” enough times, will people just stop being squeamish about the whole thing already? That’s the message of online videos for The Period Purse, an organization that strives to reduce the stigma surrounding periods and provide free access to menstrual products.



doug&partners created a 30-second spot for autoTRADER.ca demonstrating that you can feel confident you’re getting the best price – so confident you just may feel like you can pull off an acrobatic move from a seminal ‘80s movie.



The beautiful thing about an education is that it’s not just about where you get it, it’s about where you take the learning afterward, and how that benefits the world. For the University of New Brunswick (UNB), doug&partners created “UNB is Here,” an enrolment push that promotes the impact its graduates have on the world stage.



To encourage donations over the holiday season, Plan International Canada gave doug&partners the dream brief: ask people to give goats to each other as charitable holiday gifts. The agency obliged with an online campaign of charming, animated stories.



In 2021, the very successful “Wildhood” campaign continued, reminding people that there’s never been a better time to “Live Your Wildhood.” Building on its slogan “Bring Back Wildhood,” doug&partners charted new emotional territory: aspiration.



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Winning in a world of uncertainty

How UM is futureproofing business

IF THE RELENTLESS PACE OF DIGITAL transformation hasn't created enough uncertainty, count on a pandemic to up the ante. UM chose to confront the unknown with forward-thinking initiatives including data-driven learning, a commitment to training and a robust kit of new media innovation tools. It's all part of what the agency calls its 'futureproofing' of people, culture and work.

Let's start with people. Last year UM invested in an ambitious training program, focused on transforming specialists into 'investment professionals' who are better equipped to act on their clients' strategic business challenges. With clients scratching their heads about the next "normal," the program could not have been more timely.

It also paid off in terms of employee retention and job satisfaction. UM's turnover rate is under 10%, compared to an industry average of 30%, according to UM Canada president Shelley Smit. "This chronic industry problem has now become a client concern," she says. "In pitches we are routinely asked about our retention rates, and contracts often include retention-based KPIs."

Then there's the culture. With the pandemic, UM's challenge has been building culture remotely. "We have new hires who have never been to our office and never met colleagues in person, so how do you communicate your culture and what it's like to be part of the UM team?" says Smit. Her solution is a multipronged approach involving weekly check-in emails, a "Curiosity Connects" program which arranges 30-minute connects between random people across the company, and a peer-to-peer recognition initiative called "Better Thank U," a small way for people to acknowledge a colleague who went above and beyond.

As for the work, innovation is the key. Take the recent launch of the BMO eclipse VISA Infinite card, specifically designed for millennials.

'Impact Day': UM closes one day each year to give employees time to volunteer and support their community. "Small businesses have been hit hard," says Shelley Smit, president, UM Canada. "And if you're Black, Indigenous or a Person of Colour, as an owner, there may be the added challenge of being under-funded and under-represented." So to support BIPOC businesses, employees shared their skills to create media playbooks and offer pro-bono consultation, research and best practices.

To reach a demographic that has little love for bank advertising, UM deployed an inclusive, multi-influencer strategy and engaged *RuPaul's Drag Race* winner Priyanka to act as lead spokesperson. In a global first, 281 pieces of content were created via the YouTube Director Mix using influencers.

The results? Ad recall at 3X category norms, +650% in site traffic vs. pre-campaign, increase in total card applications of 350% vs. previous period and a remarkable boost in BMO purchase intent – 40X the category launch average.

Flipping the script is another way to futureproof work. If you think millennials hate ads, Gen Zers hate them even more, with 82% skipping past them. So for McCain, Canada's leading brand of fries, UM took the format Gen Z hates the most – pre-roll – and

turned it into a lottery in which getting served a winning ad could earn the viewer a prize. To win, they had to watch a video of fries baking in an oven until it "dinged." Videos of various lengths were produced, some as long as 10 minutes.

UM reached 77% of the Gen Z target with over 50 million campaign impressions. The campaign extended the average Gen Z attention span from eight seconds to 64 seconds. And while YouTube's engagement benchmark is 20% completion for :30 ads, UM's significantly longer pre-roll baking videos had a 25% completion rate.

UM's approach is garnering acclaim. Over the past two years, they have received more industry awards for client work than any other media agency in Canada. UM was the most awarded media agency at the Media Innovation Awards and the CMAs, WARC's #1 Canadian agency for effectiveness, RECMA's top-ranked agency in terms of vitality and growth and the #1 media agency on strategy's Creative Report Card.

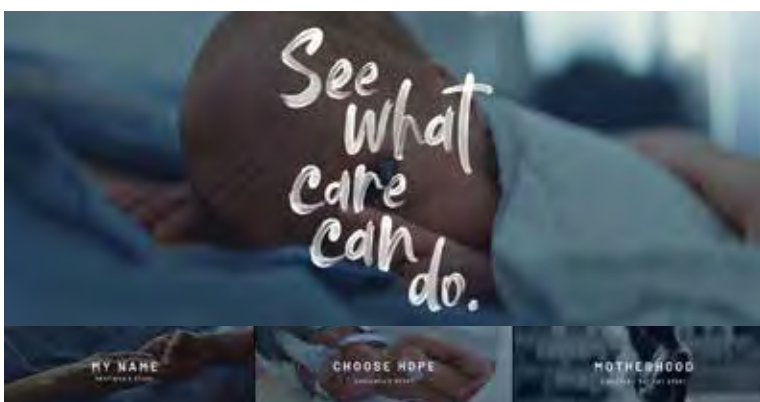
Futureproofing has also meant rolling out new tools.

"Our Growth Accelerator is a cross-suite toolkit that covers everything from data mining high-value audiences to activating and tracking those audiences across the right channels," explains Richard Fofana, VP strategy at UM. "We use Demand Forecaster to carry out predictive modeling by category to help clients anticipate changes in consumer demand and inform scenario-planning. And our Media Futurecaster allows us to map audiences to emerging media and partnership growth opportunities."

While all these initiatives are designed to help clients grow their businesses, they also help UM team members grow their skills and confidence, resulting in the kind of strategic smarts required to navigate what lies ahead. All of which helps make the future look a little brighter.



