

MARKETING » MONTREAL PITCHES ITSELF AS AN ADVERTISING HOT SPOT

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Isolated and cut off from U.S. media culture? Montreal may not be the first city that comes to mind as an advertising testing lab. But the city's business community views drawbacks as positives



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MONTREAL

When MasterCard Worldwide went on the prowl for a testing ground for a new big budget ad campaign using its “Priceless” tagline, the company was looking for a “purer” market with less exposure to U.S. advertising.

It chose Montreal.

“It’s an isolated market with very little ‘spill’ from outside,” said Lilia Tomovich, MasterCard’s Toronto-based vice-president of brand marketing, citing a much lower level of U.S. advertising penetration compared with the rest of Canada.

MasterCard Worldwide tested a new web- and television-

based campaign in Montreal before rolling it out around the world. The testing in Quebec resulted in some important conclusions, such as the need to complement the web campaign with a strong television promotion to help drive traffic to the net, Ms. Tomovich said.

“It’s a clearer, purer test environment,” she said of the city.

Millions of promotional dollars have been spent countering Montreal’s image as a struggling regional economic player that has seen better days. Now, a group of enterprising admen and local boosters are betting the city’s alleged drawbacks can actually be used to advantage, as in the

case of MasterCard.

They’re launching a campaign of their own, seeking to sell the largely French-speaking city as “the perfect human laboratory” for big global companies such as MasterCard to come and test their advertising strategies, in large part because it is a small, self-contained, isolated market.

“We looked at the Quebec market and asked what the next step should be,” says Sébastien Fauré, the chairman of the Association of Quebec Advertising Agencies, which is running the program, and head of Montreal ad agency bleublancrouge.

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The Association of Quebec Advertising Agencies is launching a campaign to sell Montreal as ‘the perfect human laboratory’ for the testing of marketing strategies. PETER McCABE/

THE CANADIAN PRESS

Montreal seen as perfect laboratory for ad testing

» “We decided that the negatives – a small, limited market – were probably our greatest strengths,” Mr. Fauré said.

Montreal is like a bubble, given the predominance of French and a homegrown entertainment and advertising culture complete with its own galaxy of locally famous stars, Mr. Fauré said. The result is that there’s little influence from outside advertising, creating “an isolated market where experiments can be performed in a controlled environment.”

Among Montreal’s other selling points are that it has an “overdeveloped” media environment for its size, it has competitive rates and world-class advertising talent, and it has a cultural effervescence.

The idea of the program – dubbed YUL-LAB (YUL is the city’s international airport code) – is to allow multinationals with hugely expensive annual advertising budgets to use Montreal to find the right mix of new and traditional media campaigns and then replicate the results on a global basis.

Quebec’s ad agencies need more international business like MasterCard’s, which is the underlying goal of the program, Mr. Fauré said.

“We’ve built up a strong advertising community here, but now it’s time to seek more international mandates.”

The ambitious bid to make that happen more is backed by a who’s who of Quebec business and political luminaries.

Among those supporting the project are Montreal Mayor Gérald Tremblay; blue-chip lawyer and former Conservative minister Michael Fortier; software tycoon Daniel Langlois; Gilbert Rozon, the founder and head of the Just for Laughs festival; and Daniel Lamarre, the president and CEO of the Cirque du Soleil.

The formal announcement of the launch is to be made today in Montreal.

But Eric Blais, head of Toronto-based Headspace Marketing, says he’s not sold on the concept, even though he acknowledged that Montreal is a creative hotbed that includes a vibrant advertising community.

“What is it about Montreal that’s going to make it such a great testing ground? Frankly, I don’t see it. The fact that it’s predominantly French-speaking, I’m not sure that makes it a small-scale version of what advertisers would want to replicate on a larger scale.”