

the entrepreneurs

MEDIA EXPERTS changed the way advertising works by focusing on the message – not the medium

Mark Sherman's quiet revolution

JASON MAGDER
THE GAZETTE

Mark Sherman is proud of his humble roots.

The principal owner of Canada's largest independent media services firm started at the bottom, as a ski reporter and part-time mascot for CHOM 97.7 FM.

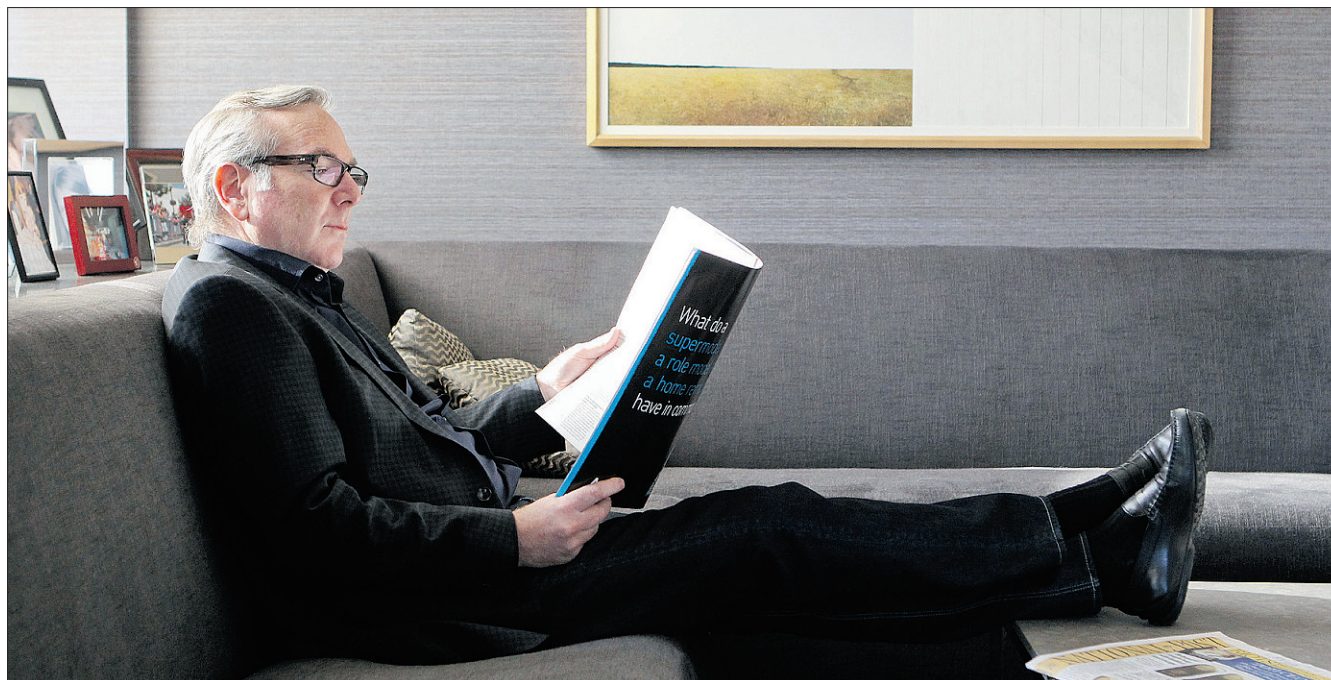
From those sweaty days in an overgrown rodent suit as Rocky Raccoon, Sherman moved on to become sales manager of the classic rock radio station before embarking on his own venture.

He started Media Experts in 1981, focusing primarily on buying media on behalf of advertisers. This includes developing a strategy and deciding which demographic to target, and buying ads to best reach that demographic using the most appropriate medium, such as newspapers, television stations or radio stations.

"At the time, 90 per cent of the money was being spent on the media, but only 10 per cent of the discussion was on how the message would be delivered," Sherman said. "It was backwards."

The approach was considered to be revolutionary at the time.

Media Experts today has customers such as Aldo, Bell Canada, Best Buy/Future Shop, BMW Canada, Mini Canada, HBO Canada and WestJet with annual media billings of close to \$300 million. It counts 125 employees spread out in three offices



JOHN MAHONEY THE GAZETTE

Mark Sherman started Media Experts in 1981. The company now employs 125 across three Canadian offices.

in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal.

Last year was a banner year for the company. It celebrated its 30th anniversary, earned a silver in Strategy Magazine's Media Agency of the Year Awards and Sherman tied with Terry Horton of Cossette Media for Media Director of the Year.

Sherman believes part of the company's success can be attributed to the fact it's independently owned and relatively small (compared to competitor multinationals with tens of thousands of employees). That has allowed the company to maintain an entrepreneurial

spirit and react quickly to new trends.

His company was among the first to use a modem in the late '80s and in 2007 produced Canada's first Facebook application as part of a campaign for Telus. Last October, the company became the first in Canada to open an online trading desk called Xpeto, a marketplace that matches advertisers with websites. It allows advertisers to make bids and instantly deliver ads to websites while targeting specific people based on their profiles and Internet browsing behaviour.

Sherman said the Internet has revolutionized his indus-

try, calling the pre-Internet era the dark ages. And his firm has blossomed since those dark times, from just a dozen employees in 1999.

Although the company is spread out in three locations, with its largest office in Montreal, Sherman says he considers it all to be one office. That means employees collaborate between locations, and it also means there is just one company Christmas party (either in Toronto or Montreal) and employees are flown in. The whole company also gets together every summer for a two-day retreat at a camp in Ontario's Algonquin Park.

While most Canadians may never have heard of Sherman or his company, many are surely familiar with one of the company's most successful campaigns, in which aerospace and transportation giant Bombardier designed and built the Olympic Torch for the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics.

Sherman said that campaign took a number of years to come to fruition, after Bombardier first approached him saying it wanted to buy a few newspaper advertisements in hopes of improving its profile across Canada. Sherman's firm convinced the company to

become a major sponsor of the Canadian team in the 2006 Olympics, and again in 2008. When it came time to think about sponsoring the Vancouver Olympics, the company came up with the idea for Bombardier to build and design the torch.

"Our research found that the No. 1 symbol of the Olympics was the torch, and it embodied the same kind of values that we wanted to embody for the Bombardier brand," Sherman said. "Given the complex nature of the things that Bombardier designs and builds – jets, trains, airplanes – we thought it would be a great vehicle to display Bombardier's design capabilities."

The torch relay received heavy media attention, which was complemented by an advertising campaign that included a television spot that premiered during the broadcast of the opening ceremonies, minutes before the torch was brought into the stadium. The campaign won several international awards, and survey results showed that Canadians with favourable opinions of Bombardier rose 28 per cent after the campaign. Bombardier ranked third in a CROP listing of Canada's most reputable companies.

"They went from the depths of Canada's most-liked brands to No. 3," Sherman said.

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