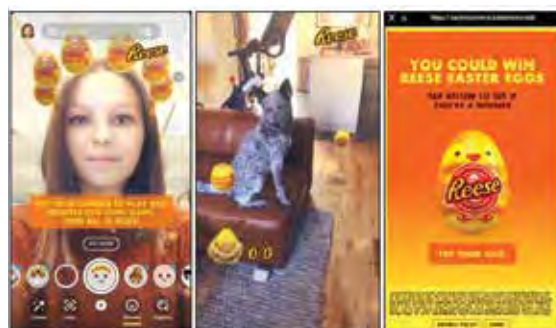
To launch Sobeys' new grocery delivery service and gain a deeper understanding of the target shopper, UM built a consumer-focused messaging engine fueled by full-funnel datapoints at every moment along the eGrocery journey. Voilà By Sobeys saw an 11% month-over-month increase in new customers, doubling the conversion rate and reducing CPA by 65% over the campaign.



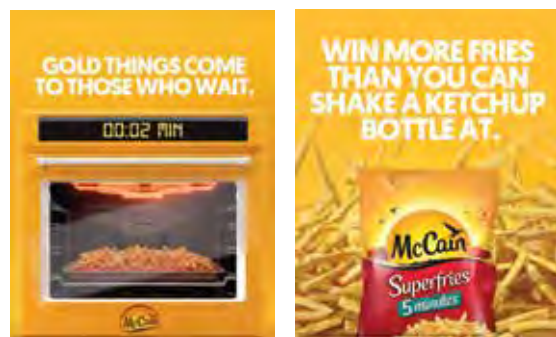
To support Sinai Health's first-ever public fundraising campaign, UM aired powerfully emotional documentary videos of real patient stories that boosted awareness +16% (vs target of +4%), increased email sign-ups 49% (vs target of +8%) and drove donations +78%, far exceeding goals.



To launch the BMO eclipse VISA Infinite Card, UM needed to drive awareness and purchase intent among ad-averse millennials. Built around principal spokesperson Priyanka, winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race Canada*, and supported by other key influencers, the campaign created 281 pieces of content via Google's YouTube Director Mix to drive a sense of personal connection and inclusion. The result? Category-defying conversion and brand-affinity levels.



In response to pandemic lockdowns, UM helped the annual Reese Easter Egg Hunt pivot to virtual with an augmented reality experience through a new Snapchat Lens. Users could search around a room, apartment or house to find the virtual eggs. By catching all 10 Reese Easter Eggs, players had a chance to win free Reese Mini 3D Eggs shipped directly to their home.



McCain's "Golden Oven" campaign, aimed at Gen Z, the most ad-avoiding demo of all, took hated pre-roll ads and turned them into pre-roll lottery tickets. Viewers could win simply by watching an ad. The videos were so effective that while the typical Gen Z attention span is only 8 seconds, UM was able to hold it for an average of 64 seconds.



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Connecting on a deeper level

Calgary's C&B Advertising gets creative to deliver meaningful ROI

"CREATIVITY IS A POWERFUL BUSINESS TOOL," observes Leigh Blakely, managing partner at Calgary-based C&B Advertising. "It can change perceptions, influence behaviour and ultimately drive sales."

It starts, she says, by investing the time to understand customer needs and then articulating those insights in a simple, relevant, emotive truth.

And whether that's in campaigns for Travel Alberta, ATCOenergy, Calgary Stampede, or Calgary Silver Linings Foundation, a thread runs through the agency's work. It has heart. It speaks to consumers in a fundamental way.

"We believe that emotional and rational messaging, working together, are more powerful than on their own," says Blakely. "To persuade and change perceptions, we need to cut through the hundreds of commercial messages consumers hear and see daily and connect with them on a deeper level."

C&B's job, notes Blakely, is to help deliver profits today as it sets clients up for success tomorrow. That entails weighing both short-term activation tactics and long-term brand-building communications – using any and all mediums to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of a client's ad spend.

And that combo of creativity and ROI seems to be paying off for clients.

When British Columbians emerged from quarantine after the first wave of COVID-19, client Tourism Richmond was ready with an offer true to its brand – an invitation to 'Travel Afar. Near.' in Richmond. To help drive visits and motivate audiences, C&B used incentive-based

C&B Advertising spread the word about the launch of Co-op Wine Spirits Beer's e-commerce platform, where ordering your favourites is as easy as grabbing your device.

elements to create a sense of urgency and promote overnight hotel visits. Through online videos, OOH, print ads, paid social and digital ads, the campaign reminded regional visitors that the experiences they craved were still available without hopping on a plane.

Over 1,200 bookings were made directly through visitrichmondbc.com during the campaign – exceeding Tourism Richmond's fall 2019 and winter 2020 campaigns by more than 500 room nights, generating over 48% more revenue and exceeding transaction targets by 70%. Creatively, the campaign saw completion rates for connected TV of 96% and online video as high as 59%, exceeding industry averages of 30% to 40%.

In 2019, C&B created the 'Get it. Done.' brand for the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA). Last year, while most people were being asked to stay home, agricultural workers needed to keep operations up and running to keep the country fed. So the agency created a series of videos and ads titled 'Shut in.

Not shut down.' to honour UFA's members, customers and employees. The combination of brand-building tactics as well as activation at retail and online saw many locations in the network seeing YOY same-store growth of over 30%.

Last summer, C&B used drone footage to create a series of breathtaking single-shot videos for Travel Alberta that feature a solitary traveller in an iconic provincial landscape. The 7 x 30-second "One Shot at Summer" video series was in market within two weeks of initial production, giving Travel Alberta and tourism operators a much-needed end-of-season boost delaying the shoulder-season slump.

Blakely is particularly proud of the project for Calgary Silver Linings Foundation, an org that provides a voice to Alberta's eating-disorder community. C&B donated its time and expertise, partnering with music and sound house 6 Degrees to produce two evocative radio commercials: one speaking to the dangers associated with social-media fitness culture; the other talking directly to the community with a message of hope through treatment. She hopes these dual messages will help change perceptions toward eating disorders – and increase donations.

The past year has seen the C&B team (comprised of about 25 employees and contractors) win projects for clients including Agriculture Financial Services Corporation, Traditional Cowboy Arts Association, Tourism Radium, and Calgary's University District.

"We're excited that some of our clients are returning with new ways to operate, despite COVID," says Blakely, adding that great creative ideas anchored in human truths are needed now more than ever to help drive business results.



With international travel limited, Tourism Richmond wanted to remind regional visitors they could still 'Travel Afar. Near.' Through online videos, OOH, print ads, paid social and digital ads, C&B used incentive-based elements to create a sense of urgency and promote overnight hotel visits.



In 2020, C&B launched Calgary Co-op's new private label brand, Cal & Gary's, driving a 10.6% sales increase during the campaign.



