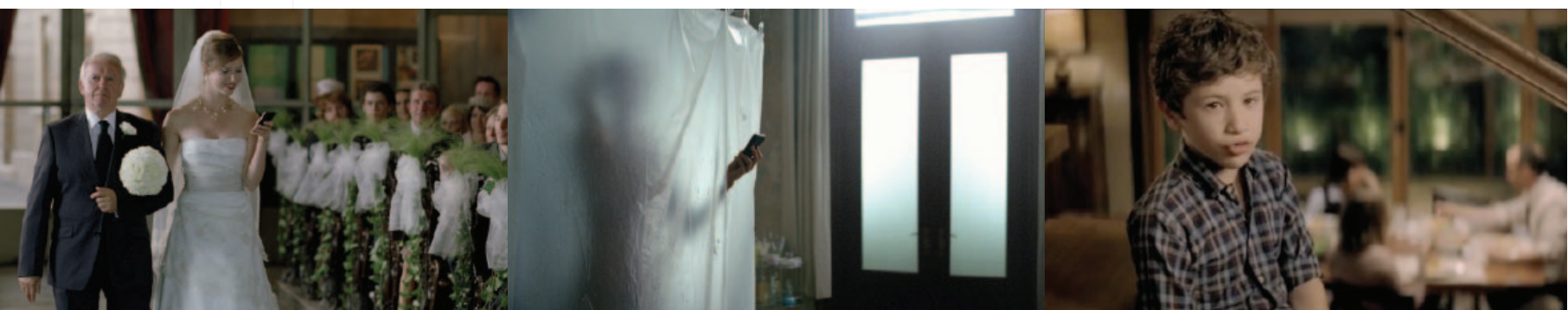


THE CHOSEN FEW

With Alex Bogusky's departure, will CP+B continue to reinvent advertising?

By Ann Cooper



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Alex Bogusky's unexpected exit from MDC Partners this past July—two years after he quit as chairman of Crispin Porter + Bogusky, the ad agency he helped propel to such exulted creative heights—resulted in much industry wailing and gnashing of teeth. The questions on everyone's lips: Could the agency retain its creative crown without him? Was it the end of CP+B as we knew it? Had advertising's so-called Ad Jesus upped and taken all of the agency's creative fairy dust with him?

Not surprisingly, according to the heir ascendants now running the Miami- and Boulder-based hot shop, the answers to the above are a resounding "Yes," "No," and "No." In fact, to many of Crispin's 1,100 or so remaining troops, the departure of their much-loved fearless hero, may yet prove to be a blessing in disguise as they reconfigure and plan for the next phase: A more aggressive global expansion with the first port of call—London.

These days, there's no mistaking the shifting of the spotlight away from the agency's favorite son and onto a whole new layer of recently promoted, if not as heralded, rising stars. These include the former co-chief creative officer

Andrew Keller, who assumes the chief executive officer role; his fellow former chief creative officer Rob Reilly, now elevated to worldwide chief creative officer, and longtime partner Jeff Steinhour, who moves up to president.

And it didn't exactly hurt the new regime that just days after these promotions were announced in October, came the news of two new high-profile account additions to the CP+B roster: the Kraft Milka global creative account, and the \$80 million MetLife account.

Since Bogusky's departure, the agency has been at pains to show that there is a lot more to it than just its charismatic former leader. "It's like a sports team with a star athlete, or a band, like U2 and Bono," says Steinhour. "Alex worked hard to make his agency and clients famous, and maybe he did too good a job. There are a lot of people here who have been very instrumental in the growth of the company. It's not that they didn't get credit, but externally, it often felt like the Alex Show. So even if the guy got hit by a truck, the reality is we've always had a strong senior management team here that has played a support role to the fanfare that Alex commanded—and rightly deserved.

1. Client: Microsoft
2. Client: Kraft
3. Client: Burger King

We still believe in the same things: doing great work, supporting each other, being smart, likable, fun and being quick studies. Someone you'd like to have to your house to dinner."

Reilly adds, "We haven't lost one account since he's been gone. What Alex did was completely unselfish. He put processes in place and identified leaders that he thought would best continue that vision. Three years ago, he stepped away gradually, so you didn't feel the huge loss within the company. He's left Crispin such a great, positive place, so it really hasn't changed."

