

Animation

Products

COMMERCIALS IN CANADA

By Karen Mazurkewich

The animated commercial in Canada has come a long way in 50 years. Through experimentation and ingenuity, styles and techniques have broadened. Flat 2-D cartoons became a thing of the past. Once ghettoized in the 13-and-under category, animation is used not only to promote milk products, but also for sophisticated "adult" campaigns peddling Nike running shoes, beer, cold medicines and 7Up. Now, many advertisers view animation as an ideal vehicle for the soft sell.

It wasn't always so easy for animators. In the late 1940s, Budge Crawley had a corner on commercial jobs in Canada and he got steady commissions from government agencies like the National Film Board. Two rivals emerged in the late 1940s, Winnipeg-based Phillips-Gutkin and Toronto's Graphics Associates, a company formed by ex-NFB staffers Jim MacKay and George Dunning in 1949. Unlike Crawley, who was first and foremost a documentarian, the two new corporate entries were run by people trained in graphic arts and animation.

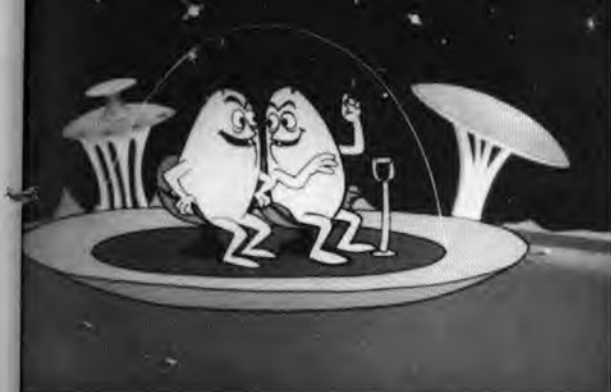
Phillips-Gutkin was formed in 1948 by catalogue fashion photographer John Phillips and Harry Gutkin, a freelance illustrator for *The Toronto Star* and *Maclean's* magazine. Operating out of an office in a third-floor walk-up on Winnipeg's Main Street, Gutkin hired U.K. animators Dennis Pike and Jeff Hale, and recruited local boys Barrie Nelson, Blake James and Barrie Helmer. The one-room office quickly expanded to take up the entire floor. The logistics of the operation were daunting. Most of its clients were based in Toronto, Montreal or New York. Making a deal over a cup of coffee could cost hundreds of dollars. In addition, the only motion-picture film processor was located in Montreal. Phillips-Gutkin had the graphic artists, but postproduction was practically a double-blind experiment. In 1954, the company landed a large contract to produce animated commercials for Libby's *National Movie Night* on CBC. It was a big break which led to more work. Tight budgets ranging from \$1,200 to \$4,000 per spot meant the company had to take shortcuts—substituting full animation with postering and collage techniques. The reign of Phillips-Gutkin came to a slow and painful death in the early 1960s when video replaced film and competition for low-end commercials skyrocketed.

Crawley and Phillips-Gutkin were entrepreneurs, but the real brickwork was laid by the NFB. The NFB may have started as a product of war, but it quickly evolved into a leading producer of sponsored films. Canadian Public Service Announcements (PSA) were the unwitting progenitors of commercials in this country. Some of the best commercial pioneers, George Dunning and Jim MacKay, cut their teeth on sponsored shorts. Even after they left the mother ship, they often looked to new works by the NFB for inspiration and opportunities for plagiarism. Rather than dampen creativity, the highly motivated animators at the NFB elevated the sponsored film from workhorse to art house. There was never a subject too dull. A film clip warning fisherman about fish rot found its way onto the international festival circuit. *Teeth Are to Keep*, a short promoting dental hygiene, attracted fan mail from UPA president Stephen Boststow, and an antismoking PSA made it to the Oscars.

During the sponsorship era of the NFB, its executive producer, Colin Low, conducted a cross-pollination experiment—mixing and matching filmmakers from around the world. Many of the artists hired in the 1950s and 1960s—Kaj Pindal, Gerald Potterton, Michael Mills, Carlos Marchiori, Les Drew—moved in and out of the commercial world. They were not cloistered artists. This elite group employed unusual techniques and humour to bend the rules of conventional advertising. Satire and spoofs were a favourite tool. Pindal's *Do it Now: Don't Wait for Spring*, a series of films that aired on the CBC, addressed the scintillating subject of labour shortfalls. *It's a Crime* (1958), a film animated by Potterton and directed by Wolf Koenig, is a spoof of *The Third Man*, the noir classic starring Orson Welles and Joseph Cotton. Its debonair thief gains insight into the economy when cracking vaults. Based on his inability to earn a living during the cold weather, the thief deduces that the problem is due to seasonal unemployment. Following a personal investigation, he offers sage advice to employers. Hailed by the *Globe and Mail* critic as "entertaining and original," the film premiered at the Stratford Film Festival. It drew such critical applause, plans were made for TV and theatrical bookings. Despite its entertainment value, the film's message had little impact on its target audience. Unemployment nearly quadrupled in the months following the film's summer release.