Due to COVID-19, the 2020 Calgary Stampede was cancelled for the first time in its history. To keep the brand top-of-mind and help raise money in a year of depleted revenues, C&B designed "We Will Ride Again" Stampede T-shirts that sold out.



C&B built on the 'Get it. Done.' campaign it created for the United Farmers of Alberta, honouring UFA members, customers and employees with videos and ads with the tag 'Shut in. Not shut down.' Brand-building tactics and activation at retail and online saw many locations record YOY same-store growth of over 30%.



For Travel Alberta's "One Shot at Summer" video series, C&B used drone footage to capture the province's breathtaking landscapes. In market within two weeks of production, the campaign gave operators a much-needed bump before the shoulder season.



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Creating cultural velocity

Last year Initiative doubled down on innovation – and the results can be felt and seen

AFTER COMING OFF A MOMENTOUS 2019 in which it picked up Gold Media Agency of the Year and Cannes Lion statuettes, Initiative opted out of last year's awards submissions. "We wanted to take the energy that goes into [pursuing] awards and put it back into our people and clients," explains Canadian president Helen Galanis.

Instead, the agency's Toronto-based office decided it wanted to be an island of stability in a landscape of uncertainty. That meant turning the focus inwards towards the development of staff; a renewed attention on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); and initiatives designed to create a culture of support and innovation.

Those moves proved just as beneficial to clients.

"We elevated our role, becoming not just media partners but marketing partners," says Galanis. "We've gotten to a richer level of engagement across a number of clients."

And that roster continued to grow last year, adding Nintendo and the Government of Ontario, and earning the media business for the Black Professionals in Tech Network.

Initiative helped keep the chaos at bay with a new offering called Demand Forecaster, which uses historic data and analytics to offer clients reliable market insights.

"Clients were generally getting blanket advice in the industry," observes chief strategy officer Nish Shah. "It was: 'Just don't go dark.' And, for some, that wasn't a viable option. If we can provide a way to model what demand might look like, you can forecast better and determine the best way to proceed that was specific to a brand's situation. Why not use data to make more informed decisions?"

Initiative took over the large-format digital screens at Toronto's Yonge-Dundas Square to spread the word about Amazon Prime Video's *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* release. It also launched a massive, unmissable Borat-themed barge into Lake Ontario.

Data certainly plays a central role in the agency's new content offering, a capability significantly built out in 2020. One beneficiary was Travel Alberta. In a Q4 campaign called "The Art of Winter," Initiative worked with *The Globe and Mail* and 11 local artists to create 10 new works of art interpreting Alberta's winter.

"The data showed consumers were still dreaming about travel," recalls Shah. "So, we thought, 'What if we show different artists' perspectives on how beautiful Alberta is?'"

The creative was hosted on a dedicated hub and the campaign was driven by social, where it resonated with thousands of shares and high engagement.

The Wendy's "#GrownWithLove" campaign, meanwhile, spoke to the QSR's new environmentally friendly greenhouse-grown lettuce and was rooted in the science that when you speak to your plants, they do better. The campaign was launched with McCann and driven by Twitter engagement. Consumers could Tweet messages that would be read to the plants.

"It spoke to what sustainability looks like for Wendy's," observes VP client advice, head of Learning and Culture Ishma Alexander-Huet. "It's an example of being able to take consumer and cultural insights and turn them into a relevant and engaging campaign idea."

Initiative labels its philosophy Cultural Velocity, which threads its way through every aspect of the agency. It speaks to different cultural pathways including: Cultural Agitation (challenge the status quo), Cultural Collision (pair two usually disparate things), Cultural Proximity (demonstrate hyper-local knowledge and understanding), Cultural Spotlights (highlight overlooked but important issues) and Cultural Contributors (use data to enact positive cultural change).

You could see it at work during the Amazon Prime Video release of *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm*. Initiative launched an integrated campaign for the film that had Borat literally everywhere. (In one execution, a massive *Borat*-themed barge was launched into Lake Ontario.) "We needed to create a ton of cultural relevance," notes Shah, "and it was unmissable. We received a lot of earned media pick-up."

Not all the agency's best work last year was on screen. Galanis is especially proud of what Initiative accomplished on the DEI front, helping to shape an industry for all creatives and consumers. The agency even audited a client's targeting parameters to see if they remained sound.

Says Alexander-Huet, "When you overlaid them against different segments within the community, those interests under-indexed in every single segment. We realized that, inadvertently, the targeting parameters were contributing to exclusion. And that's not specific to the client. It's industry-wide."

Bigger-picture thinking and better tools can only help messages resonate more. So when it comes to efforts like these, notes Alexander-Huet, "There is no final destination. It's about being more conscious and better than yesterday."



Recognizing WeTransfer as a creative destination for working professionals and artists of all types, Canada Goose tapped into the platform and its audience with high-impact premium rotational video in a brand-safe environment.



The Lego Dungeons of Shintaro board game campaign gave kids the power to create new stories and enjoy new ways of playing with their Ninjago sets. Initiative used interactive video to let them choose their path through a variety of actions (click, drag, scroll, shake, etc.) and customize their experience.




Travel Alberta knew vacationing wasn't an option for Canadians stuck at home, so it partnered with Initiative and *The Globe & Mail* on "The Art of Winter." The campaign recruited 10 local artists to create a multimedia hub of original poetry, installations, paintings and music to get readers dreaming about travel again.



For Wendy's "#GrownWithLove" campaign, cameras and speakers were installed in a Wendy's greenhouse so that Tweets tagged #GrownWithLove could be read to the lettuce twice a day. It was an innovative way of addressing sustainability that harnessed the power of social media.



The RBC "#CanadaUnited" campaign was a nationwide movement leveraging digital engagement as the currency of success. The goal was to support the local small businesses economy and create momentum to spend locally.

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The online-pivoting Media Experts team.

Shaping what's next

Media Experts stays a step ahead by responding to human behaviour

SINCE 1981, Media Experts has been an innovation leader in Canada, driven by the mission to deliver business results for its clients. It was the first agency in the market to serve its own ads and implement retargeting, it launched the first programmatic agency trading desk in Canada and was at the vanguard of promoted Snapchat filters.

So it's little surprise that, following an unprecedented year in which the rules of digital engagement have gone into hyperdrive, Media Experts has continued to evolve and innovate.

"The world has become a very different place. Canadians are a diverse group and many aspects of how we live, work, play, engage with brands and shop is evolving," says Kris Davis, SVP, client business partner. "Understanding this human dynamic is essential in helping our clients build successful, long-lasting relationships with their customers."

