

How to get ahead in advertising

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VANCOUVER — It was a lopsided billboard that got Alan Bedingfield and Claire Lamont started. They were driving in Vancouver in 2003 when they noticed a giant sign advertising a luxury car. It wasn't the ad itself that caught their attention—neither of them can even remember the brand—but the fact that the billboard was falling over.

"We thought, what poor representation for them. There's got to be a different way to do it and still get the message across," says Bedingfield. "Seeing that billboard allowed us to get the creative juices flowing."

What they came up with was Smak, an advertising firm that specializes in non-traditional marketing. They knew their chances weren't great. "I remember hearing that 80 per cent of businesses go under in their first year," says Lamont. Not only has Smak lived to see Year 3, but it now has seven staff and counts Lacoste, the BC Lung Association, Future Shop and Telus among its clients. The firm's goal is to reach \$1 million in revenue by the end of the year. In May, it expanded into Toronto.

When they started out, Lamont, a marketer for Stella Glass Assemblies, and Bedingfield, then with Rogers Wireless, began studying what other advertisers were up to—particularly in Europe. They found that agencies there were producing campaigns unlike anything they'd found at home. They decided to bring that kind of creative thinking to Canada.



Unlike guerilla marketing—a term Bedingfield believes has been bastardized—non-traditional marketing includes orchestrated events or installations, and publicity stunts. "With us, they're not just getting a free sample; they have something to talk about," he says.

To confirm whether their ideas were viable, Lamont and Bedingfield created a small-budget campaign for Vancouver's Bloom Essentials day spa. They put together a team called "the Bloom Girls," clad in pink wigs and white T-shirts, who handed out temporary tattoos with the spa's logo during the Gay Pride Parade. Bloom's business increased in the days immediately after the parade,

but that was just the beginning. The Bloom Girls continued to haunt the city in the following months, participating in a variety of events, including charity walks, and soon became associated with the spa.

Though the Bloom Girls campaign got some good press, Lamont and Bedingfield realized it wasn't going to make Smak a household name. Nor was the spa's leap of faith in the company suddenly going to translate into more work. So instead of pitching to potential clients one by one, Lamont and Bedingfield decided to explore the partnership route—linking with established agencies to build their brand.

"Typically, an ad agency will have 10 or 12, maybe 15, clients, so if we can sell them on one client, hopefully they can see the benefit to roll them out over numerous clients," says Bedingfield.

Smak's pitch: It would complement an agency's existing campaigns with non-traditional tactics. With so little in its portfolio, however, few agencies were interested. Then, in 2004, Rethink Advertising came into the picture. The Vancouver firm was known for its highly creative campaigns, though it still remained in the "traditional" camp, since it worked mainly in television, radio and print. Lamont had always admired Rethink, and she used her South African roots—something she shared with a senior staffer—to snag a meeting.

At the time, Rethink was working with the Women's Information Safe House (WISH), a non-profit safe house for Vancouver's East Side prostitutes. The plan was a two-day campaign featuring life-size cut-outs of women placed in parts of the city where prostitutes are seldom seen. Smak proposed that it select the target neighbourhoods, and install and take care of the cut-outs—pro bono. Rethink agreed. After the first day, some of the cut-outs were stolen; others were knocked down or defaced. If they weren't already vandalized, Smak made it look like they had been. Above each cut-out was the slogan, "No woman should be left out on the streets."

Although Smak had no part in the creative process, executing the campaign for Rethink opened the doors for other projects, including one with Future Shop.

On Rethink's recommendation, Future Shop got in touch with Smak last fall. Lamont and Bedingfield orchestrated the Future Shop Dorm Room Challenge, a five-day campaign in seven Canadian cities where students competed for thousands of dollars worth of electronics. Six contestants in each city endured five days in a 160-square-foot living space with clear walls, so the public could watch them. Students built up points with daily challenges; the one with the most points at the end of the week won. Onlookers returned daily, fascinated by the fish-bowl existence of the contestants.

Today, half of Smak's clients come from referrals, the other from advertising agencies.

"We take an advertising campaign and put a twist on it. We give it legs that reporters and that people want to hear about. It gives it more credibility at the end of the day," says Bedingfield. "There are not a lot of people out there saying 'Hey advertising agencies, where you guys stop, we begin.'"

In the beginning, the goal was to go national in five years—a goal they're close to attaining, now that they're opened in Toronto. After visiting the city a dozen times in the last year and testing out the market, Lamont and Bedingfield decided to set up one staffer in the city as a direct contact for potential clients.

"It's a natural progression," says Bedingfield. "Everything in Toronto is bigger and better. Budgets are larger, clients are larger, and the opportunity is a lot bigger in Toronto."

Lamont and Bedingfield say their tiny Toronto office is just the beginning. After their growth in Vancouver, a city they consider tight-knit and conservative, they're not worried about taking on Toronto—though they're attempting to break into the biggest market in the country.

Under-promising and over-delivering, they believe, will set Smak apart from competitors. Their goal for Toronto is to implement three campaigns by the end of the year. For a start, they're putting together their very own buzz campaign—they won't be able to get their clients noticed until they get some notice themselves.