

Ready for their close-up

Dove's much-acclaimed Evolution ad showed a normal woman being transformed into a model. Three hundred million viewers later, it's also transformed Toronto's Janet Kestin and Nancy Vonk into viral advertising gurus

Talk about perfect timing. In October 2006, Janet Kestin, the co-chief creative officer of Ogilvy & Mather's Toronto operation, flew to England to talk to her London-based colleagues about one of the firm's big accounts, Dove, the 50-year-old maker of plain white soap. Kestin was all charged up about her team's latest efforts for the brand. It wasn't your standard ad for a beauty bar. Instead, it was a 74-second video that showed an ordinary girl being transformed into a billboard goddess, with a lot of help from makeup, lights and no small amount of computer wizardry. In case anyone missed the point of the ad, here was the punch line: "No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted." Evolution, as the video was called, was the latest incarnation of the then two-year-old Real Beauty campaign, which promoted Dove, a brand owned by the London-based Unilever conglomerate. The ad had been launched just a few days earlier, but not in any of the usual places. It was posted on YouTube, the online video-sharing site favoured by teenagers where the most-watched items were gags like explosions caused by dropping Mentos mints into Coke bottles. But many adults were checking out YouTube, too. It had just made headlines when it was sold to Google Inc. for an eye-popping sum of US\$1.65 billion.

BY SARAH SCOTT › PHOTOGRAPHY BY SANDY NICHOLSON

Dove didn't have to spend a penny to which cost just \$135,000 to make, generat

Sitting in Ogilvy's Canary Wharf offices, the company's global creative director for Dove, Will Awdry, was very pleased to see the Toronto ad maven.

"Have you heard about *Good Morning America*?" he asked.

Kestin, who had never made a habit of waking up to the program, was caught off guard. "Somebody needs to tell me what's going on," she said.

"You got six minutes on *Good Morning America*?" Awdry replied. The talk show had jumped on Evolution — with a little prodding from Ogilvy's New York PR people — because it played right into one of the hot topics of the day. A Spanish fashion show had just banned rail thin models, and commentators were starting to wonder why the fashion industry insists that the ideal of beauty should be an anorexic size zero. Now, the ad was being treated as content on national TV. You just can't pay for that kind of publicity.

Little did Kestin realize, this was only the beginning. In the days and weeks that followed, Evolution was featured on *Entertainment Tonight*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and at least 100 mainstream print and TV outlets around the world. The number of viewings on YouTube was just as staggering — by this spring, the video had been seen by an estimated 300 million people on the Internet and on TV. It was the most famous ad ever to come out of Canada, and it turned Kestin and her co-chief creative officer Nancy Vonk into gurus of viral advertising.

For their part, Kestin and Vonk say the ad has proven that the impact of viral advertising — information spread by people to their friends, family and colleagues online — can equal or surpass the power of traditional media. They explain their success in the context of a bigger trend, noting that the Internet has expanded the outlook of people in the ad business. It's making them rethink traditional ways of reaching an audience. "It doesn't matter if you're eight or 80," says Kestin. "If you can find people who are interested in what you have to say and engage with them, and if these people decide you deserve a wider audience, they will disperse your work for you, and you will wind up with a far larger

group than you would have if you had gone through the mass media." That's how Evolution managed to zip around the world so quickly. In other words, says Vonk, "find people who give a shit and let them tell others."

The duo certainly don't have to work any harder to convince their clients at Dove about the value of online marketing. It didn't cost them a penny to get people to watch the video. So for the \$135,000 they spent to make it, the ad generated \$150 million worth of free advertising, based on Unilever's estimate of the normal cost of reaching that many people. The ad has won some big prizes, too. Last June, Evolution was the first ad in history to win two Grand Prix awards at Cannes, the Oscars of advertising. Little wonder, then, that Kestin and Vonk are now big names on the speaking circuit, frequently invited to talk about online ad campaigns. These days, they regularly fly to conferences in North America and Europe, giving speeches to people who want to know how to make their own Evolution.

This wasn't the first time that the creative duo had landed in the spotlight after harnessing the power of the Internet to spread a message. Exactly one year before Evolution was launched, Vonk sparked a firestorm about a former friend and mentor, industry icon Neil French. He had told a Toronto audience that women can't make it to the top of the ad world because after a short stint in the business, they go off and "suckle something." A few days later, Vonk posted an essay, *Female Like Me*, on ihaveanidea.org, an online forum for creatives in the ad business. The article got heavy traffic online and was widely covered in print and TV outlets. Two weeks later, French lost his job — "death by blog," he complained.