For instance, when much of the world shut down in the early days of the pandemic, Media Experts – which has over 175 staff at offices in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver – helped BMW reach audience segments that typically might not have walked into a showroom. Realizing that grounded Snowbirds were saving money by staying home, Media Experts targeted older shoppers looking to treat themselves to a luxury. Similarly, the agency identified that young professionals who no longer wanted to take transit were potential customers.

"Coming out of 2019 the industry was hyper-focused in its targeting, but COVID-19 changed that," says Davis. As new opportunities emerged, he adds, "We adapted by broadening our audience lens to connect with new segments and enhanced our ability to scale

engagement longer or shorter along the purchase journey because lockdowns slowed some shopping behaviour and accelerated others."

For plant-based beverage Earth's Own, Media Experts uncovered a tension between people's intentions and actions: despite claiming to care about the environment, they don't want to compromise on taste or price. "The difference between people's claims about their values and their actual behaviour quickly came into focus. We had to leverage their passion for the planet and at the same time dispel the notion that going plant-based meant trading down on quality," says Morgan Watt, managing director of the Vancouver office.

The agency addressed this challenge with a digital campaign that built awareness and trial. Over the campaign period on YouTube, connected TV and social platforms, Earth's Own grew three times faster than the category (46% vs. 16% category), increased buyers (+13% to 2.4M), increased loyalty by +2.4%, and delivered more than double its annual Oat Milk sales target.

Human behaviour is not the only shifting sand in the media landscape. The agency is enabling better targeting for clients through access to high-value audiences in preparation for the end of third-party cookies, which it's doing through a proprietary data stack of unique Canadian data sources.

"This allows us to gain control of who we are targeting and how we reach each audience across multiple platforms," Davis says.

Media Experts has also developed a new performance practice that creates greater flexibility for rapid optimization. New workflows and processes mean that clients can shift media channels without onerous document revisions, freeing up Media Experts' performance traders to make changes in real-time. Patricia Gray, VP digital, says that while simple in concept, these changes represent significant updates to process and workflow across the agency and are unique to Media Experts.

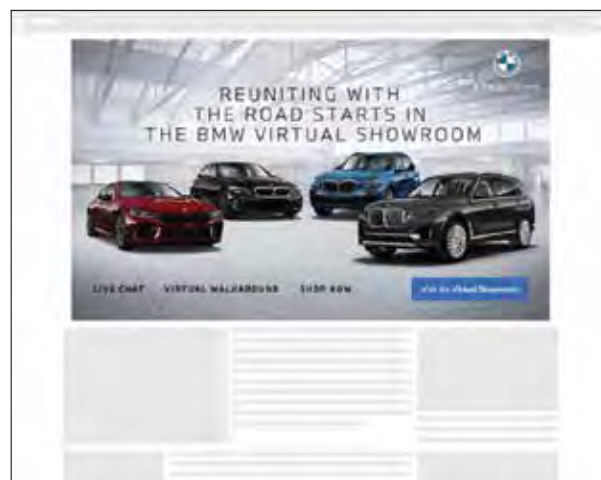
This practice is supported by a performance lead position within the company and a proprietary suite of tools called Aura, which offers a level of reporting granularity that would be impossible to generate without robotic process automation. Saving time on the compilation and visualization of data means Media Experts traders are spending more time optimizing and refining campaign setups.

"Historically our industry has treated search, social and programmatic as discreet practices. Conversations become siloed, results are inconsistent and process is specific by channel," says Gray. "We have reimaged both front-end optimization process and tech as well as back-end logistics to ensure our approaches are truly cross-channel, focused 100% on driving results."

Davis says this is a result of the agency's entrepreneurial spirit and integration. "We're driven to build it in-house if it's right for our clients, so that the capabilities and teams are connected, insights can be identified and acted upon, and we can move across all channels with flexibility and agility. We are excited for the future and what's coming next."



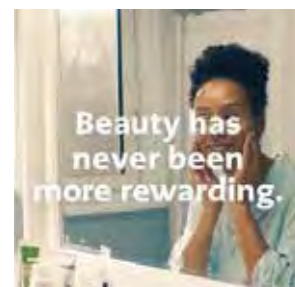
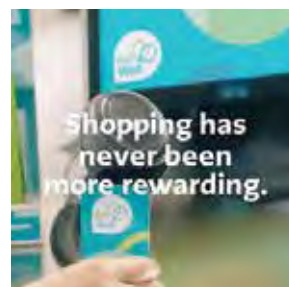
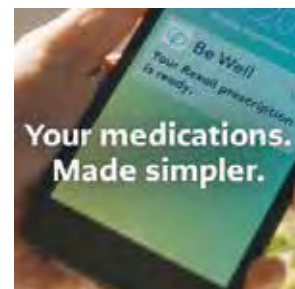
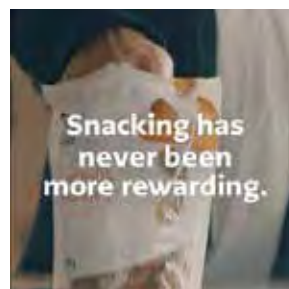
EDC's national #BusinessAsUnusual campaign aimed to support and inspire business owners and professionals suffering business loss due to the pandemic. The campaign included TV, online video, radio, print, digital and social media channels and included customized sponsorships with BNN Bloomberg, *The Globe and Mail* and CBC and was emphasized during key times of the year for business owners such as October's Small Business Month.



For BMW, Media Experts built a campaign that showcased the carmaker's vast product lineup in a time when in-person showrooms were shuttered due to the pandemic. The campaign involved special targeting efforts to adapt to the lockdown reality, as well as a mix of TV, DOOH, display, social and search, and executions with Yahoo and Amazon Fire TV.



The best thing people can do as individuals to combat climate change is to adopt a plant-based diet. This was the message Earth's Own oat milk was looking to convey. To dispel the myth that taking a stand for the environment means sacrificing on taste, Media Experts created a digital-first campaign, which resulted in three-times faster growth than the category.



After nearly 20 years partnered with the Air Miles loyalty program, the Rexall chain of pharmacies launched its own loyalty program: Be Well. To drive membership, Media Experts created a three-month campaign beginning in September encouraging signups and app downloads. It resulted in 250,000 new registrations by the end of 2020.



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The power of an unwavering philosophy

Giants & Gentlemen finds long-term success with bravery and collaboration

NEARLY 10 YEARS AGO, Alanna Nathanson, Natalie Armata and Gino Cantalini joined forces to launch Toronto agency Giants & Gentlemen. Now a thriving team of about 25, they've never abandoned their roots.

