



Playing Through

The principals of Wexley on the corporate course: Cal McAllister (with goat), Brian Marr (with raised putter), and Ian Cohen.

BUTLER CREDIT: H



The Wexley Way

In the advertising racket, the future is coming up fast. Or maybe it's already here, at an obstreperous little agency called **Wexley School for Girls**

BY JOSH DEAN
Photograph by
Greg Segal

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If you run

an advertising agency, there are different ways to pitch a potential client. You can submit a proposal, all neat and workshopped and PowerPoint-y. You can create a mock campaign that dazzles with its vision and insight and originality. Or you can pretend that one of the client's products has poked your eye out. That would be the Wexley way.

Brian Marr, managing director of the Seattle-based Wexley School for Girls—which is not a school—has received a tip that a certain office-supply juggernaut is looking for help with a new campaign. So he and Ian Cohen, one of Wexley's two founders, have concocted an idea.

Cohen begins untwisting the wire from a spiral notebook until a nice tangle of gnarly metal protrudes from the spine. He holds it up to his eye and pinches it shut, then contorts his face into a painful grimace. Then he howls, not entirely convincingly.

"I like it," says Marr. "We'll e-mail that clip to them with an ultimatum: Your dangerous spiral-bound notebook has poked out Ian's eye. Give us your business, and we'll forget the whole thing happened."

Being young and relatively unknown, Wexley can't rely on word of mouth alone to attract business, and its principals are not at all shy about pitching themselves. A favorite technique (for when blackmail doesn't strike quite the right tone) is to build a one-page website known as "Welcome to Kick Ass." The site will be targeted to a specific person, and an original song will be written on his or her behalf. This is how Wexley came to work with Amp, Pepsi's Red Bull competitor. As with the office-supply company, a friend tipped Wexley off that a certain marketing officer might be open to entreaties. So Wexley sent Brett O'Brien, Amp's senior marketing man-

ager, an unsolicited e-mail containing a link. He clicked on it and listened to his song, an excerpt of which follows:

You've got lasers for your eyes and four swords for your hands.

You're 12 feet tall and made of iron clad iron and pure alcohol.

So please don't light a match around you or you'll explode in a fiery ball of sexy hotness the likes of which have never been seen or ever witnesssssssed. . .

So why don't you give us a call today? Brett O'Brien and the Wexley School for Girls ooh ooh ooh ooh. . .

The singing is acceptable but unpolished. And if you are looking for rhyme or rhythm or pentameter, you won't find any. It is what you might call low-fi, which is an adjective that fits easily with much of Wexley's work. O'Brien hired Wexley—not to create commercials; that's the job of his big agency, BBDO. Rather, he wanted to solicit Wexley's help in naming some of the Amp products. "It's less about creating large-scale advertising with these guys and more like how do we infuse their influence into our larger message," he explains.

Not every potential client is ready. A while back, Jansport came by. Jansport makes backpacks. Tom Deslongchamp, who is an art director but, like everyone at Wexley, is agile and contributes to pretty much everything, put on a white jumpsuit and a top hat and squeezed himself into a gigantic Jansport bag that sat in the corner of the upstairs conference room. When Jansport's marketing reps arrived, Deslongchamp hopped out of the bag and handed over the presentations. Perhaps it was a little much—Wexley didn't get the job. Which is OK. Either you get what Wexley is selling—a

very particular sensibility and approach toward marketing—or you don't.

This is not *Mad Men* or *Melrose Place*. The men and women of Wexley even bristle a little when you call what they do advertising. In their estimation, the ad business is undergoing a shift, one that affects both agencies and their clients. The days of huge production teams and million-dollar media buys is waning, and as the economy slips further into decrepitude, and companies have less money to burn, this will only become clearer.

"Across the country, companies are telling their boards, 'economic downturn; it's terrible out there,'" says Cal McAllister, Wexley's other founder. "And the board should ask, 'OK, what are you going to do about it?' Well, just like the Big Three need to think differently and not fly jets down when they have eco-friendly cars to drive, they need to not buy a 30-second spot that everyone is going to TiVo right past and start thinking of other ways to reach their customer. There is less money out there right now, but there is also huge opportunity. People are spending more time getting information and branding messages than ever before. To reach them, it just takes a marketing department to think entirely differently. And that's exactly where Wexley comes in."