Kestin also knows what it's like to stand up for her convictions. When she was a copywriter, she risked losing her job by refusing to write an ad for the cigarette industry and by not working on a campaign for a grocery chain weathering a strike.

She first met Vonk, an American-born art director, in 1990 and they became instant best friends. It was, they say, "a rare and

Model of Perfection In 74 seconds, Dove's Evolution video shows an ordinary woman being transformed into a fashion model. Posted exclusively on YouTube, it drew a flood of comments. Some felt it was a thinly disguised charitable campaign designed to exploit women's insecurities to sell more products. Others argued the ad spreads the powerful message that women need to accept themselves as they are. The discussion spilled into the blog world, prompting more people to watch the video



make people watch Evolution. The ad, and \$150 million in free advertising

magical click of a truly synergistic art director-writer partnership.” Then, in 1998, the job of creative officer came up at the Toronto office. In an advertising shop, the creative officer or creative director is like the editor of a large newspaper. He or she has to hire and manage talented people, decide how to mobilize resources, select which of the great ideas deserve to be developed, supervise and approve the development of those projects and keep the clients happy. Not surprisingly, it’s a 24-7 job. Kestin and Vonk both had one child each, and “we didn’t want to screw our jobs or our families,” says Kestin. So instead of competing against each other, they offered to share the top job, which was unusual at the time. But it worked out. Each of them is now responsible for half of the agency’s 30 accounts and they back each other up. “We’re very supportive of each other,” says Kestin. “We finish each other’s sentences.” They even merged their names for a lively online advice column, Ask Jancy. In 2005, a collection of their columns was published as a book, *Pick Me*.

Kestin was in charge of one of the Toronto office’s biggest clients, Dove. Unilever’s 50-year-old brand had always trumpeted the bar’s benefits for the skin with testimonials from real women, not models. But now, as Dove expanded into other beauty products, global brand leader Sylvia Lagnado proposed a radical change for Unilever’s flagship line of products. Dove had commissioned research showing that in 10 countries, only 2% of women considered themselves beautiful; the rest, apparently, had reservations. So why not make women feel beautiful by showing “Real Beauty,” in many shapes, sizes and ages, in plain daylight? It would be a challenge: The beauty industry had constructed a singular image of desire — the skinny wide-eyed 19-year-olds who monopolized the billboards and magazine covers. So Lagnado made a ballsy pitch. Her team photographed Lagnado’s daughter and the daughters of Unilever executives. They recorded what the girls, mostly preteens, thought about their bodies and what they’d like to change. One girl didn’t like her nose. Another wished she were blond, like her mother. Still another already thought she was fat. The message

— we need to expand the current idea of beauty to prevent girls from developing a negative body image at an early age — was a hands-down winner in the boardroom. The Real Beauty campaign began in Toronto, with billboards in October 2004, and the next spring, Dove launched another phase, the Self-Esteem Fund, which aimed to make girls feel better about themselves. Canada took the lead. The first ad, which Kestin supervised, replayed Lagnado’s pitch to Cindy Lauper’s song “True Colors.” It drew 50,000 people to the campaignforrealbeauty.ca site and was also a big hit on the 2006 Super Bowl.

Then Kestin gave her team a new assignment — to create a series of one-minute ads to drive women and girls to the self-esteem workshops that Dove was holding for mothers and daughters across Canada. Art director Tim Piper, a freckled, sandy-haired Australian whom Kestin and Vonk hired in 2004, had an idea: to expose the artificial techniques that transform a woman into a billboard model. The concept was that by showing the process, viewers would realize that the fashion models they see in advertising don’t look the same in real life. Piper convinced his girlfriend, children’s TV producer Stephanie Betts, to be the model for the pitch to the client. Then Piper, Vonk and the photographer decided Betts would be perfect for the real thing. The film, shot on video (less flattering than film), begins with her sitting down on a chair, in harsh light from one window. She looks ordinary. The lights turn on; she instantly looks better. Then the makeup artist goes to work. Piper sped up the process 1,600 times and digitally stabilized Betts’s head so you could see the transformation accomplished by high-fashion makeup. Then we see how the computer manipulates the image. Betts’s neck is suddenly lengthened, her shoulders squared, her eyes enlarged. And voila, one minute and 14 seconds later, she’s a convincing billboard model.