In truth, it's probably too soon to tell the ultimate impact of the Chosen One's departure. But Reilly is right about one thing—it would be hard to find a more lively, positive URL on the ad agency planet, than for example, the Crispin website, filled with upbeat tweets, blogs and the non-stop reporting of agency news and events. Similarly, it's hard to beat the sunny optimism of its new CEO, Keller, he of the prodigious cre-

ative talent, the curled flaxen-hair and the two sets of twin boys. His promotion was probably the most unexpected of the three in that he's assumed a role more usually filled by traditional MBA-equipped suits. "I'm an optimistic, positive person, so when I heard about this role, I got excited about the leadership element," he says. "I thought, 'OK that's interesting—could I be good at this?'"

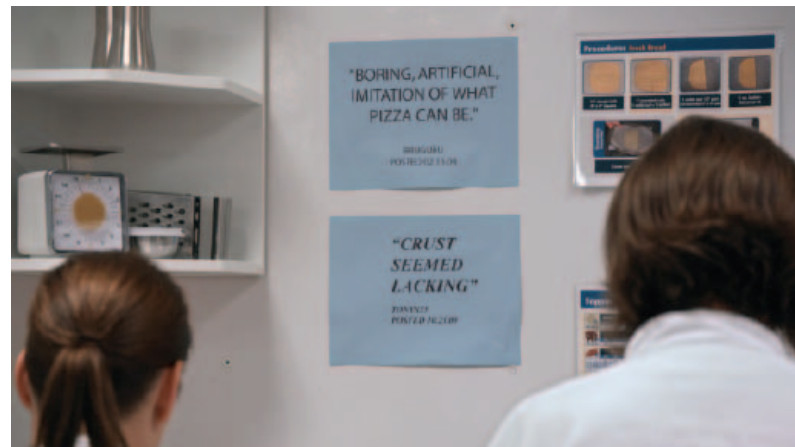
He decided he could. "The agency is building its future around being more creative-centric, and we're working with so many companies, it seemed as if creativity was needed in that seat to solve problems," he says. "I felt that I could definitely bring something to the position. I'm able to lift people up and find their true potential. I think that's maybe more my true calling. As a leader, you have to be open to ideas, which is something I really enjoy. Collaboration comes naturally to a creative person."

It was a move that was long in the making and much-welcomed, he says. "I was feeling, a bit,



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you know, tired maybe," he says. "It's been a difficult year due to the recession, accelerating technology and new forms of media. As someone trying to generate success for clients, you don't have a lot of wind at your back."

Keller becomes CEO at a time when global expansion is up front and centre on the agency's radar, especially with winning the Milka account, which is based out of London.

"Everything we do is so linked now. I think we're going to be seeing a bigger consolidation in global work and brands. For us it's a huge opportunity," says Keller. "As we grow and spread out, we don't have to be one of the old school global models of offices. We can do it differently. Our philosophy is talent-based. We've done a lot out of Boulder and Miami, as well as partnering with Sweden, where we have creatives from around the world. We've made work there and we spread it around. More offices create more surface area to attract talent. It's different from how others are doing it, but that's our philosophy."

Amongst his first other priorities: establishing processes and protocols whereby the increasingly sprawling agency can operate more efficiently. "I've been watching and taking notes on what our processes are," says Keller. "A lot of it's been gut-based. We have philosophies, but they're not exactly written on tablets and passed around. And that's key to spreading the wisdom

so we can be successful wherever we go."

In charge of herding all that global talent is Reilly, who started at Crispin back in 2003, and was the brains behind many of those attention-getting and hugely successful Burger King promotions (yes, you can thank him for the BK King). The agency had already fielded several global campaigns for clients Microsoft and Burger King, largely via service offices in Europe. Then, anticipating further growth, in 2009, it acquired Swedish digital shop, Daddy, which became known as CP+B Europe.

Reilly says that winning Milka allows them to do things they couldn't before. "My job with Andrew is to expand CP+B globally, get the offices to work together, get new business and fix things that are wrong with the existing businesses," he says. "We've got so many talented people and so many accounts that are going great, but you've got to put out the fires and find new opportunities. We need to add layers and leaders to allow me to do my job, because I'm still cd-ing some things. There are opportunities for people who want to work for us, and for people who are here, to grow into these roles. And you only do that by creating space."

