

THEY RUN THIS

Marketers have scratched their heads for years over how to best connect with millennials, who are now recorded as the world's most populous and brand-fickle generation. But who better to market to millennials than millennials themselves? In a new media landscape where the very definition of uncool is to *say* you're selling something, millennial creatives are prioritizing engagement and influence over bare-bones brand marketing in a no-rules approach that this industry hasn't seen before—and they're doing it on their own. We talked to some of the hottest millennial-owned creative studios who are breaking bad

By Alison Garwood-Jones & Scott Kirkwood



↑ Kastor & Pollux founder Dani Roche, pictured in the Topshop room her agency designed at the 2017 WayHome Music Festival. ("Nowhere in the room was it branded 'Topshop,'" she points out.) Roche took over the reins of K&P in October 2015 after her former partner went solo. "By then, influencers no longer felt organic or interesting," Roche says. She wanted to create an art-focused vehicle for quality branded content. "When I rebranded as an official agency, it took me a year of [analyzing] how to position myself because it didn't exist yet."

KASTOR & POLLUX

With a knack for organizing digital participatory experiences, this creative studio has set off a rethink around branded content aimed at millennials, especially females

KASTORANDPOLLUX.COM

IF YOU'RE A BRAND TRYING TO UNDERSTAND the secret to reaching millennials, forget about pushing your product or ideas on them. Hire them instead to throw a party (but don't call it a product launch) and ask them invite their cohorts.

If it's Dani Roche and her all-female team at Kastor & Pollux throwing the party, they'll build themed sets, add a DJ, pass around some retro snacks and free beer, engage guests with trivia contests and DIY activity booths (that may mention your brand in passing), award prizes, and commission or be the artists filling up the walls with provocative commentary on the sociopolitical trends affecting every millennial's pocketbook and dreams.

In the past two years, Roche and the "KP Squad" have shown that FOMO-style events with a dedicated hashtag work best in organically generating the kind of photo-worthy moments partygoers actually feel like sharing on their social feeds, while brands get the impressions and engagement they need to raise awareness of their latest products and services. To date, K&P has worked with Fujifilm, MOGO (the fintech app), and Topshop, to name a few. But what kind of ROI are we talking about? At the two-day event they organized for Fujifilm's launch of the Instax Share SP-2 Printer, 700 guests generated 400-plus shares on Instagram and 54 million impressions for Fujifilm. "I'm not confident I could deliver that many impressions through my own channels, but I know I could get people into a space and I know I could get them to interact with the product," says Roche, 25, who got her start in editing and managerial roles at MTV and The Creator Class.

Roche uses the six-year old former fashion blog that spawned her agency to archive each event, posting snappy video recaps, social metrics, and what K&P achieved for the client. On a deeper level, though, she uses the blog to examine her current methodology to achieving "virality" and her evolving understanding of the ever-changing world of branded content. While the corporate world tries unsuccessfully to reverse-engineer millennial behavioural patterns, virality only happens organically, says Roche. Although she does concede that there's a definite algorithm for sustaining an audience's attention and interest. "At the core of it, the most successful participatory experiences feel inherent to the user," she says. For Roche, this translates to "DIY" activities that tempt guests to play with a product in ways that are fun and intuitive. "By engaging an audience with an activity and teaching them something new, DIYs invite exploration and investigation and are popular [with my generation] because they are accessible, personable and fun," she says. "If viral content is based off crafting meaningful and positive experiences, DIYs are a natural way to fulfill this need."

All-girl squads are another effective way of engaging millennials. Think: Tavi Gevinson and the online Rookie Magazine or the Toronto-based Sophomore Magazine, run by a team of twentysomething feminists. Roche, who



↑ Kastor & Pollux specializes in shareable event production for clients such as Fujifilm (top) and finance company Mogo (bottom). In 2015, when Mogo wanted Roche to be their influencer of choice for their launch in Toronto, she instead pitched K&P as agency partner for branded content. "What if we tried to reach an audience in a different way by hosting a 300-person event?" she proposed. "I [didn't mention I] had never thrown an event before! I just wrangled all the things we needed to do." All things, she points out, that she didn't learn in her graphic design courses at York University/Sheridan College. But her design training came in handy commissioning the installations, which encouraged partygoers to pose for pictures.

works with three friends—graphic designer Sabrina Scott, art director Dani Reynolds, and senior creative producer Ema Walters—isn't convinced that keeping it all-female explains their success, but she does think that it makes them more relatable and inspiring to their audience. "All-girl teams encourage other groups of girls to have a voice and not be ashamed of not having your token dude calling the shots or being the face of something."