Under "What does Wexley do?" on the company's website—a site that beckons with (to quote its own verbiage) a "half-naked statue lady" and that has a jangly, off-tune fight song—it reads: "In the true sense of the word 'advertising,' we can act like an advertising agency... that said, we believe everything is advertising: Traditional media, design, packaging, guerilla tactics and events... even squirrel races, done properly, can be advertising. Fact is, lots of our clients already have

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They're Off Wexley's breakthrough short film, *Winner Take Steve*, wasn't really an ad for anything.

(final design tk for this page)



Targeted Giant pushpins like this appeared all over Seattle in 2007, calling attention to Microsoft's Live Search Maps.

By All Means A Wexley School for Girls portfolio



Left Hanging This TV spot, from 2004, was meant to be the first part of a multimedia campaign, but the client balked at Step Two: driving a crane through the streets of San Diego with a mannequin on the hook.



Boomer Business A print piece—your basic rock poster—for Microsoft, which sponsored shows as part of the rollout of Windows Vista



Let It Snow Scenes and materials from the National Snow Day campaign executed last fall for Copper Mountain Resort. Wexley took this one directly to the media—by whitening out the front yard of a popular Austin deejay.



Now You See It A projection—essentially a movable slide show using the sides of buildings for screens—for Sprite

traditional ad agencies.”

So what is Wexley, exactly? A nontraditional marketing company, perhaps, or an alternative ad agency. Or, to use the industry’s latest buzzy categorization, a “media agnostic” outfit—the idea being that media agnostics don’t worship at the shrine of traditional media, which would be print, television, and radio. They reach the consumer in untraditional ways: websites, publicity stunts, viral videos. Whatever you call it, Wexley School for Girls is representative of a splinter cell in the advertising and marketing world—small, creative operations born in the digital era and nurtured by the rise of the Internet, which provided a new and vast market for media buying that was not only cheap (or free) but also offered access to very specific groups of consumers.

Jonah Bloom, the editor of *Ad Age*, says it’s impossible to pinpoint the originator of the media-agnostic idea but that he credits the rise of the current movement “to a bunch of independent agencies in the U.K., like Michaelides & Bednash and Naked Communications. What those guys realized was that some other agencies were tending to solve every business problem with the same answer: ‘Let’s do a flight of TV commercials.’” Trouble was, DVRs were devaluing the commercial (which is expensive to produce and place), and anyway, these firms found that there were plenty of other ways to speak to customers.

“It’s less about the mass conversation as opposed to a whole lot more individual conversations,” says Rae Ann Fera, editor of the industry trade magazine *Boards*. “The buzzword now is engagement. That’s why things like events or microsites”—which are very specific, ephemeral websites pegged to a product or event—“or alternate reality gaming or experiential design are so big. There are very few situations anymore where you’re guaranteed a huge audience. Companies like Wexley can target a smaller audience with a creative idea and really do something cool with impact.”

McAllister and Cohen are reluctant to

Wexley is representative of a splinter cell in the advertising and marketing world.

even open the door to a conversation about Wexley as a cheap buy—they billed \$10 million last year, and they will gladly spend your money. But their work doesn’t have to cost a lot. Wexley works often with small businesses and small divisions within larger brands. If a company calls and says it has \$30,000 to spend on a viral video, McAllister says, he knows that money means a lot to that company—too much, probably—and that Wexley can’t promise a video that’s going to get more than a few hundred views. It will certainly be funny, but what good is that if nobody sees it? Instead, Wexley would rather use viral as one element in a complete media campaign that might even, in the right circumstances, involve a more traditional buy, like some print or billboards.

Take the case of Copper Mountain, a Colorado ski resort often overshadowed by bigger, more famous places like Vail and Aspen. For the current ski season, Copper had \$200,000 or so to spend—money that would typically go to a fleet of magazine and newspaper ads of a skier chest deep in powder, with a tag line like “You could be here.”

“We were so over that,” says Pete Woods, Copper’s director of marketing. He called in eight agencies, including Wexley, and told them that, as a “challenger resort” stuck between much-deeper-pocket operations, Copper needed nontraditional thinking. Wexley’s thinking, he says, was “steps ahead of what everyone else was doing.”

Wexley took a look at where Copper Mountain would most likely find customers and targeted Dallas and Austin. In the fall, it hired improv actors, put them in vintage snowsuits, and turned giant tricycles into human-powered snowmobiles it called Snowmobikes. It then collected piles of ice shavings and dumped

the faux snow in busy downtown areas, creating a “snow day” that stopped traffic and attracted coverage in newspapers and on TV and radio.

Woods says the faux ski patrol was so popular that bouncers at local bars invited the patrol in. “With what promotion in the world does the bar buy you drinks?” he asks.