A key part of freeing Reilly up to concentrate on global was the recent hiring of CP+B alumni, Ari Merkin, as VP-executive creative director in Miami, and who immediately started boosting the creative ranks there. Merkin, formerly CCO and co-founder of New York-based ad agency

3. Client: Domino's

Toy, and before that the chief creative officer at Fallon, New York, had learned his creative chops at the hands of the late Bernbachian Mad Man, art director Roy Grace.

Adding Merkin means that these offices will all have their own ECDs, says Reilly. "Even though it's all still one CP+B, we've got enough people here in Boulder who could be running their own agencies and who just happen to be running creative accounts. We have to create roles that don't necessarily replicate what's going on in Boulder or Miami. You need people who are the keepers of the culture for these new offices. My biggest challenge is just finding talent, and the speed with which we need to do that."

High up on the 'To Do' list: expanding the London office, sooner, rather than later. "A number of clients have said, 'If you had a bigger office in London...'" says Steinhour. "Milka's been a sort of a kick in the pants to act aggressively, and London is a logical place for us. So the plan is to build more of a factory in the model of Miami or Boulder over the next six to nine months in London."

For a long time, says Steinhour, Crispin was known as an off-the-grid agency that came up with unconventional ideas. Now, they're experiencing that on a global level. "Social, interactive, digital and crowd-sourcing are all changing how clients go to market," he says. "Clients can't afford not to look for the best idea, wherever that comes from. We have to make sure we're at the forefront of it."

Creatively, Reilly says the agency plans to keep doing what it's always done: produce great work that equals great results. "Great work that wins awards but that doesn't move business, fails," says Reilly. "Average work that moves the business, still fails. We hire intelligence. You can teach a lot of things, but you can't teach intelligence. Being delusionally positive and believing we can do anything helps as well. It's why clients come to us. We give them ideas that we don't think can be done and then figure out how to do them. I'm a little nuts when it comes to that. I take nothing for granted—I try and be humble and I'm always thinking of how can I be better at my job. If you remember just those three things, you ought to be pretty successful."

He continues: "My saying is, we're always on probation. I want everyone in the organization to wake up thinking, 'How do I make what I need to be making? How do I add value? How does the agency add value?' I don't smile as much because I'm always thinking about what do we need to do next."

One thing he is doing next, he says, is actively searching for senior people who love technol-



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It may come as no surprise that Crispin Porter + Bogusky, a multiple Best of Show-winner in One Show Interactive—is also the top agency in the Digital Decade list, which was voted on by past One Show Interactive judges and board members. And client Burger King's Subservient Chicken has been voted the favorite digital campaign of the decade.

The Subservient Chicken microsite was launched by Crispin and The Barbarian Group back in April of 2004, as a prequel to a TV and print campaign to promote BK's "Have it Your Way" promotion. Pre-YouTube, pre-Twitter and only a couple of months after the launch of Facebook, it took off virally and rapidly encircled the world. Within months it had notched up millions of views, umpteen parodies and changed advertising forever. Today, with 450 million hits and counting, it also "fueled a lot of aggressive innovation on behalf of our competition, because it showed that something could be made very inexpensively that would have a huge, viral impact," says Jeff Steinhour, president of CP+B.

Yet if it were launched today, it probably wouldn't have anything like the same effect. "It was made for less than \$50,000 and came off a real invention spree internally," says Steinhour. "Since then, marketing has changed radically in terms of the devices and how people discover content. I don't think they'd find it that interesting today. Subservient Chicken was still around two years after it was made. Today, people would be bored with it within a week, and that shows how quickly we tire of content—because the volume out there is incredible."

But more importantly, what it also did was kick-start the agency's interactive department. Set up eight years ago with just three employees, it now has almost 400. "That's a fact that very few other agencies or clients realize about us. People see us as a general market ad agency," says Steinhour. "And when we pitch digital-only business, they say, 'But I'm looking for a digital specialist, and you guys are an ad agency.' The thing is, we are larger in our digital agency offering than a lot of these companies that specialize, or hold themselves out, as digital experts. My goal as president is to repackaging that story in a way that tells the world that we're still leaders of this."