"We started from scratch with just our philosophy and our name," recalls co-founder and CCO Nathanson. "Our philosophy of 'Be brave, be decent' allowed us to attract the kind of clients we want to work with and the kind of people we want to hire."

"It's about always acting with integrity. We're not here to bullshit anyone or spin anything. We believe in open communication and our creative process is very collaborative."

Nathanson describes the G&G approach as "go wide and go deep" – first, explore high-level concepts and get client weigh-in, then deep-dive into the ideas with the most potential. They also have a proprietary tool called "Outthinking," which has someone outside of both advertising and the client's industry come in to provide insights and a fresh perspective. This gives clients an unfair advantage over their competition.

When there's been a tight timeline or problem that needs cracking, the entire agency has gathered in "The Gentlemen's Den," which sees internal teams competing to come up with the best idea.

And they've needed to be on top of their game in the last year. Despite global tumult, it's been busy. G&G won a project for Queen's University, became AOR for seafood provider Clover Leaf, picked up an assignment for cannabis company Tokyo Smoke, and grew existing client business.

Giants & Gentlemen provided creative for Harvey's humorous "Be a Burger Boss" campaign. In this spot, a hockey team is surprised to find its practice taken over by its towel boy, who is emboldened by getting to call the shots on his Harvey's hamburger toppings.

"Initially the pandemic was devastating, but we quickly recovered and in fact have gotten stronger," says Gino Cantalini, co-founder and COO.

Creative highlights include a series of "Be a Burger Boss" spots for QSR Harvey's that ran as part of a larger broadcast campaign. "We really dug into what differentiates them as a brand, which is customization," says Nathanson. "And these days, with people feeling more powerless than ever, we highlighted that you can finally be the boss of something."

For Dr. Oetker's Ristorante Pizza, G&G created "Ristorante Diamond Records" – an integrated campaign for social, Spotify and digital. "It was all about people who are awkward in expressing their love," she says. "Ristorante [was there to] help you up your love game." The campaign featured four 15-second spots of lovers struggling to express their feelings – until they're rescued by an R&B crooner. The ads threw to a site where consumers could qualify to win a custom love song of their own. The top three were then put up for a fan vote, the winner receiving a diamond ring.

G&G also did a series of spots for Enercare, promoting the home heating and cooling company's range of protection plans – helping homeowners take back control from meanspirited homes. Natalie Armata, co-founder and CCO, says the creative insight came from personal experience. "As a homeowner myself, there's a simple truth: when you own a home, it owns you just as much. There's always a problem to fix – or one lurking around the corner. You're at its mercy."

"The longer you're around and prove yourself by doing good work and being a good partner, the more you have people knocking on your door," says Nathanson. "But regardless of how much we grow, maintaining our philosophy and the kind of work we do remains key."



G&G empowered homeowners to take back control from their meanspirited homes with the help of client Enercare's range of protection plans.



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The future is multidisciplinary

Wunderman Thompson's service offering takes a 360° view of both client and customer

IF ADVERTISING IS A BUSINESS LOOKING FOR a new model, this two-year-old merged entity of WPP companies JWT, Wunderman, and Mirum believes it has found it: part creative agency, part consulting firm, part technology company.

As digital transformation has forced client organizations to rethink their approach to customers, Wunderman Thompson Canada has built a multidisciplinary offering aimed at capturing the full funnel, and a non-linear process designed to exploit the potential of cross-disciplinary collaboration.

As CEO Jeff Dack explains, "The traditional agency process is a waterfall model where the client briefs the account person, who briefs the planner, who then briefs the creative directors, who then brief their teams," says Dack. "We just don't work that way anymore. We take far more of a marketing technology, product-based approach where creative, strategy and technology are at the table together from the get-go."

This 360° view of the customer experience is reflected in Wunderman Thompson's service offering, which includes commerce, insights, communications, consulting, CRM and CX, with technology touching all of them. This model means that teams are built around clients, not around disciplines. Says Dack, "I don't think there is any other agency in Canada built this way."

How does this look from a project perspective? Take WT's recent work for The Royal Canadian Legion. In an effort to educate younger generations about Remembrance Day, WT built a video game that lived within the popular Fortnite battle royale franchise. Remembrance Island recreates historic WWI and WWII battlefields where Canadians lost their lives. A hit among young gamers, it has become a permanent interactive exhibit at the Canadian War Museum. This exercise in software-building-as-marketing benefited greatly from WT's multidisciplinary model.

To help The Royal Canadian Legion raise awareness of Remembrance Day among millennial gamers, Wunderman Thompson used available Fortnite creative platform tools to produce a custom Fortnite Remembrance Island game featuring recreations of WWI trenches, D-Day beaches, a Canadian military cemetery and the Vimy Ridge memorial cenotaph. Player objectives were to discover 30 museum-like info panels and follow poppies to the memorial.

Another strength of WT is its borderless approach to project teams. For Church's Chicken, WT Toronto partnered with WT Atlanta to launch this American QSR's new chicken and shrimp tenders. To reach a younger target, WT took a cue from the world of athletic footwear, where 'sneaker drops' are major product-launch events that often give out lookbooks to showcase the product line. WT created a lookbook parody titled the Texas Tenders Collection, complete with beauty shots and product names such as The Longhorn, The Lone Star and The Outlaw. It lit up social channels and was an AdAge "Editor's Pick." The best part? The product sold out in one month.

While WT signed the agency pact not to enter any awards shows in 2020, this year has already seen some momentum with the Remembrance Island campaign winning at this year's Atomic Awards, and the Pay Tribute campaign for the Royal Canadian Legion and HSBC receiving a recent nomination at the Webby's.

More importantly, the firm has seen wins in the new business category, taking on cannabis provider FIGR for brand-building, advertising assets, website development and app development; signing on with cybersecurity provider NPC for strategic and creative development in digital B2B channels, and two other recent wins currently under NDA.


If these successes are any indication, WT's seamless, simultaneous approach may just be where the industry needs to go.



How do you generate excitement among millennials for a new line of breaded chicken and shrimp tenders? You pretend they're a fashion item and launch them like you would a sneaker drop. For Church's Chicken's Texas Tenders, Wunderman Thompson created a lookbook with beauty shots and clever product names such as 'The Lone Star' and 'The Longhorn.'



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The power of informed creative

DDB Canada writes a new chapter with a data-driven, design-thinking methodology

DDB, ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST highly regarded agencies, hasn't shied away from reinventing itself in the past year. "We had to ask, 'Who are we and where do we want to go?'" says Megan Hardisty, SVP, managing director at DDB Canada in Toronto.

