

NORTHERN LIGHTS

Sid Lee has risen from obscurity by taking on the global account for adidas.

By Ann Forbes Cooper

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"Who the f--- is Sid Lee? Where the f--- is Montreal?"

The above profanity-laden and rhetorical questions, from Philippe Meunier, founder and creative director of independent Montreal-based shop Sid Lee, are delivered half facetiously and half seriously. Meunier ("Who's this guy? We've never heard of this guy..." he says, continuing his riff) claims he's asked those questions all the time.

"I'm traveling a lot and visiting schools and clients. I was at VCU Ad Center in Virginia, and I kept getting asked, 'Where's Montreal?' It's true. Can you please tell people that Montreal is on the east coast of Canada and is an amazing creative center. We can learn a lot from Montreal. We speak English and French and there are no Indians here." OK. Are we all clear now?

Geography lesson, sarcasm and expletives aside, he has a point. According to a short, non-scientific survey conducted by yours truly, Sid Lee is still something of an unknown quantity. This despite being named Agency and International of the Year by various marketing magazines, and landing global clients such

as adidas, Dell and Cirque du Soleil. But look out—thanks to a just-launched global marketing campaign for adidas, and a forthcoming global effort for computer giant Dell—this 450-person, independent agency that also does architecture/packaging/industrial/design/interactive/branding/marketing/production/company/you name it, looks set soon to be a fixture on everyone's map.

It's not so much the British are coming, as the French Canadians are coming. The most visible evidence of their advance is the current, 360-degree marketing and advertising effort straddling the globe—some 35 countries in all—on behalf of adidas, the sneaker brand determined to dethrone arch-rival Nike. The campaign, which broke in March touting its new tagline, "adidas is all in," is the first time the company has created an umbrella campaign that encompasses its Sport Performance, Originals and Sport Style sub brands.

The adidas work features the company's roster of superstars, including the NBA's Derrick Rose, football giants Lionel Messi and David Beckham, hip-hop artist B.o.B. and songbird Katy Perry. And it's comprised of a variety of



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1. "adidas is all in" TV spot
2. Singer Katy Perry
3. David Beckham
4. Hip-hop artist B.o.B.

executions, ranging from a two-minute online extravaganza, 60- and 30-second TV spots, and a series of five-second blasts, focusing on individual stars, all aimed at directing viewers to the adidas Facebook page. It also includes mobile, retail, event and print. The campaign itself, directed by French director Romain Gavras, with music by Civilization, is a glitzy montage of quick cuts of each star doing what they do best: performing with interspersed images of young skateboarders. Signing off with the tagline, "Rose/Beckham/Messi/adidas is all in," the campaign aims to fuse fashion, sport and music, and is a kind of literal visual translation of the theme line.

Using celebrities has always been part of the adidas brand, says Meunier, and it's just a question of how to use them. "We say, 'it's all in,' because, even if you're a singer or dancer one moment, you put everything you've got into the performance, and that was the foundation of everything. We're selling a brand to a guy who is running in the morning, and another pair of shoes for him at night, when he's going to a party. It's the same guy, but with different moments in his lifestyle. We said you need an umbrella, rather than a specific campaign for the different moments in your life. You could

be a skier at one point and a runner a couple of years later. adidas is a brand that embraces your lifestyle from A to Z."

It is not without its detractors, especially on the blogosphere. The campaign has been compared to the kind of super slick production for which Nike is known, specifically, "Write the Future," Nike's 2010 World Cup campaign. "It's not the same at all," says Tom Ramsden, global communications director for adidas Originals, and also in charge of the creative direction of 2011's 'all adidas' global campaign. "I can only tell you that our brand is built on authenticity and on real footage. We filmed Messi playing football for Spain, and Rose playing for the NBA, it's not fiction. Authenticity is key for adidas."

Ramsden says feedback has generally been very good. "We have a great opportunity on Facebook to get feedback. Posters love the music. They love the campaign. We want the campaign to be very authentic and that's the hardest thing to say and capture in 60 seconds." But the company always has its eyes on the competition. "The plan is to outgun the competition. I'd be lying to you if I said we didn't watch what they do, but we're not focusing on what they do."





Meunier says, "Of course, when you're the agency, everyone only tells you good things. I had emails and Facebook comments from different directors around the world saying, 'Is that you Sid Lee?' And to be honest, everyone was watching us because they knew it was a big campaign and so far, everyone is raving about it. Sid Lee is not known to be the classic ad agency, doing 30-second spots. We're more about emotion and we drive brands from a different point of view, and it's not only about advertising, so it's always stressful."