According to Rob Reilly, worldwide chief creative officer, "Today's Subservient Chicken equivalent is Wieden's Old Spice campaign, 'The Man Your Man Could Smell Like'—if you're talking Twitter and how it got so successful. But our Whopper Sacrifice for Burger King was arguably the most interesting and innovative thing on Facebook. We've done pretty well between Twitter, Facebook and the other social media tools. The world has been generous enough to recognize us, and we've been lucky enough to have brands that want to take a leap for us."

As for the next frontier, "Mobile is something we're conscious of and have been working with a lot," he says. "It's not easy to find out what's next. Someone who truly innovates in mobile—that's going to be a harder one."

ogy to pitch in on Microsoft, the agency's \$300 million behemoth brand, locked in a do or die battle with Apple. "Microsoft is one of the tougher things to work on because it's the software that runs the world," he says. "It helps if people have passion. On any account you need people who are passionate about it to drive it, and that's our philosophy."

But the jury is still out when it comes to measuring how successful the agency has been at remaking the Redmond, Wash.-based company's tragically unhip image. Steinhour, who helped reel in the Microsoft account back in 2008, claims, "We're very close to where we want to be. Apple has had lots of moments, and Microsoft has regained a lot of their footing. We've given them a brand voice, courage and a point of view. Before, they were kinda like, 'Yeah, we're big and we're sorry for it.' Today, they're 'Yeah, we're big, we're good and we're proud.'"

Steinhour points to Microsoft's recent financial results, for the quarter ending September 30, 2010, revealing a 25 percent increase in revenue over the previous year due in part to increased sales for the Xbox 360 and Windows 7, the replacement for Vista. "We're very happy to have been part of that," he says. "It hasn't been easy, but it's rewarding to see things we mea-

sure, such as likability of work and brand buzz, are very favorable. In the past that might not have been the case. No one likes to talk about it because it's not that sexy. When the numbers go up and people are happy, that's generally what you want."

Another key area poised for expansion: new products and content development. So far, Crispin's design department has created products ranging from in-house initiatives such as a bicycle sharing system in Denver, to new Xbox games and Chicken Fries for BK, and a new pizza ordering device for client Domino's. Keller says the more the agency does, the better it is for clients, and much of their growth over the past year has come from existing clients. "Anything we can do with packaging, websites, advertising or new products, is good," he says. "I look at the millions of ideas we have every day, and wonder, 'Why didn't we invent Twitter?'" Our model has got this production backend as part of its workflow, and we've got all these amazing ideas and great thinkers. So, why can't we combine these things instead of trying to convince clients to give us rights to intellectual properties that we create for them? Why not just create them for us?"

OK, so what's the answer? "Well, we've got these day jobs, and you can't lose focus on that.

- 4. Microsoft
- 5. Baby Carrots



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But to me, it's part of our process. It's not just additional work. It's what we do. It's not like we're squandering those resources."

Steinhour concurs: "Creating product is very important, but it's never been figured out in my opinion. We do it for lots of clients, but part of an overall agency of record service. For years, agencies tried this, but very often got, 'Thanks, but we have our own wonderful designers, what we want from you is advertising.' We've never thought of ourselves as only a marketing or advertising company. We've always come up with product ideas. But it requires an open-minded client that wants to share in the upside if these things take off."

All of which begs the old Jay Chiat question: How big can they get before they get bad? The agency has never sat down and talked about size or billing.

"If we're twice as big in five years, that's OK,

but it's not a goal," says Steinhour. "We are becoming more global out of necessity. Very few brands are just in North America. If it can be tweeted or put on a blog, it's everywhere. People want what we do and we need an infrastructure to handle it."

Steinhour says agencies either have momentum or they don't. "It's kinda like acting. Everyone wants to cast an actor in a movie, or else he's struggling, looking for work. It's very difficult to take a year off from new business. It's not a switch you flip on or off. With momentum comes new clients. This is great, but you need lots of employees to do the work, and suddenly you have 1,100 people spread over six offices and you're wondering, 'How do we manage all this?'"

It's a great question and an interesting dilemma pondered by many agencies before them. In the fishbowl world of advertising, meanwhile, it certainly won't be dull watching them find out. 🍷

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