Hardisty, who joined last June, represents one of several key worldwide leadership changes at DDB that demonstrate the agency, with network offices in Montreal, Edmonton and Vancouver, isn't planning to rest on its laurels. "Long gone are the days of opportunity knocking on agency doors," she says. "You need to be more proactive and have a better differentiating story."

Social upheaval and COVID-19 economics have forced brands to look to efficacy like never before, she explains. "It's about bringing talent around the table who are flexible thinkers and are energized by figuring out what the root problem is," she notes. "From a creative perspective, we need to be thoughtful in how we connect with customers at each stage of their journey. It's about tapping into that moment and finding that unique emotional connection."

One way DDB Canada is doing that is by implementing more of a design-thinking methodology, workshopping business challenges in a way that brings clients to the table earlier and solving problems through quick learn-and-adapt iterations. It is also taking full advantage of in-house data analysis gurus TrackDDB to predict trends and inform and target creative.

DDB recently let data lead the way on a launch for a U.S. rideshare provider. The agency used third-party data to build a target universe, determine the client's ability to reach it, and map consumer motivation. "That allowed us to create unique messaging based on specific

For home and auto insurance provider Onlia, DDB Canada developed an approach that broke the rules for traditional advertising in the category. "Safety Obsessed" is a fun, integrated campaign that features typical car-safety measures taken to a humorous extreme.

motivations, and hyper-target media plans," she says. "It's a great example of how we're using data on a creative insight perspective versus just 'How do we connect with a customer?'"

The new approach of co-creating with clients also informed the fun Safety Obsessed campaign for Onlia that recently played out on TV, OOH, digital and social channels. As a challenger brand, Onlia had to bring something new to the insurance conversation, so the campaign offered non-traditional stylized and colourful creative. "It needed to stand out in a sea of sameness," Hardisty observes.

In the West, the Edmonton office has been applying similar thinking and garnering accolades along the way. By recreating the Royal Alberta Museum's Vikings: Beyond the Legend exhibit to live on Instagram, they engaged audiences and captured the ACE Award's 2020 Best of Show. Their stylized campaign to promote the Southern Alberta Art Gallery's "Art Frenzy" virtual auction won Best of Show at Ad Rodeo's Anvil Awards. And most recently, they created an immersive, experiential website to showcase the City of Edmonton's plans for the future. Featuring data visualization and animated illustration throughout, the City Plan site was voted Site of the Day by FWA. Their next challenge: rebranding the Edmonton Football Team.

Change, she notes, is the order of the day and agencies need to be ready. "You have to be open to thinking about things in new and different ways."



DDB Canada's campaign for the Southern Alberta Art Gallery's "Art Frenzy" virtual auction took Best of Show at the Anvil Awards.



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The Citizen Relations Canada team.

Making every conversation count

Citizen Relations found new methods of connection in a pivotal year

THERE'S BEEN A SEISMIC SHIFT IN THE conversational zeitgeist over the last year. The topic of workplace productivity has been eclipsed by employee wellness; in-person collaboration has been replaced with a grid of virtual faces; and racial justice is being discussed in great depth from living rooms to boardrooms.

For integrated public relations agency Citizen Relations, where the mission is to make every conversation count, this change is serious business. So, when the typical forms of connection evaporated following the onset of the pandemic, the agency set out to adapt.

The 90-person shop with offices in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and Quebec City has bolstered capacity with a social-impact practice, formalized a flexible work policy, launched a conversation metric tool, and reimagined how it engages with "citizens" – its preferred term for consumers.

"Conversation is the new currency in PR. Every action, whether it's changing behaviour or influencing a purchase decision, starts with a conversation," says agency president Nick Cowling. "We've become much more deliberate in making sure the conversations in which we're involving our clients will have a specific impact."

One way the agency is doing that is through a newly launched practice led by EVP of social impact Dr. Shilpa Tiwari, who joined

this year, bringing extensive experience building and growing sustainability, social impact, and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

Cowling often sees brands needing guidance on how to connect on social issues. "The right opportunities are not always obvious. Take a client in the food business. Many would say, 'Let's support food banks,' when they should say their corporate purpose is to make those food banks [unnecessary]," he says. "Real social impact could come from helping address job availability or community safety. We're helping them zone in on where their support will matter the most."

Citizen Relations has also seen profound change in how its clients connect with people through influencers, something Cowling attributes to the rise of TikTok. He says influencers have evolved to become more authentic on the video platform versus the glossy, curated personas seen on Instagram.

"Their roles have changed; they're now teachers, DIYers, brand ambassadors," he says. "They're also more direct and less polished. That's what Gen Z wants." That means brands looking to play in that space must relinquish more control.

When Molson Canadian launched the "most Canadian case of beer ever" – one filled with 43 Canadian competitor brands, aimed at dethroning Budweiser as Canada's number-one beer – the agency tapped sports, food and lifestyle influencers to amplify the message. The campaign generated over 85 million impressions and over one million dollars in earned media. PR and social impressions exceeded 31MM and sales increased 11%.

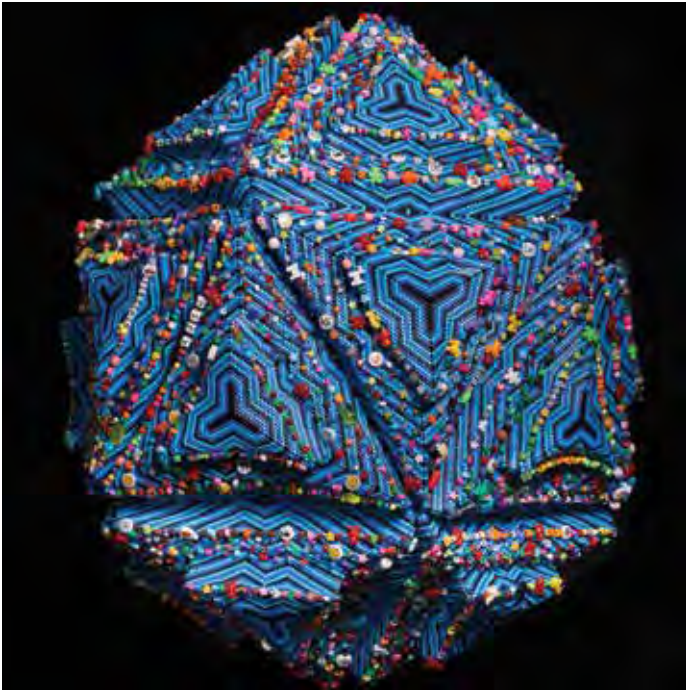
To promote the return of ketchup-flavoured Doritos, Citizen worked with influencers to launch streaming platform Doritos Ketchup+, featuring original programming from content creators spanning sports documentaries to abstract expressionism and fringe conspiratorial viewing choices.