The first filmmakers to leave the NFB to set up their own commercial studio were Jim MacKay and George Dunning. Toronto was Mecca in the Canadian advertising industry. When they formed Graphic Associates in 1949 they concentrated on animation, design and filmstrips rather than commercial photography or live-action production. It was a creative choice, but not a profitable one. Graphic Associates (later renamed Film Design) produced a product that was a cut above Crawley's and Phillips-Gutkin's posterized spots. Borrowing techniques taught by Norman McLaren, it raised the bar on Canadian commercials. Graphic Associates produced the first Canadian colour commercial for a Buffalo TV station in 1950. It also gave both Richard Williams and Michael Snow their first jobs in the industry.

It would take almost two decades after Graphic Associates opened its doors before another company threw down the creative gauntlet. Vladamir Goetzelman setup the Toronto-based Cinera studios on the heels of the collapse of Al Guest's company in 1968. An art director for Guest since the 1950s, Goetzelman picked up where Guest left off. Goetzelman hired untested designers with a natural aptitude. Frank Nissan, Bob Fortier and Marv Newland—some of



Canada's top animation directors—passed through his doors. "Animators were far and few between, so Vlad was just looking for somebody who could animate, who could put the thing together," says Nissan, "and whatever design idiosyncrasies you could offer was just a plus." Nissan designed and animated one of the company's most stylized commercials—a cat-food spot featuring Miss Mew who is chatted up by three male top cats. The spot is starkly designed, with no anthropomorphic clothes covering the cats and no backdrops. Only the occasional marker, a manhole or piece of fence, pans across the screen indicating movement. One cat is introduced simply as a smile illuminated in the black. Subsequent Miss Mew commercials filled out the background and added props like hats and aprons, but the client returned to Nissan years later to repeat his minimalist approach. In addition to more standard fare for Bell Long Distance, Q-Tips, Shirriff's Mashed Potatoes and Del Monte chocolate pudding, Cinera produced some psychedelic commercials for Lowney. The animators borrowed heavily from Dunning's *Yellow Submarine* in a spot promoting Cherry Blossom chocolates. Floating lips tuck into the chocolate-covered coating to the cherry centre surrounded by colourful flower-power images.

In Montreal, a second NFB exodus fueled production. Gerry Potterton and Michael Mills left in 1968 and 1973 respectively to open their own shops. Both had an enormous impact on the commercials we see today on Canadian television. The humour of *Huff and Puff* (a training film for Royal Canadian Air Force pilots), a fish-spoilage spot, an income-tax promotion and a government-sponsored antismoking vignette underline the self-parody of these filmmakers. Michael Mills was already a *wunderkind* in British animation circles before joining the NFB in 1966. Despite his expertise, he was forced to adopt the Don Arioli caricature style for his first short, *Tax is a Four Letter Word*. By the time Mills left the NFB, he had refined his own distinctive "shaky-line style" to create some innovative campaigns for Alcan and Bell Canada. The loose approach came from working in a very small field for his animated short, *Evolution*. Mills is still a bit of a purist, always seeking sophistication. In the Stella Excuisine commercial for Backer Spielvogel Bates, Mills and his animation team translate what appears to be a sketch from a fashion designer's notebook into movement. The controlled, colourful strokes of a fashion model's face mimic the assured draftsmanship of a seasoned stylist.

Mills's years at the NFB may account for his appreciation of art-house techniques. He clearly has an eye for talented auteurs in his field and is one of the commercial leaders who advocates the soft sell. The commercial that exemplifies this savvy approach is the award-winning Milk Marketing Board spot for McKim/Watt Burt. The water-coloured commercial, which features a man astride a hamburger, resembles the illustrative style of Ryan Larkin. Its intended market was the "on the go" white-collar crowd. "Originally, the client came to us with hard-line linear drawings," says Mills. "I thought it had to be softer, like water colour, and they let me experiment." The six-month marketing plan turned into a six-year campaign. Over the years, Mills developed his own distinctive caricature. His big-nosed men, drawn with a nervous line, are frequently requested by advertising clients. It's animation's answer to a style made famous by New Yorker cartoonist Blechman. J. Walter Thompson called upon Mills to produce two corporate messages for Alcan—one promoting the recycling of aluminium cans and the other highlighting the company's participation in the 1990 Montreal International Jazz Festival.

The NFB provided a creative template for the first generation of commercial artists. The second generation—Animation House, International Rocketship, Pascal Blais, TOPIX and Cuppa Coffee to name a few—have taken the industry one step further. Standing on the commercial rungs established by the old guard, the second wave has exploited both the experimental artists, as well as taking advantage of the emerging computer software industry. And they have proven beyond a reasonable doubt that animation cels products. ●

Excerpted from *Cartoon Capers: The History of Canadian Animators* by Karen Mazurkewich, to be published this fall by McArthur and Company. All rights reserved to Mazurkewich and McArthur.