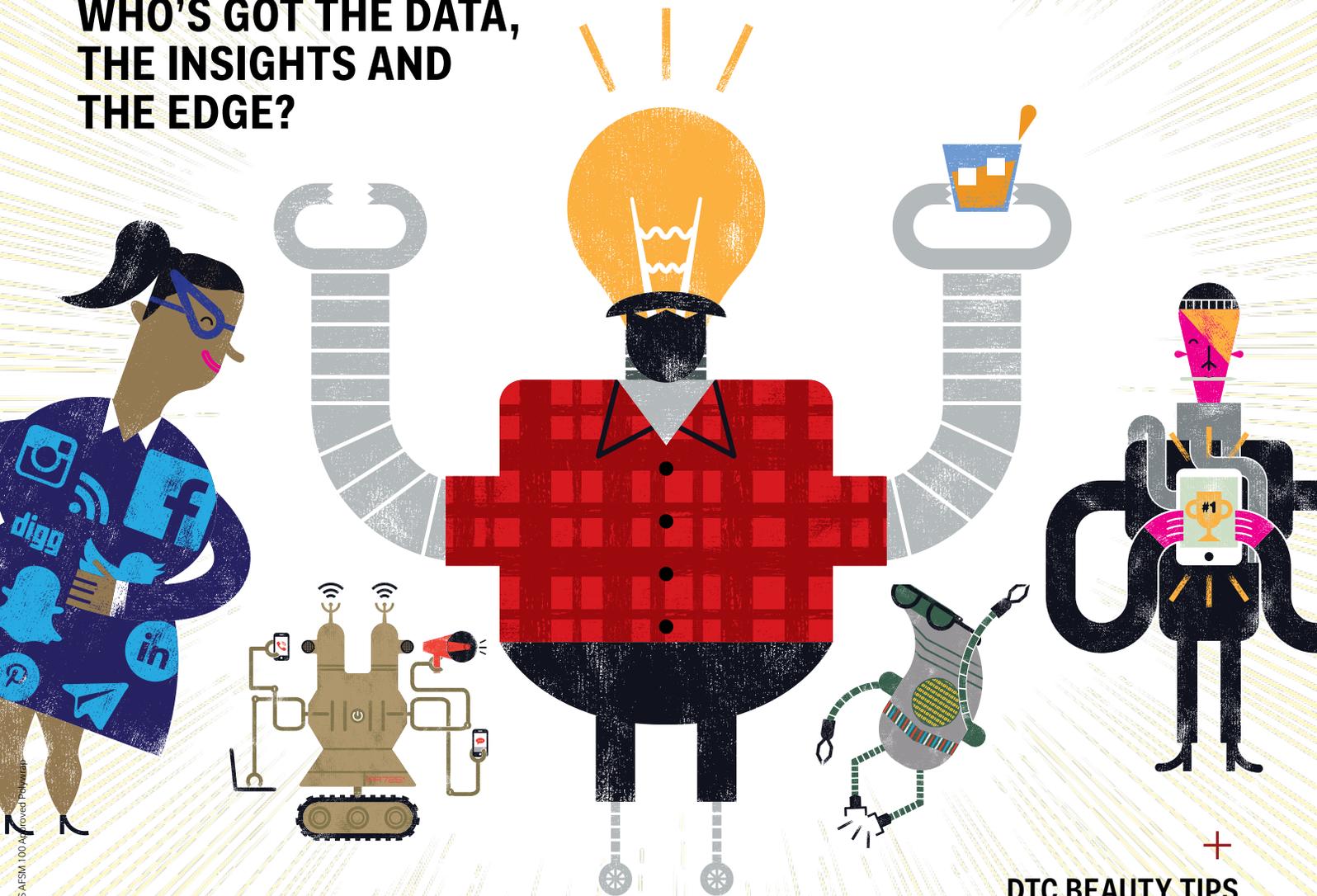


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Rethink and the cultural zeitgeist

BY MELISSA DUNNE

TOM SHEPANKSY TALKS LIKE A HIPPIE and acts like a businessman.

While these two sides may seem at odds, the co-founder of Rethink has managed to bring them into harmony for his agency, staff and clients.

“We’re independent and values-based,” says Shepansky. “And I’ll be very competitive here and say, unlike the multinationals, we are here for our people, for our products and our profits, not the other way around.”

For Shepansky, who co-founded Rethink in 1999, along with Chris Staples and Ian Grais, making money and having business ethics were seen as two sides of the same coin. When the trio started their agency on the West Coast, they wrote their four core “beliefs” on a whiteboard: “Believe in the brands we help build. Believe in the people behind the business. Believe they need and want a great creative idea. Believe they can pay our rates.”

Those are still the beliefs that drive the agency, which has been profitable every year, notes Shepansky.

The agency’s focus on people has worked. Rethink’s credo is that free-market capitalism and ethical consciousness can co-exist to better both the business and the world. And it’s this ethos that has paid dividends for many of its clients, including the Canadian arms of A&W and IKEA, which have had big wins with values-based campaigns. Rethink has also been winning a lot of new business pitches lately, including WestJet.