The engagement Roche and her team have received is proof that marketing to young women and girls has dramatically changed in the last few years. Now it's more about creating a positive support system, where girls want to buy products because they like the message more than they aspire to be this model or that celebrity. "The amazing thing about the millennial world is that it is more 'feminine' than the traditional masculine business world," says Roche. Millennials give each other the permission to create their own spaces and messaging.

Take last summer's Topshop installation at Ontario's WayHome Music Festival. K&P conceptualized and designed two rooms around the themes "Modern Romance" and "Wear How You Feel." For the latter, Roche designed and installed colourful posters with the protest slogans "Resist," "Revolution," and "Don't Judge." Over Instagram, the installation's meaning snowballed



into "My Body, My Choice." "Everyone was like, 'Yeah right! That's true!'" recalls Roche. To hear visitors at the space actively saying those things was remarkable to the team. "It showed they were participating, not just being in the space taking pictures, but reading what's on the walls and finding something to relate to in the art. These are the words that our generation is using to show that we're conscious and aware of what is happening in the world at large and what we need to do to encourage other people to also fight against all these problems in society."

The wisest brands are now supporting this kind of freewheeling storytelling like patrons of the arts, leaving push marketing behind. —A.G.J.

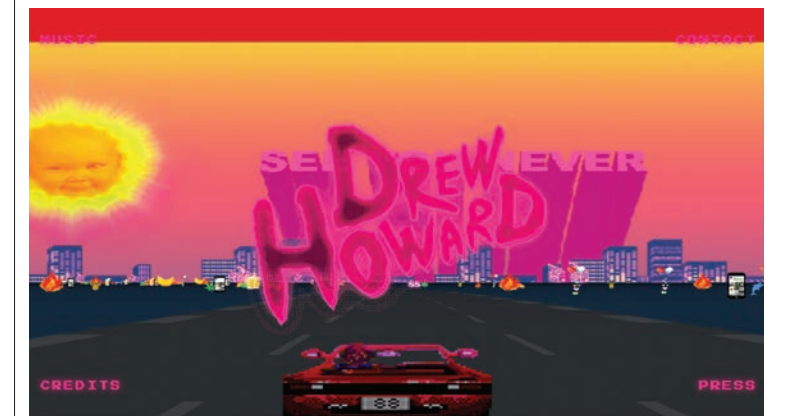
56

The user-experience wizards at this two-year-old studio deliver experimental interactive applications to musicians and other cultural influencers