Everyone inside the industry knows models are retouched and the faces on the billboards are artificially enhanced, or even manufactured. “But the first time I saw the rough cut, I literally gasped,” says Vonk. “You had to fully confront the fact it was an illusion,”



adds Kestin. Piper posted it on YouTube on Oct. 6, 2006, and immediately, the comments started flowing on the site. Viewers were astounded to see how fake the billboard model was, and relieved: It made them feel better about what they saw in the mirror.

It was the right thing at the right time, says Sean Moffitt, president of Agent Wildfire, a firm that specializes in viral advertising. While Burger King's 2004 Subservient Chicken campaign had shown that people would flock to a comic video on a website, and YouTube had also proven to be a wonderful distribution vehicle for goofball content, Dove now proved more sober content could also be a viral video hit. Serious social messages are "very, very rare in the online world," Moffitt says. "You could say the legitimization of YouTube as a marketing vehicle happened in October of 2006."

Even Ogilvy's competitors praised Evolution. "It was one of those ideas you wish you had thought of," says Zak Mroueh, chief creative officer of Taxi Canada. "The payoff is so powerful. It's so perfect for the self-esteem fund. It was so brave and smart to put the microphone and the lens on the industry, to say 'Look at what we do.'" Canadian companies were taking note of the fact that you could reach millions of people without spending a cent on print or TV advertising, Mroueh says. But there's no recipe for an Evolution-style winner, he cautions. "It's something that happens organically. You just put it out there, and you can't predict whether it's going to be successful."

There's no question that Evolution achieved its official goal of spreading awareness about the self-esteem workshops that Dove was holding across Canada. The response was "quite phenomenal," says Mark Wakefield, Unilever's Canadian marketing director for Dove at the time. Over 650,000 people visited campaignforrealbeauty.ca, which contained information about the workshops, while the North American site got so many hits that Unilever briefly wondered whether they were being attacked by hackers. "Women in Canada are applauding," says Wakefield. "They appreciate us pulling back the veil, in a mesmerizing and provocative way, to show there's a lot of retouching and changing" in the manufacture of most of the images you see in magazines and billboards. "That isn't real," he adds. In Canada, the video helped to fuel double-digit growth of sales of Dove beauty products, although Wakefield declined to disclose any specific numbers. It was also a spot of good news for Unilever, a US\$41-billion conglomerate that has been lagging rivals like food group Nestlé and consumer products giant Procter & Gamble in recent years. In early August, Unilever reported that underlying sales rose by 5.8% in the second quarter, up from 3.9% the previous year, thanks partly to rising demand for Dove soap and face cream in the U.S.

When Vonk and Kestin speak on panels or attend industry functions, they are routinely asked for their thoughts on the rapidly changing world of advertising. In response, they're developing what you might call the Jancy rules of winning on the Internet. YouTube is a tricky venue, they say. If you're a big corporation, you can't post something directly. (Evolution was posted by the 35-year-old director, Piper. He also replied to some of the hundreds of comments posted about Evolution on YouTube's online forum.) What's more, you have to hand your content over to the



community, let them parody it, and take the flak with good grace. "Not all clients are ready to go there," says Vonk.

And don't bother trying a heavy-handed sales job, they advise. "You will not survive in that environment with anything less than total transparency," Vonk says. "You have got to be attention-getting, engaging, honest, likeable. Don't show up with anything that is less than extremely entertaining content. So that rules out 95% of advertising." And remember the audience, Kestin adds: "Don't put the stuff for your grandmother on YouTube."

The Internet is opening up thrilling new vistas for ad people, they say. "We used to be a business driven by media," explains Kestin. A TV ad, for example, has to fit the strict conventions of the medium. "Now the business is driven by ideas. If an idea is strong, it can exist in many different media." TV, print and radio "seem like just a few notes out of a keyboard that has an infinite number of keys," Vonk adds.

Today, Kestin and Vonk remain co-creative directors, but Kestin now flies around the world on a new job, as Ogilvy's global chief of the Self-Esteem Fund. They're having fun being celebrities. Last June, for instance, the two were standing in line at Toronto's Pearson Airport when they got an advance call informing them they had won a Grand Prix at Cannes. Screaming for joy, Vonk jumped hand in hand with Kestin, like kids at a playground. "It was the polar opposite of jaded cool," recalls Vonk. A couple of days later, they celebrated their unprecedented second Grand Prix in Cannes at a swish party with the global hot shots of their firm. "It was very cathartic," says Vonk. Just one year earlier, some of those hot shots had shunned the pair after Vonk's critique of Neil French. But now, in the warm glamour of Cannes, Kestin and Vonk were savouring their moment on top of the ad world. Says Vonk: "It was a perfect circle, almost in a mind-boggling way." **B**