The values of Shepansky and his agency are currently in perfect alignment with the zeitgeist. A survey of more than 20,000 consumers, released by Kantar Consulting earlier this year, found that companies “with a high sense of purpose have seen their brand valuation increase by 175% over the past 12 years versus a median growth rate of 86% and a growth rate of 70% for brands with a low sense of purpose.”

And a majority (almost two-thirds) of millennials and Gen Zers express a preference for “brands that have a point of view and stand for something,” adds the survey

KEY NEW BUSINESS

Heinz Mayo, Kraft Peanut Butter, Ontario Science Centre, KRAVE, WestJet, Ace Bakeries, UNIQLO, Mad Jack, Ottawa Tourism, Skip the Dishes, Pedalheads, Marcon, BeFresh, Uniqlo, CBC, Goldseal, Nicola Wealth, National Film Board of Canada, Maille, Sonnet

KEY HIRES

Christina Yu, managing partner, CD; Shelby Spigelman, director of broadcast; Dhaval Bhatt, CD; Stephen Parker, editor; Alex Butt, content producer; Thomas McKeen, motion graphics artist

STAFF 156

by the global growth consultancy.

Younger people want to buy products from brands that align with their beliefs. Shepansky says Rethink has reviewed mountains of research that shows the demo believes in putting their money where their values are. For example, A&W's recent successful launch of the Beyond Meat burger (which is regularly sold out at stores) proved millennials have an appetite for plant-based burgers, which align with those that believe consuming animal-based burgers is wrong.

Before the U.S. plant-based burger brand hit A&W stores, Rethink rethought how it did product launches. The agency engaged influencers who tried the burger (which reportedly tastes uncannily like the real thing, despite being made with peas and mung beans) to promote the new menu offering on social media. A TV spot didn't run until the third week of the campaign.

The shift away from television spots to influencers posting about products online means telling a compelling brand story is necessary, says Rethink's co-founder.

"It's really important for brands to have that authentic, believable story. In A&W's case, its evidence behind their food and its whole ingredient story has been a powerful piece of the strategy," says Shepansky.

"I'm a big believer in values-based brands and building strong values that you can use in your communication. I think more and more millennials are looking for brands they can believe in."

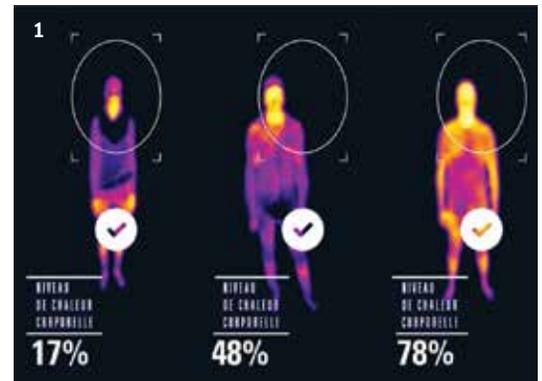
After celebrating 19 years in business this November, Rethink is now looking ahead to 2019 and beyond. The three founders are building an independent agency with strong values and are "guiding, mentoring, governing and leading" the next generation of Rethink leaders. Among them are Aaron Starkman and newly appointed CD Christina Yu, who was recently hired from Red Urban to co-lead the creative discipline at Rethink Toronto. Its culture is what drew Yu to the indie shop.

"Since the day I started in the business, I had always wanted to work at Rethink," she told strategy. "They've always been fiercely independent and prioritized people, product and profit in that order."

Staying true to those roots and values is as important to the Rethink co-founders now as it was back in 1999.

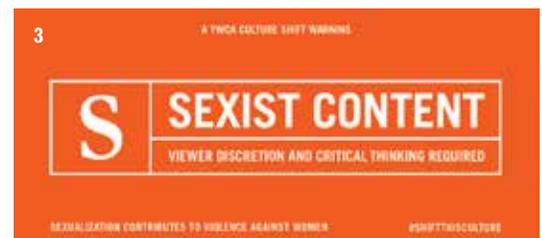
"We don't have a quarterly analyst to talk to [that we have to tell how] good our business is. We just run our business," says Shepansky on the pluses of being privately-held. "We're growing and we're profitable, but we're focused on our people doing the best work of their career for clients they believe in, and for a business that can make money and that's values-based."

CASES



1. Warming up for discounts

For its 50th birthday, Sports Experts wanted to inspire Quebecers to adopt a healthier lifestyle. A smart thermal imaging station was created to measure body temperature and reward commuters with discounts when they worked up a sweat. All they had to do was run or walk up a flight of stairs in a Montreal subway. While it may seem simple enough, the stairs in question were the steepest in the station, giving people a serious challenge if they wanted to earn a coupon. For instance, to get a 70% discount at Sports Experts, you'd have to increase your temperature by, you guessed it, 70%.



2. Using a digitally-led design system, Rethink worked with local folk with deep roots in their communities to tell their personal stories for Uniqlo.

3. For YWCA, the agency disguised warning labels on YouTube to

highlight how sexualization is still rampant in music videos. Mimicking labels that play before trailers, the "Six-Second Ambush Advisories" were unskippable and advised viewers of the content they were about to watch.

► For full cases, go to daoywinners.strategyonline.ca/2018