So why a global, umbrella push now? According to Ramsden, there was no one specific reason. "We have never told before the story of adidas in one execution, the full breadth and depth of the brand. Before, we always focused on Sport, or Originals. We'd had a lot of success building up different categories and we felt it was time to combine them. We had a compelling story to tell and we looked at the campaign as a bold statement that acts as an invite to step into the world of adidas and engage with the brand on a regular basis. We hit upon the idea of telling the story through passion – they all love what they do and they give it everything. We wanted to drive the message to as many people as possible and tell everyone our story."

The aim, says Meunier, was to stay true to the core brand. "We said, 'OK, adidas is not about me, myself and I.' It's about us as a team, and that's where we went creatively. We had the 'all in' line written on a piece of paper, and when we applied it graphically to the campaign, we said 'That's it!' and everyone was super happy."

The campaign's conception and execution is emblematic of how Sid Lee works. "There's always a team of six people around a table, and we keep putting ideas on the table that are interesting until you do something with it, because you don't always know if it's sticking or not," says Meunier. "One designer took the idea

and played with it graphically and then we said, 'O.K. that's it, that's the new concept.' And from that three-second message, came the explosion of the brand."

Meunier says they took the basic copywriting/art directing team, and added a creative leader—Kris Manchester, in this case. "Then we put three other people—it could be designers, interactive designers or architects or creative technologists—at the same table and they receive the brief at the same time. It's not the classic process where an ad team is briefed, works on it for three weeks, then ships it to the interactive department and then to design, and at the end of this process you end up with four/five/six creative directors, and four or five copywriters and they all have different ways of seeing the brand. So at Sid Lee, everyone is doing everything from A to Z, from retail activation to big TV spots."

Aimed at a broad audience, conception to execution took about eight months, with new phases launching later this year. While the core market is always young hardcore fans, it spills over to those in their 60s and 70s, to active 45-year-olds, while at the same time capturing the cool factor for the 10- or 12-year-olds. TV and online were key for the launch. "You use TV to put oil on the fire. It drives everyone onto the web where you can go deeper," says Meunier. "The adidas YouTube channel was number one last week, so you want viewers on the Web as fast as you can because then, they can go deeper with Messi or Perry."

Sid Lee's roots lie in the recession of 1993 when two young high school buddies, Meunier, a graphic designer and Jean-François Bouchard, a lawyer, decided that they wanted to make money, work together and have fun doing what they liked. "We started out as a design boutique because of my background, and because, who wants to give an advertising account to two young guys?" says Meunier.



In time, they became a small ad shop split between interactive and traditional advertising, resulting in a culture clash. "We decided advertising didn't work as well as it used to, and so we evolved into a new beast that was more about commercial creativity," he says, which he has described as a multidisciplinary approach to "create products, services and spaces and market them through advertising, experiential marketing, branded content and interactive communications."

They named the agency Diesel Marketing in 2000, paying tribute to the inventor of the engine, Rudolph Diesel. "His intention with that motor was to change the industry," says Meunier. "At that time, we knew we had to come up with a name that would do something in the year 2000, because we were just like kids with no money and no clients, but we knew the future would be about changing the industry. So we came up with a new name, and everyone was like, 'Diesel? What's Diesel?'"

Focused from the beginning on interactive, early clients included Cirque du Soleil, the French circus act, which suited the agency's creative personality. Hit by the dot.com bust the fledgling agency retracted temporarily, then regrouped once the economy recovered, winning local accounts and international accounts such as MGM Grand and Wines of France.

Then those Italians came along with their jeans brand. "They were super successful, and then we had a branding problem when everyone began asking us, 'Are you the jeans company?'" So they dropped the Diesel name, rearranged the letters and presto! Sid Lee was born. "When you rebrand your company, it's like having a sex change," says Meunier. "Sid Lee is crazy. It means nothing, but it means everything to us. It's a reboot of who we are."

Along with the new name came an expansion of their services. They launched the Sid Lee Collective, a "creative incubator" designed to fuel the efforts of Sid Lee workers. They also added industrial designers, retailers, and even a full-time chef. Sid Lee began working on projects for adidas, including, coincidentally, a launch campaign for the adidas Originals Denim by Diesel collection. That led, in 2008, to the agency pitching against and winning, from incumbent 180 Amsterdam, the adidas Originals global account, which dealt with retro footwear and urban wear. It also fueled the opening of the agency's first international "atelier" in Amsterdam, a concept supposedly inspired by the true meaning of the term atelier—an artist's studio or workroom—an open space where inspiration and creativity can grow. Two years ago the partners created Sid Lee Architecture. Then came Jimmy Lee, for audio/video production.

Sid Lee began by redesigning the adidas Originals concept store, subsequently launched worldwide. "We said, 'Let's embrace all the boundaries of creativity,'" explains Meunier. "Let's do architecture, industrial design and interactive. We asked, 'What's gonna happen if you put interactive into a retail space? What's gonna happen when you do a campaign that's gonna be on a bus that you designed?' So this is what's happening right now for STM, a local bus network here in Montreal. We're now designing the subways, the buses, the ads that go on the buses and naming the metro station. It's all part of the brand experience."

