

QUÉBEC MILK BUREAU

Moo juice goes Pure Laine to serve up large servings of comfort

Street columns with woolen hats and talking wool puppets in bus shelters? When it comes to media creativity, the Québec Milk Bureau (Fédération des producteurs de lait du Québec) is not afraid to make gutsy decisions.

And that's for good reason: "We're always going for the emotion," says Nicole Dubé, the bureau's head of marketing, who's been working for 25 years on what she calls a "challenging product, which needs personality while staying generic and brandless."

True, there's always been something deep and heartfelt about "Le Lait," which is its own brand in Québec. Competing in a noisy landscape of screaming sodas and colourful juices, Le Lait has long been known for its quiet, sensible attitude from the old "Never without my milk" platform to the current "Natural source of comfort."

Launched two years ago in the middle of winter, a recession and H1N1, the new keyword for Le Lait is "réconfort," as in comforting families and friends through the hardness of everyday life. Hence the wool.

Since nothing says comfort like a hand-knit scarf made by a loving grandmother, that's exactly what the bureau's long-time ad agency Nolin BBDO showed on the first TV ads for the new platform. The idea quickly spread across other media, far beyond the traditional mix.

Over the past year, in collaboration with media agency Touché! PHD, the now-iconic hand-knit wool garments have shown up in extraordinary placements, such as giant tuques on Astral Media's street columns, hand-made woolen posters in MetroMedia Plus' stations, knit-covered billboards and knit-animated web ads. Pink-coloured, textured and shaped beyond the typical boundaries of display advertising, all that wool was hard to miss.

The tuques especially were so noticeable that pedestrians stopped for photoshoots between friends while motorists pulled over to take pictures. Some even stole the wool, fake or real. Talk about consumer engagement.

"We only deployed four street columns in Montreal and two in Quebec City, but they were so memorable that many said they had seen dozens," says Dubé. "We could have put 50 out there, and the results would have been the same. When you have good creative, you don't need to overdo it."

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Winter 2010 saw the wool come to life, with three puppet characters helping people solve everyday problems in a reassuring voice. During the fall, their 3D likeness were placed in bus shelters where commuters could plug in their earphones to be comforted by their sound advice. Folk stories could also be heard in the shelters where heaters brought tangible comfort on winter days.

In the meantime, "folktale nights" were organized in Montréal and Québec, including real-life grandmothers giving knitting lessons.

"Québec Milk Bureau is an extremely courageous client," says Karine Courtemanche, newly named president of Touché! PHD.

"When you pitch creative media ideas to a client, you can't use any traditional argument of reach, frequency or impact," she says. "It takes an open mind to accept these new ideas. Thanks to their gut feeling, they've created new points of contact where others would not have ventured."



Quebec Milk Bureau pulled wool over consumers' eyes in surprising executions

In the end, Le Lait saw milk sales grow by 1% over a few months, according to Dubé, "We're among the few Canadian markets where milk sales have grown."

Milk is not just about milk, however. In the Milk Bureau's \$20 million annual budget, there are three other generic brands: Lait au chocolat (chocolate milk), Le Beurre (butter) and Fromages d'ici (cheese).

Cheese became a strong focus of attention in 2005 when Québec Milk Bureau started making it a matter of national pride in response to a growing interest for imported fine cheeses. Québec-made cheese was in need of awareness.

This year, Cossette created a campaign associating locally made cheese with typical family moments. Five stories were produced for TV, including parents offering cheese to their daughter returning from Europe, new homeowners celebrating with cheese, cheese at a wedding, etc.

"Everybody can relate to these situations, but most importantly, Quebecers can relate," says Dubé.

For print, Cossette created awkward situations where cheese was painfully absent: macaroni without cheese ("It's just pasta"), cheese fondue without cheese ("It's just a plate"), and of course poutine without cheese ("It's just fries with sauce!")

As a result of Québec Milk Bureau's efforts, Québec cheese sales went up 25% last year.

-NICOLAS RITOUX