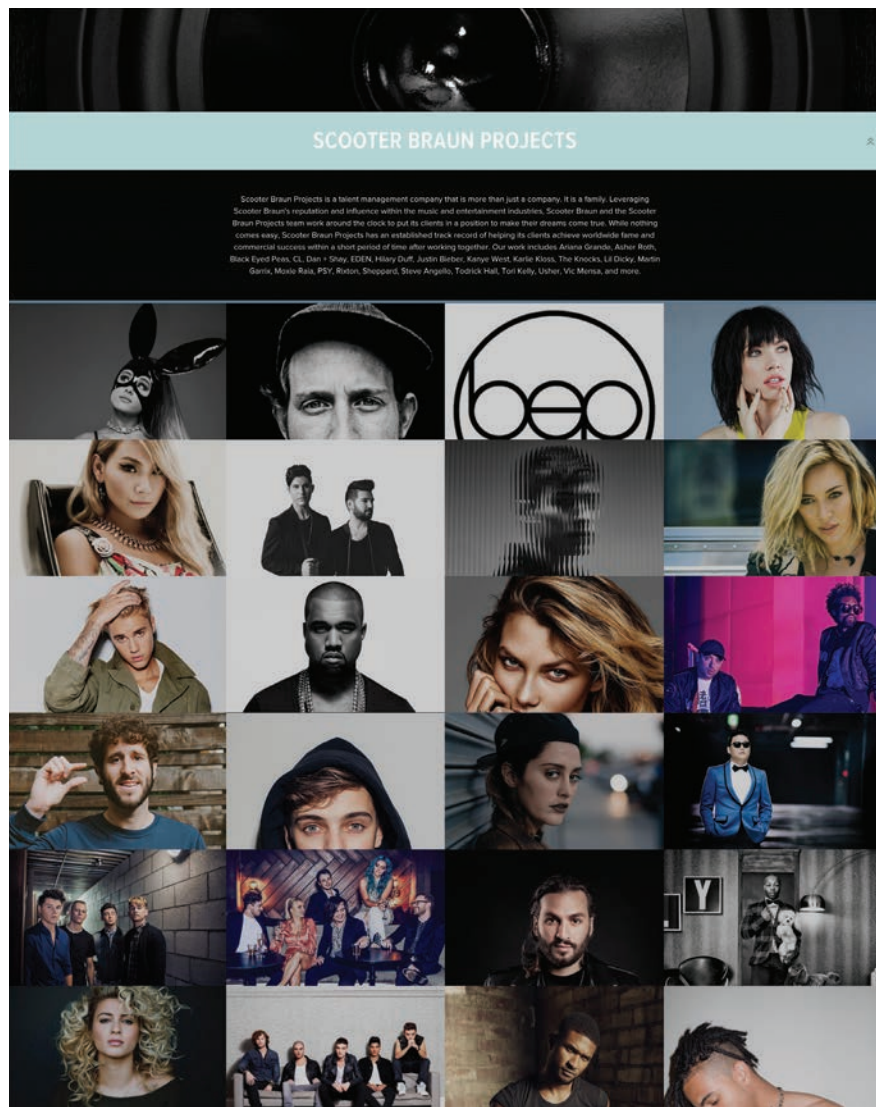
56.DIGITAL

IT ALL STARTED WITH MUSIC. Chi Chen had been crafting digital strategies for artists and musicians when Toronto rapper Drew Howard asked for help creating a website for his alter ego, 88 Camino. Howard introduced Chen to Peter Li, an OCAD University student, who later brought his peer TF (né Timur Fattahov). The three clicked immediately. After working together for a few months, Li and TF left OCAD to join Chen full-time, launching 56.

Early projects included creating a high-tech-meets-low-fi website for Kid.Studio, whose clients include The Weeknd and Big Sean. The agency also partnered with Free to create a new online home for The Creator Class—a community of millennial photographers and videographers that had outgrown its presence as an Instagram hashtag.



↑ 56's interactive efforts mix low-fi looks with high-tech executions. Clockwise from top left: Album artwork for musician Roy Woods; an animated online game for producer Harrison featuring original sprites and animation; a website for and designed by creative agency Kid.Studio, which 56 developed using a customized Kirby CMS platform; logo and website for Drew Howard, aka 88 Camino, based on the style of arcade games.



↑ Work by The Young Astronauts. This page: Website for talent agent Scooter Braun. Opposite page, from top: creative management for Ariana Grande; posters for Simon Cowell's boy band PRETTYMUCH; a still from Quartersnacks for Nike SB. "Creative management" means the Astros take care of the artist's creative, not their day-to-day business. Todorovic likens it to the way Mike Carson creatively manages Big Sean. Having one team work on all aspects of digital, merch and music videos creates cohesion. "When we're working with these huge artists, our biggest mission is to make them into icons," she says. "These are the projects we're most passionate about."

Before too long, the three had a steady flow of work. Today, Chen and Li manage day-to-day operations, Li serves as creative director and TF is lead developer—and they still pluck friends and students from OCAD to serve as interns on small projects, as needed.

"We're all consuming the same content and listening to the same music as students in high school and university, so in a lot of ways we're just designing things that we think are cool," says Chen. "But we're also hoping to design things that you wouldn't expect—so if you're scrolling down a web page, you might see a 3D perspective like the Star Wars preamble, which we re-created for musician Roy Woods's tour dates. We're always trying to push the boundaries of what design can do from a user-experience standpoint."

When they're sitting at their desktops, the team draws inspiration from Are.na—their generation's answer to Pinterest—but their creative work is also fueled by music, fashion, anime, the internet, and even downtime spent playing video games together.

Case in point: While creating a website for Toronto producer Harrison, Li wanted to telegraph the artist's upbeat, accessible approach to music. So the team created an animated lo-fi video game that allows fans to control a cartoon Harrison as he makes his way across a bright pink landscape, like a modern-day Mario. Li admits the team of twentysomethings is open to just about every design solution, even if it means biting off a little more than they can chew—crafting even the simplest video game with 100 per cent customized animation took a lot longer than they'd expected, but the final product remains a favourite.

For now, one of the primary challenges facing the agency is the speed of growth: "We're always trying to make sure that we're taking on the right clients because there's a lot of power and wisdom in saying 'no' to clients that don't fit your brand," says Li. "[If you say 'yes' too often], it may just slow you down and derail you from your goals as a studio."