The tag line for the work is “National Snow Day,” and Woods says the plan is to slowly build a campaign that will end up in Congress, where Copper will lobby for an actual National Snow Day. “The whole campaign is based around the idea that everyone deserves to feel that little thrill of an unexpected day off with zero obligations,” says McAllister. “Anyone who grew up in a snow state knows what it’s like when your school district is announced on the radio. That jolt is the motivation. We want to bring that to the rest of the country.” (In the case of one Austin radio deejay who had never seen snow before, Wexley’s snow guns blasted his yard and driveway on his day off, then had the station call and wake him up at 5 a.m. Says Woods: “And he goes to the door in his boxers and sees 3 inches of snow in his yard.”)

As a microshop, Wexley isn’t able yet to make a play to be a big company’s agency of record, but that’s not really what it wants now. Rather, Wexley, and other smaller companies like it, is biting off little pieces, looking to take on a particular niche of a business—product launches, say, as Wexley has done more and more often, especially for Microsoft.

Recently, Microsoft asked Wexley to help promote Hyper-V Server, a software program that you would have no reason to know unless you work in programming. Wexley’s job is to help sell the product, which belongs to a category called VM, to a very limited audience of the guys who matter—corporate IT geeks, mostly. An agency that creates commercials and print ads isn’t really optimized to think creatively about such a project. The agency would probably say, “Well, let’s buy some ads

in *IT Monthly!*” But to Microsoft, this is an important product, and it has competition. It’s not as simple as just putting the name out there. What Microsoft has found with Wexley is that it can hire a bunch of people willing to apply their wacky energies to even the most boring of products.

For one thing, Wexley decided to crash last September’s VMWorld conference at the Venetian in Las Vegas, sending out hired actors dressed like the Venetian’s staff to hand out fliers that said the competition’s software was no better but cost more. On the back was a \$1 gaming chip. A frenzy broke out; one attendee stole an entire bag of fliers and chips.

“Just that idea became viral,” McAllister says. “Tech bloggers were at the conference; they took pictures and put it up.”

“We know you want something viral, but maybe you don’t want a video,” says Cohen. “Maybe you want something like that. Those 2,000 people are a whole lot more valuable than a bunch of people who really don’t care about the product.”

When Microsoft drafted Wexley to work on its college recruiting efforts, in which it had been struggling against more glamorous companies like Google, it was another seemingly unsexy piece of business, but a critical one for a technology company built on big brains. So Wexley launched a campaign called Hey, Genius!, which targeted the top students across America. Wexley sent the students e-mails with links to websites that—literally—sang their praises. It drew up sandwich boards with students’ names on them (“Hey, Sean Lynch!” for example) and had actors stand outside their classrooms wearing them. It built the first ever “Jobcuzzi,” a hot tub parked in student unions and occupied by a sycophant in a suit who barked congratulatory greetings at prospective hires.

The campaign hit more than 60 colleges and had 72 distinct creative pieces. “It was about as integrated as it gets,” Cohen says. And it cost less than \$1.5 million.

You know what Microsoft did the year before it hired Wexley? It bought ads featuring stock art and tag lines like

“Options are good” and gave out pens and stress balls. (“Stress balls?” says Marr. “What kind of message does that send?”)

“This year, they closed their numbers four months early,” says Marr, who says he recently spotted a kid at LAX in a Wexley-designed “Hey, Genius!” T-shirt.

He smiles. “Everything is a brand opportunity.”

Not even two years ago, the Wexley School for Girls comprised 18 people in 1,000 square feet described by McAllister as “more like an undergraduate independent newspaper club space.” The bathroom was 3 feet from his desk. “And it had saloon doors.” The rent was \$1,100 a month. “That is how you keep costs down,” says Marr.

The School existed at that location for three-and-a-half years, McAllister says, until the day it moved to Seattle’s Belltown neighborhood, into a former print factory that, according to the plans, was meant to have a retired helicopter attached to the roof. (The landlord approved this request, but the deal for the chopper fell through.) Inside, there is a faux Chinese restaurant with faux chickens hanging in the windows (it houses production, and, yes, people have stopped in inquiring about lunch) and a woodland-themed miniature golf course that winds among the desks where the creatives sit.

Wexley was founded in 2003, when, after a few years of working for Wieden + Kennedy in Portland, Oregon, Cohen acceded to his wife’s desire to return to Seattle. He thought the city lacked a firm like Wexley and saw no reason he

couldn’t start one himself. McAllister, whom Cohen had hired to replace him at Hammerquist and Saffel in Seattle when he first decamped to Portland, was more than ready to quit his big agency job at Publicis (where he had since moved), and so the two men set up shop. They spent their first few weeks filming themselves doing things while wearing University of Washington women’s volleyball uniforms. Their first video: jumping and touching stuff. “I was like, Running a company is easy!” says McAllister.