These efforts are informed by Citizen's conversation monitor, launched as a prototype in May 2020, which helps marketers determine the kind of content that will connect with people on social and digital channels. The platform measures data points and KPIs and provides insight on content that drives online conversation and how many relationships are needed to drive specific results.

The pandemic also forced a tactical overhaul at the agency's Citizen XM division. For instance, whereas historically the agency has helped the Humber College Student Union execute an on-campus event with activities including axe-throwing and pop-up cafes, that wasn't possible in a virtual school year.

Instead, the agency developed a "virtual tournament" to engage students with week-long digital games occurring over five months. Students earned points tracked on a leaderboard and won prizes, allowing the union to connect a virtual student body throughout the year.

"One positive out of the last year is that it's caused agencies and clients to think differently about how we engage with audiences," says Kevin Wagman, Citizen XM's managing director. "It has opened up the possibilities of other tactics that can be incorporated or layered into traditional events or experiences when they eventually do return."



Citizen Relations worked with SickKids Foundation to build a Monument to the Brave in celebration of achieving one million donors. The Monument represents one million-plus acts of bravery from over one million SickKids patients to date and is adorned with Bravery Beads donated by patients past and present. It will live in the new SickKids hospital once construction is complete.



To help Tourism Australia keep the country at the top of North American travelers' lists when the borders reopen, Citizen devised a virtual cookery class with celebrity Australian chef Curtis Stone, connecting the organization and three of its key regions with media and consumer audiences.



To promote the return of ketchup-flavoured Doritos, Citizen worked with influencers to launch streaming platform Doritos Ketchup+, featuring original programming from content creators.



To raise awareness and drive trial of Oroweat organic bread in the Vancouver market, Citizen delivered a collaboration between Oroweat and the Dalina cafe to create a menu of sandwiches made from ingredients produced within a 50-mile radius of the city.



The agency tapped sports, food and lifestyle influencers to bring attention to Molson Canadian's launch of the "most Canadian case ever," filled with 43 Canadian brands and aimed at dethroning Budweiser as Canada's number-one beer.



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Do you see me now?

BY NATHAN HALL

ILLUSTRATION: GETTY IMAGES



“I see you” – a seemingly innocent acknowledgement, greeting, or gesture of praise commonly used in the Black community.

For instance, you walk into the room wearing a nice outfit and you might hear, “Okay! I see you!” in recognition of your style. However, beneath the veneer of this colloquial expression is something that extends far deeper into the psyche of us all: it is felt to a greater extent by those of us whose differences have relegated us as outsiders within the greater society and our workplaces.

To be *seen* is a fundamental human need. Psychologist Susan David says, “When we are truly seen, we become.” Regardless of who you are, we have all wrestled with notions of being seen and belonging. However, our society has been built off of the unequal distribution of power and access for certain demographics. As a result, in just being, some of us are innately considered to be more standard deviations from the norm compared to others.

By the time we enter the workforce, we already have decades of experience finding the right balance of masking our true selves and assimilating to fabricate a sense of pseudo-inclusion, where our success is not contingent upon the hard skills that are highlighted on our resume but on our mastery of knowing how to play the game.

When it comes to the topic of DEI in the workplace, I can understand why people believe it is a hard and difficult subject to tackle, because inequities have been entrenched into all aspects of our lives and our businesses. However, it's really not that complicated; at the root of all this, is that we just want to be *seen*.

During the height of the #MeToo movement, I would hear of men being scared to be alone with women in a room, to mentor

or promote them because they “didn’t want to find themselves in a compromising position.” This is complete nonsense. This is an example of deflecting and redirecting the problem to protect these men’s interests. Effectively, men were not held accountable for their gratuitous behaviour and, when they were, they tried to turn the table to penalize women by suggesting that their very presence is the issue.

Some leaders are apathetic to issues of DEI because they do not see us. Denial, dehumanization, deflection, redirection – these have all served as tools to construct the insulating barriers that keep “diverse” employees marginalized or tokenized and keep us from being seen. Barriers such as racism, sexism or classism serve to protect current structural hierarchies and those who benefit from them. Companies that are struggling with these concepts are struggling because they are trying to appease the external pressures to be diverse and inclusive, while trying to not disrupt how they already do things.

This is a culture problem. If your organization or your leadership fails to see me, establish clear values, set behavioural norms and embed mechanisms of accountability, then your organization will continue to be a hostile environment for those of us who are “diverse.”

When something is considered mission critical for a business and that thing breaks, or the organization experiences some sort of issue like a data breach, no single company would respond by forming a volunteer committee with little to no budget and have them create a five-year plan to address the problem. Yet, this is exactly how many companies have approached the issues of DEI in their workplace. So, what message are they sending? That these “issues” are not really issues for them. That our pain, and our mental, emotional or physical well-being, is less valued. That we do not matter.

In his *Are You an Accidental Soul-Sucking CEO?* blog post, Garry Ridge, the CEO of WD-40, wrote, “We know better than anyone at any time in the history of humans what it takes to create a workplace where people want to come to work, joyfully invest their efforts and talents into a cause greater than themselves, and go home happy to children who are learning from their examples. And yet we’re still screwing it up.”

Tackling DEI is not complicated. Leaders and organizations have more support and knowledge to address these issues than ever before, but knowledge is not the issue here. Leading these changes takes leadership, courage and vulnerability. It requires leaders to sit and listen in their discomfort, to create space, practice empathy and build a connection. We need leaders who care.

You cannot lead me if you don’t care about me and you cannot care about me until you *see* me.



NATHAN HALL is the founder and CEO of Culture Check, an anti-racism support centre for the workplace.

Trust the science

BY DR. SOFIA DELENIV, DR. SHELBY SUTHERLAND AND KELLY PETERS

Given the waves of civil unrest that washed over North America after last year's killing of George Floyd, it comes as no surprise that the corporate world rushed to express its solidarity and ambitious plans to tackle inequality in its ranks.

