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How children's television station TFO remade itself into a digital powerhouse



Pascal Arseneau, Chief Marketing Officer at TFO, in one of the company's studios in Toronto.

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Once upon a time there was children's television station named TFO that didn't have a marketing department and did little advertising. Instead, it relied on a few press releases and a teacher-only web portal to beckon kids, parents and educators to explore its creative French-language educational content.

As TFO grew up, the broadcasting world grew up, too. Everyone was talking digital and the station wanted in. Glenn O'Farrell, head of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, was recruited as CEO to lead a move from analogue to digital. He was joined by Pascal Arseneau, who had worked on an award-winning TFO rebrand back when it was part of TVOntario. This time Arseneau was charged with putting together a strong marketing team to build TFO's brand as it charted a new path.

By the time the station's 25th birthday approached two years later, Groupe Média TFO was turning bilingual heads with its new look, a YouTube channel and amusing messaging. Today it boasts nine YouTube channels that have garnered more than 148 million views combined as of last month and ranking TFO as the No. 1 destination for pre-schoolers in French on YouTube in Canada. And just a few weeks ago, the broadcaster launched an all-video platform at TFO.org that it's dubbing a French-language Netflix for kids and their parents. A cheeky bilingual digital ad campaign is in the works.

No doubt, hard work and inventive marketing have helped TFO boost its numbers.

Our success as an educational agency depends on our ability to listen and be relevant "What happens when there's a celebration?" says Arseneau of the birthday bash. "There's usually a gift and a wrapping around it. We looked at what we were offering to our public and how it was wrapped, how it was packaged. We took a good look at our content. Not just, 'Is it pretty and shiny?' but, 'What is it we're offering?' So while we were working on the content, we were working on the packaging and developing ways of connecting with audiences – reconnecting with some and connecting with new ones."

It's all about "micro-moments," he explains – being there for the audience whenever and wherever they're engaged. A Google-coined term, it's those "I-want-to-know, I-want-to-go, I-want-to-buy, and I-want-to-do moments" when a person turns to a smartphone or other device to take instant action on whatever they need or want. To Arseneau, Groupe Média TFO's chief marketing officer, micro-moments are about finding the most efficient channels to connect with audiences, proposing relevant solutions for their lives, and being ultra-responsive and predictive whenever possible.

"For a small agency like ours, it is key to identify our audiences, understand their needs and pain points, and focus our resources so that we can answer those needs with a genuine desire to make a difference, when and where it matters," he says. "Anything else would go against our educational mission. Our success as an educational agency depends on our ability to listen and be relevant."

In 2010, under O'Farrell's watch, TFO went OTT – or "over-the-top" meaning TV content is delivered via the Internet, without requiring users to subscribe to a traditional cable or satellite pay-TV service. Next, the station took on a more formal name and created its first YouTube channel.

Then came the party, with Arseneau and his team designing a new logo and new bold-colour branding on all platforms to attract a younger audience (it won a prestigious Clio award in New York City). A year later the brand was reintroduced through a Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi-Tele ad campaign with saucy transit and media placement that drove traffic to a microsite with the same upbeat bilingual tone. More than 50 employees in programming production, acquisition, marketing and promotion received social media training to learn how to engage audiences.

Now they're busy promoting the TFO.org video-on-demand platform featuring more than 9,000 videos and games, 5,600 pieces of educational content for children between two and six, mobile applications, colouring spaces, lighthearted skits and music by Francophone artists.

It's no wonder the marketing team has grown to 25 marketing and brand promotion specialists, with creative agencies brought in for major campaigns and launch strategies.

“Having had to start from scratch, with limited resources, allowed us to avoid some of the traps and the rigidity of traditional advertising,” recalls Arseneau. “There is an increasing number of communication channels, and so we choose very carefully, not based on what was done historically, [meaning] very little. Our marketing decisions are based on what makes sense today. It comes with successes and sometimes we make mistakes – something we are not afraid of. It's kind of freeing, actually.”