A few marketing directors who knew them in their previous lives starting throwing work their way. “We were doing well, but it was doing traditional work that we didn’t want to do,” McAllister says. For instance, they created a series of hilarious commercials for the San Diego–based continuing-ed company Microskills. The ads featured a crane that rolled in and plucked unhappy workers from their jobs and hauled them away. It won awards, but McAllister and Cohen felt the campaign was a failure, because Microskills scotched what they considered the crucial component of the campaign: an actual crane, bearing dummies, that would be driven up and down highways and parked outside Padres games.

“We really needed the stunt to happen for it to live up to the full idea,” says McAllister. “And coming off [a series of acclaimed ads for ESPN fantasy football], we felt ourselves beating this drum about reaching people across all mediums, but just slipping down the ‘boutique agency that does funny ads’ path. That’s not what we were about.

“We didn’t set out to be an ad agency. So we had a good first year, but 2004 was really, really difficult. We committed to

each other to not take that work anymore from old marketing directors.”

Wexley’s big break, when it came, wasn’t a piece of paid business. Nike put out a call for short films based around the idea “you’re faster than you think.” These

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were not commercials; the logo was not to be featured.

McAllister and Cohen sat around “staring at each other, just throwing ridiculous ideas back and forth.” And McAllister said, “What about ‘winner take Steve?’” His inspiration, he says, was the sort of nerdy summer camp moment when kids decide that the best way to settle something is with an athletic competition. In this case, two boys would race for the right to the name Steve. The loser would have to find another name.

Friends at a film production house suggested a recent Brigham Young University graduate named Jared Hess. He had shot a film called *Napoleon Dynamite*, which had yet to come out. (It would eventually gross \$44.5 million at the box office and more than \$100 million in DVD sales, becoming a cultural phenomenon in the process.) Cohen and McAllister loved his sensibility.

You could say they got lucky by stumbling into Hess right on the verge of his breakthrough, or you could acknowledge that maybe Cohen and McAllister had hit on a comic sensibility just at the moment when it was about to explode.

The film aired on a loop on Nike’s website and in Niketown stores across the country. It hit more than 20 film festivals and became an Internet sensation. Most important, it said to marketing directors and their bosses, “This is what we were talking about.”

“We said this is what viral can be for you,” McAllister continues. “The case study we were able to put together was quite literally what we were telling people viral could become. Plus it was Nike—a giant respected brand known for its marketing. It wasn’t just some nickel-and-dime little running store down the street.”

It was instant credibility and got them in the door with Washington Mutual and Coke. “People started taking us seriously when really big brands started trusting us with budgets that were decimal-point rounding errors for them but

Cohen congratulates the team.
“We got kicked out,” he says.
“Which was awesome.”

for us were reasonable production budgets,” says McAllister. “That was when the stars aligned for us.”

Every morning, the students of Wexley gather at the picnic tables outside a 1973 Prowler trailer parked in the middle of the office for the 9:07, a daily meeting. Its purpose is twofold: to make sure people (all of whom are young and many of whom work late) get to work on time and also to allow each employee to discuss what he or she is working on and to communicate anything he or she might need from fellow workers or from one of the bossmen. The meeting is one of the things Marr implemented to help impose structure on the creative chaos.

Someone runs the meeting from a laptop, going through a spreadsheet of clients. In a meeting in late fall, there’s Brooks Sports, Copper Mountain Resort, Pepsi, G4TV, and a whole list of Microsoft projects, representing various divisions. Ian Cohen congratulates the VMWare team on the Vegas stunt. “We got kicked out,” Cohen says. “Which was awesome.”

“It was a pretty basic guerrilla attack, but it got the news hit, and the URL was called out,” says Marr. “The client was ecstatic.”

Then, partly for my benefit and partly to fill in those not involved with the most recent project, just completed—the creation and execution of Microsoft’s annual company meeting, a rah-rah gathering of thousands held at Safeco Field, home of the Seattle Mariners—Marr rolls a series of teaser videos e-mailed to Microsoft employees in the months leading up to the meeting, with the goal of heightening interest and increasing attendance. They are spoof reenactments of the brainstorm

sessions at which Wexley and Microsoft planned the event.