While this change is sorely needed, we are already hearing reports of consumers and employers experiencing "statement fatigue" – a term which comically resonates with "feminist fatigue" of the previous decade, when the corporate world voraciously marketed itself as all-things-feminism. There is no denying that leaders are in danger of being perceived as making token efforts in the realm of DEI, while avoiding measures that actually need to be taken to move the needle. Can anyone blame the sceptics when our efforts currently consist of solutions like debiasing workshops?

The question of whether debiasing truly works is highly contested and not well supported by the data. A 2019 study published in the academic journal *Psychological Science* did report significant benefits of certain forms of debiasing – and yet a close look at the study reveals that the training only yielded a roughly 20% drop in bias. Is this where we decide to stop and celebrate?

A further complicating factor is the evidence, collected by Harvard and Tel Aviv University researchers, that debiasing workshops can trigger rebound discrimination. One relevant factor here is the "moral licensing" effect, whereby morally positive acts like attending workshops or consuming eco-friendly products generate feelings of being "absolved" of one's wrongdoings and implicitly give us license to engage in rebound behaviours beyond our own awareness.

Our goal in saying this is not to determine whether debiasing, or any other measure we take to achieve workplace equality, is genuinely effective. Rather, it is to point out that, whatever it is we're doing, we are far from being certain that our tactics work.

This brings us to the following logical question: If we are so eager to "outpsychologize" the flawed human biases that contribute to poor decisions, why are we overlooking the one solution that is virtually guaranteed to help? That is, replacing our illusorily "impartial" method for assessing hiring and promotions candidates with an objective one that shields the decision-making process from detrimental human bias.

Removing bias-driven noise that contaminates decision-making is the single-most effective step businesses can take to start meeting their DEI ambitions. It can be done by removing identifiers from applicants' resumes before review. Candidate names,

institutions and name-drops risk triggering familiarity biases that tempt you into interviewing someone purely on the connection you feel from sharing an alma mater or a college football team.

In addition, you can encourage individuals to apply even if they are not sure they meet all of the criteria. Approach your hiring process with a healthy dose of humility about the range of factors that shape who even gets to the point of applying to your company. Individuals differ in their access to quality education and professional mentorship. They also vary in how they evaluate their own capabilities and qualifications. For instance, men are more likely than women to consider themselves better-than-average, and over twice as likely than them to enter competitions – even in domains where there are no sex differences in performance.

Acknowledge that debiasing your selection process will not get you all the way to an inclusive workplace, and try to offset the upstream inequalities that shape your pool of applicants through inclusive language that makes room for a diversity of self-assessments.

Tactics like these can form part of a holistic and equitable process for identifying those best suited to thrive within our organizations. Crucially, they also bring another, widely underappreciated benefit: protection from the risk of having our decisions misinterpreted by disappointed parties.

Risk mitigation is certainly a weighty consideration in today's litigious climate. Over the past two decades,

99% of Fortune 500s have paid settlements in discrimination lawsuits. It's often hard to gauge where the injustice lies. Many lawsuits stem from blatant cases of discrimination. Others are rooted in gross misunderstandings and miscommunications. Whichever one it is, lawsuits inevitably represent one of two things: humans deprived of opportunities, or organizations caught in a storm that was stirred up by the untransparent nature of their own decision-making.

All of this would be unnecessary if the business world took its expressed commitment to equality to its logical conclusion and pursued an objective approach to hiring and promotions that is aware of the psychological biases that shape unfair outcomes and decisions.

The principles of science and objectivity have already helped us shape a stable world. Most of us do not doubt the processes that go into engineering vaccines, skyscrapers, or cars. Our trust in these is rooted in the objective framework that validates these processes through testing and experimentation. Perhaps it's time that more leaders recognize the potential of bringing this approach into HR.

REMOVING BIAS-DRIVEN NOISE THAT CONTAMINATES THE HIRING AND PROMOTION PROCESS IS THE SINGLE-MOST EFFECTIVE STEP BUSINESSES CAN TAKE TO START MEETING THEIR DEI AMBITIONS.



DR. SOFIA DELENIV is a neuroscientist and a technical writer at BEworks, a behavioural science consulting firm.

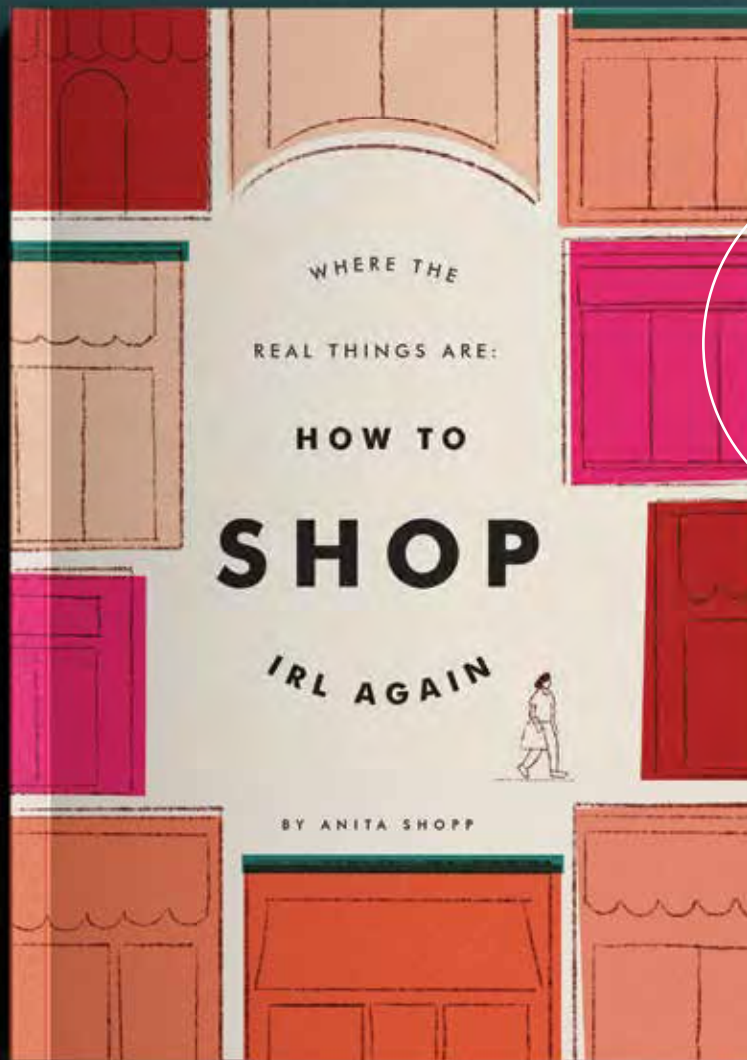


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