

## Business

# Shaking up the ad world

Chris Staples and his partners left a top Vancouver agency to set up shop on their own

By Jennifer Hunter

The first thing to know about 38-year-old advertising whiz Chris Staples is this: two years ago, at the Marketing Awards in Toronto, Staples, the national creative director of Palmer Jarvis DDB, collected so many trophies for his Vancouver firm the table collapsed under the weight, spewing a volcano of champagne glasses, cutlery and plates into the air. The second thing to know is that at the British Columbia Lotus Awards, also in 1997, Palmer Jarvis was nominated for such a slew of honours the ceremony's hosts arranged for a chair onstage especially for Staples—so he wouldn't have to keep walking to the podium. This year, Staples and his creative team at Palmer Jarvis won a Gold Lion, one of the top prizes at the Cannes International Advertising Festival in France, and the first one in the television category for Canada in the past 18 years.

Despite all these honours, in October Staples made a fateful decision. He left his job at Palmer Jarvis, and a salary in the six figures, to start his own company, Rethink Communications Inc. From Palmer Jarvis's Vancouver office, he took with him Ian Grais, 32, the award-winning creative director, and Tom Shepansky, 37, the director of client services. (The three men will be equal partners in the new business.) In Toronto, it is quite routine for creative directors to jump ship every few years, but Vancouver is far less volatile. So news that Staples was leaving Palmer Jarvis—where he had worked for nearly 10 years—shook up the advertising industry across Canada. "People were really surprised," reports Alvin Wasserman, president of Vancouver advertising agency Wasserman and Partners Inc. "About four minutes after he resigned, I got five calls about it." Despite the buzz it created, Stan Sutter, editor of Toronto-based *Marketing Magazine*, said ad people are



Shepansky (left), Staples, Grais: 'The rule is to leave when you are on top'

questioning Staples' move. "They wonder whether Palmer Jarvis can operate without Chris," Sutter says, "or whether Chris can operate without Palmer Jarvis."

Staples directed the crew of creative people at Palmer Jarvis's Vancouver and Toronto offices, and won accolades for off-the-wall campaigns such as the Humungous Bank, in which the B.C.-based Richmond Savings credit union poked fun at the arcane bureaucracy of the chartered banks. After its ads began to run, the credit union's business grew by more than 50 per cent. "It broke every rule in financial services advertising," says Staples. "It used humour and it used radio, not television, to do it." Another campaign turned the selling of shampoo on its frothy head. In a series of Finesse commercials for Lever Pond's of Toronto, there are no gorgeous

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models flipping their shiny manes, just regular-looking guys in a men's self-help group. In the one that won at Cannes, a man reads an embarrassingly bad poem about his wife: "Your hair is your best feature because it's more or less the colour of my workbench." Before the ads, Finesse's Canadian sales had been in the doldrums, but after, they went up 15 per cent, says Rob Guenette, Lever Pond's director of hair care.

Despite their winning streak, Staples, Grais and Shepansky say it was time to move on. "The oldest rule in the book," says Staples, "is to leave when you are on top." Not only had they helped boost Palmer Jarvis into the top ranks of Canadian advertising agencies over the past five years, they are all still in their 30s,

a good age to take the plunge and work for themselves. Another factor in their decision was that New York City-based DDB Worldwide Communications Group Inc., a division of Omnicom Group Inc., bought Palmer Jarvis two years ago. While Staples acknowledges his creative group did some of their best work after the sale, they were starting to feel some constraints. "When you're part of a multinational network you have to meet their profit expectations," he says.

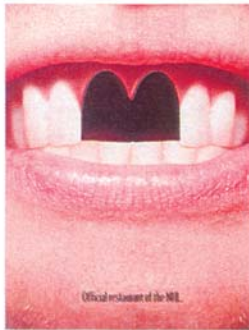
Understandably, the crew at Palmer Jarvis—the largest advertising agency in the West—is smarting a bit. "Chris is probably the best all-round advertising person I've seen in my life," says executive vice-president of creative strategies Ron Woodall. "His leaving is not unusual, though. It's sort of like sports, the superstars want to go off and fly on their own." Adds Frank Palmer, president of Palmer Jarvis: "We're a strong company and business goes on." Staples and the others have already been replaced and the Palmer Jarvis crew has successfully wooed national accounts such as Budweiser beer.

Other clients are not as committed since Staples' departure, most notably the Bay. The department-store chain employed Palmer Jarvis for this year's Christmas advertising and now says it is shopping the account. It cited the distance between Vancouver and Toronto, but spokeswoman Shawna Rossi also conceded Staples' resignation was a factor: "It would be fair to say since the team hired to work on our project is no longer there, it is one of the reasons we decided to open up the bidding for our account."

How did a young man who grew up in tiny Devon, Alta., just south of Edmonton, and went to Carleton journalism school, make such big news in the advertising world? Staples says even as a 12-year-old he dreamed of creating ads, and after university talked his way into a job with an Edmonton



Ads from Staples' crew at Palmer Jarvis for Kootenay Savings; Why Eyewear (right); and McDonald's (below): 'the tool of choice is humour'



agency. Seven years ago, three years after he had moved to Vancouver to become a lowly copy writer at Palmer Jarvis, Frank Palmer decided to change the agency's direction. It was, in Woodall's no-punches-pulled term, "the cesspool of creative agencies," and Palmer aimed to turn it into a creative powerhouse. "Frank had had a lot of financial success, but he was looking to give the agency a little respect and caché for its product," Woodall says. The two men recognized "a nugget of talent" in Staples, Palmer says, and so he was promoted to creative director in Vancouver. The first attention-grabbing campaign Staples' crew produced was for Greyhound Air. The television shot of a greyhound dog peeing on a jumbo jet caught public attention, even if Greyhound Air never did take off.

Staples is hoping some of Palmer's business acumen will rub off on the guys at Rethink. "It's hard not to catch some of Frank Palmer's entrepreneurial spirit," he says. Still, Rethink aims to do things very differently than Palmer Jarvis and that is immediately noticeable when one enters the office in a down-at-the-heels building near Vancouver's business district. The floor is laid with Astroturf and there is a Ping-Pong table in the boardroom instead of a slab of oak. Some walls are covered with blackboard paint and scrawled with slogans: "Trust your gut" and "I will not join a multinational network." There are even ties to a small Copenhagen advertising firm, called Rethink Copenhagen—ideas will be shared via the Internet.

Staples et al did not take any accounts when they left Palmer Jarvis. In the past three weeks, since the business has started, the team has attracted a few Internet clients and is working on creating its own brands such as Rethink beer, teaming up with a Kelowna brewer. "Too many ads are neutral or they annoy you," Staples says. "We try and get a visceral reaction from people and the tool of choice for us is humour." Rethink partner Grais says audiences are more sophisticated than many advertisers believe. The Rethink partners are aiming for *Seinfeld*-type drollness, making light of daily life to sell products. The only catch now is to attract more clients so they can deliver the jokes. **m**