Wexley’s team is portrayed as a bunch of eccentrics, including a cliché-spouting Fred Willard-style doofus named Chet and a loudly dressed dude named Hawaii, inspired in part by McAllister and his propensity for ridiculous shirts. They pose outrageous ideas, including one in which a “junior account guy” dressed as a butterfly wrestles a bear “Thunderdome style,” which alludes to the fact that at one point they considered renting an actual tiger to use in the proceedings. (Ultimately they decided Microsoft didn’t need to rile up animal-rights activists.)

The Microsoft representatives are portrayed as overly starched and square, and anyone who has worked at a big company will get the jokes about conference calls, room-scheduling conflicts, and corporate bureaucracy. At the company meeting, the shorts played on giant screens while the crowd filed in.

The company meeting was easily the largest project, logistically, that Wexley had ever tackled, and it included a world-record paper-airplane launch. In previous years, Microsoft had pleaded with attendees not to make airplanes out of their programs; people worried, seriously, that someone would put an eye out. Wexley turned the idea on its head. It told the 20,200 attendees to make paper planes and then, by means of a message on the jumbo screen, demanded that they be tossed in unison. (To appease lawyers, people on the field level were given protective goggles.)

“We had four-and-a-half hours of stuff that could go wrong,” says Marr. “We had pyro. We freaked that place out. It was awesome.”

Thanks to projects like the company meeting, business is good. For the fourth straight year, Wexley’s sales doubled in

2008. Even in a down economy, business (at least so far) has not suffered.

Ideally, Wexley is asking to be invited into the conversation as early as possible, to help build a brand from the beginning. The traditional model is that a company develops a marketing plan, then goes out and asks its ad agencies to execute the consumer promotion. Wexley wants to be there for the marketing plan. (Or, as in the case of Pepsi's Amp, working to brand products long before marketing them is even an issue.)

"We're getting in so much earlier now," McAllister says. "They're coming to us asking us what people want. We're effectively helping create marketing campaigns from the client side. We're creating products in some cases. [For Virgin Mobile, Wexley designed a Miss Virgin Mobile competition that was an online beauty pageant using photos taken on mobile phones. Wexley owned the trademark and from the beginning was an equity partner in the results.]

"From an ad agency perspective, you never did that," McAllister says. "You were handed the brief. We're creating the brief and then helping decide if the business succeeds or fails. That's why this stuff is so fun."

The afternoon that I was to leave Seattle, Cohen tracked me down in Marr's office, where I sat in the shadow of life-size cutouts of Cohen holding water jugs like dumbbells, McAllister shirtless, and Roxanne Okada, the account director, giving a thumbs-up. Marr's shelf is lined with fake hardcover books such as *Awesomenomics* and *The Art of Blowing Minds*. Cohen was worried that Wexley was coming off as too much of a zoo, that I might think it was just a chaotic funhouse that wasn't also a thoughtfully operated business. That this message was being delivered by a man whose desk sits on a lifeguard platform in front of a mural of the beach was more than a little rich, but it's easy

to understand how this sensitivity could lurk just under the surface of Wexley's clown mask. It's easy to imagine any number of business owners walking into this office, spying the creepy wizard statue just inside the door or the white grand piano that serves as a conference table and saying, "There is no way this sensibility could work for me."

But Cohen came bearing a binder full of PowerPoint slides and spreadsheets focusing on Wexley's work for Live@edu, Microsoft's on-campus e-mail software effort that goes head-to-head with Google. He talked of the research department and how much careful analysis actually existed behind the giant red nose. "There's a whole lot of thought and work behind the scenes," he says. Despite the stunts and the jokes, he says, it's "all about metrics and measurability. There really is a science behind it."

There is a perception, Cohen says, that Wexley is just wacky for wacky's sake—which perhaps should not be surprising to a company that announced its arrival to the neighborhood with a parade. It's a nutty (and yet highly engineered) ethos that extends to the website and the marketing materials and even the client materials. When Brett O'Brien of Pepsi got the pitch that helped persuade him to hire Wexley, the cover sheet had rainbows and a dolphin with a thought bubble that said, "Can I get a...Wha Wha?" which is the hook from an old Jay-Z song that became a cheesy white-guy cliché.

So you can see where people might get that idea.

"People describe us like that," Cohen says. "We wouldn't describe ourselves like that."

He considers this for a second.

"But if our competitors think this, good." 🍌

Josh Dean wrote for the January 2008 issue about the Learning Annex ("Bill Zanker Never Wants to Come Down").

inc.com For more about how Wexley builds a campaign, go to www.inc.com/keyword/march09.