One of those goals is finding time to travel. 56 recently booked a project with a client in Milan, Italy, and they're all hoping it's the first of many business trips where they can extend their stay—working on laptops by day, and exploring the country's art, architecture and museums during every spare moment.

—S.K.

THE YOUNG ASTRONAUTS

An interactive media company is taking innovation in the multimedia universe to new heights—and the results are explosive

THEYOUNGASTRONAUTS.COM



NEV TODOROVIC GREW UP WANTING TO BE AN ASTRONAUT, a fact on prominent display every time she dons her NASA baseball cap and badged-up bomber jacket. Tyler Savery, Todorovic's best friend from their Ryerson University days, also had dreams of space travel. They didn't make it into orbit, but when they were still undergrads they founded The Young Astronauts, a Toronto-based interactive media production company that bills itself a "collective of innovative artists and

engineers." It turns out, pushing the boundaries of the unknown—whether in technology, creative or strategic services—is a personality trait shared by all 16 of the young "Astros" on their team.

A case in point: When Drake's album *Views* dropped in March 2016, Todorovic noticed that within hours a few fans had isolated the album cover image of the singer seated on the edge of the CN Tower and Photoshopped him perched inside their own pictures, all of which they shared on social. Todorovic says she thought it was funny and timely, but knew that not everyone could use Photoshop. "I have an idea for a Drake meme generator," she told Savery, "and I know we can make this go viral, but can we make it happen today?" Savery chuckled, then delivered on schedule.

When the team shared the site's URL with reporters at *Vice*, *Fader* and *Complex*, the meme generator, as predicted, exploded. But impressions swelled into the billions after Drake asked if he could share the generator on his social feeds. Um, yeah, she said. That exposure resulted in Justin Bieber many other celebrities making Drake memes and sending them out to their combined 200 million-plus followers. Drake wasn't even a client at the time, as Todorovic likes to point out (Bieber was). "I wanted to get Drake's attention first," says Todorovic. "It's just so much cooler and a better story for him to have recognized [our work], called us, and created the relationship that way." The jury at Cannes thought so too. In June, The Young Astronauts went toe-to-toe with Apple, Snapchat and



100-year old advertising agencies to take the 2017 Cannes Entertainment Lion for Music.

If anything, that golden moment taught the team to trust their instincts. "Anyone on our staff can come up with an idea—for an app, a short film, a line of merchandise," says Todorovic. "If it's smart and it makes sense [and] we have the ability to react quickly and make it a reality, I think that is super special."

Success stories like this are confounding to legacy shops still struggling to deliver in the interactive media space. When a company experiences success with a playbook as open-ended as "explore the empty spaces and discover the uncharted territory," it can be intimidating for established agencies or large corporations who've come to rely on repeat formulas and whose services for social media growth are using strategies from a year ago. Their unwieldy size, structure and history with a different kind of success don't encourage the same real-time pivots around light-bulb moments, like the meme generator. "As soon as you do something new, it changes three months later," says Todorovic, whose nimble approach has attracted clients such as Nike, Red Bull, Live Nation, Viacom, and Pepsi. "They don't understand how we're so small and able to do all of these things [so fast]," she says. The Astros offer 360-degree solutions—from branding and website design, app and game development, video production, and merchandising, to their newest service: "creative management," a package deal for talent and brands that includes creative direction for marketing, music videos and other video content, design, strategy, and merchandising. The team has done creative management for pop stars like Ariana Grande, and, most recently, Simon Cowell's new boy band PRETTYMUCH.

After nine years in business, Savery and Todorovic are still very hands on, as they say it's part of the magic. "We were in school when it went from tape to digital. [That's when] we started to understand how everything was connected through all the different platforms and mediums." Meanwhile, the big agencies they might have worked at were farming out work to the smaller boutiques, "where one does the app, another one does the website and a third does video," says Todorovic. "You start to lose a lot of the cohesion that is necessary in advertising to our generation, and in general. The brand starts getting diluted when you have all of these different companies working on the same project but for different mediums. We wanted to fix that and be able to offer a horizontal solution so that anyone who walked in could create anything with us."

For the moment, the company structure is the only thing about The Young Astronauts that is horizontal. Everything else is shooting for the stars.

—A.G.J. M

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE
Looking for more creative entrepreneurs? Read about Montreal studio House of Youth's burgeoning business at appliedartsmag.com/features

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