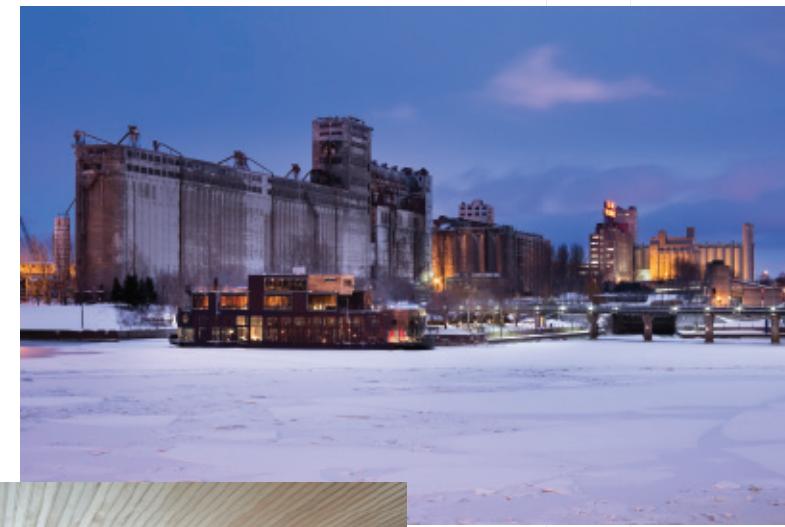
Along the way it also did something similar for the Big Apple flagship of Henri Bendel with the launch of a Functionalab, a beauty store within a store.

Then in 2010, in order to win the global consumer part of the adidas account, Sid Lee was asked to pitch against existing creative shops: 180 Amsterdam and TBWA\Chiat\Day, no slouches themselves and the latter of whom came up with adidas' previous tagline, "Impossible is nothing."

"We had the Original account, 180 and TBWA had the Performance account, so adidas said, 'Hey guys, we're just opening a pitch that will be the next umbrella campaign for adidas.'"

Videotron store experiential design



1.
Bota, Bota spa2.
INQ London print ads

Initially, coming up with a new tagline was not part of the pitch. "But I think you come up with a new tagline when you have a new creative platform. So you start with a creative platform and you realize that's strong enough to be the new tagline. This is where we put everything on the table and we present and then it was a journey for eight months. We all pitched and they decided to go with us."

Then came Dell, the troubled computer giant, and an account for which around 20 global agencies were vying. "Dell is very interesting," says Meunier. "It was a long, six-month process, but during that time, the relationship became stronger and stronger until the last presentation. And they looked at the work and said, 'Wow, it's the first time we see our brand but from a different angle.' They wanted everything that Sid Lee could output basically. If you do the ads, you could do the packaging and you could do the store design..."

The win allowed them to open their sixth and first US office, in Austin, Texas to service the account.

Of those who do know and have worked with Sid Lee, accolades abound. Ramsden of adidas, says, "With Sid Lee it comes down to the people, the talent and the skill. They're a hot bed of creativity. It's a very collaborative relationship and they're in on the ground floor of everything."

Lee Clow, chairman and global director of TBWA Worldwide has said, "They're a very special kind of a new breed of advertising model. They understand the entertainment aspect of new media and are not just technologists."

What's next? Continued expansion it seems. Meunier admits they have their eyes on opening ateliers in New York and on the West coast. They are actively looking for new clients willing to embrace a new form of creativity, he says. "Usually, we look for number two or three brands that are willing to make some changes, and at the same time, it has to be a natural fit. Dell for example, was willing to make a change." But it's not about being a big global agency, but about being a really good agency with small offices, he says. "We realized that in Montreal, when people from other countries

came to work with us, our creative culture got stronger and stronger. It's not about opening offices, it's about opening talent traps."

He's happy where they are, creatively, though some projects should get more recognition, he feels. "Here in Montreal, we launched a project called Bota, Bota. It's a spa on a boat in the St. Lawrence River. It's amazing. It's beautiful and it's the best kept secret in world because it's parked here in Montreal, not New York or San Francisco. That's why I think there's a lot to be discovered about Sid Lee and our potential because sometimes we do it in smaller markets and it needs to be known."

As for how long they'll remain independent, "We've been independent since day one. I don't know what's gonna happen in next few years. Every day there's someone knocking on the door saying, 'Let's do something together.' If we do, then it has to be relevant to who we are and what we do, and I don't really have an answer for that. We have 25 partners at Sid Lee and we're not alone. We're not on sale right now, and where we are, we're really happy." ■

