PUNK ROCK KIDS

Despite their status as one of Canada's most brag-worthy digital agencies, the team at Locomotive hasn't lost their little-engine-that-could edge

←
The "Play" section of Locomotive's website highlights the team's excursions, including a recent all-staff vacation in Cuba. "At first, people couldn't believe we'd spend one week not billing any clients," says Frédéric Marchand, president. "But in the long run there's much more value in our people."

When three young guys opened up Montreal digital shop Locomotive 10 years ago armed with a few computers and a goal to make some websites, they were savvy, fearless and, most importantly, as choosy as they could be for a studio that had yet to make a name for itself. They quickly identified the core types of clients whose values they could get on board with and signed as many as they could.

"All of us partners were these punk rock kids back in the day, and our attitude kind of goes with what we believe in," says Frédéric Marchand, Locomotive's president and creative director. "We wanted to try to get the kinds of projects where we could give back to society, and not just sell commercial stuff."

Like any sensible entrepreneurs, they initially took what they could get. But as Locomotive pumped out websites in the post-dot-com days when a site's design was becoming less of an afterthought, the studio's style quickly became recognizable. In the last several years, they've been able to work exclusively on the types of projects they want—NGOs, sports organizations, civic awareness and select lifestyle brands. Today, Marchand and partners Jean-François Chainé and Mathieu Ducharme have assembled a team of 18 like-minded thinkers and developers to create thoughtful designs that go beyond the confines of a website— namely to creating a holistic digital platform that includes a rigorous strategic approach.

"We believe a project is a catalyst that brings people together," says Chauncey McAskill, Locomotive's senior developer. "So we try to find verticals the team likes and then focus on getting contracts for them. It makes it a treat to find new ideas and new technology when it's something we're all interested in."

Marchand says the focus on selecting the right projects is just one of the ways to keep employees engaged. Another has been the steady build of the studio's proprietary PHP web framework for content management, Charcoal, which has positioned Locomotive with a unique offering over competitors. Charcoal is a clean, simple interface, built to be entirely modular so components can be easily interchanged. "It's not all about the user experience on the front end. We also want to create a great experience for the administrator, so they want to go there," says Marchand. "All the developers who come to work here really dig into Charcoal and they don't want to touch anything else."

Like another well-known CMS, Charcoal has its own admin dashboard. But it's not purpose-built for blogs, making it much more adaptable. "I like to make the metaphor of Wordpress being a dense jungle—you have to go in with a machete and cut through and build

your spot," says Sébastien Leblanc, Locomotive's co-creative director. "Whereas Charcoal is a whiteboard with a toolbox. When clients choose it, we are able to spend more time on UX and design, and develop exactly what we need." This year, Locomotive was finally ready to take the Charcoal code to the open-source community, where it now lives on GitHub—another way the studio is trying to give back.

Memo, Locomotive's digital messaging system for small municipalities, is one of the studio's pet projects built using the Charcoal platform. Memo can push out messages from a city to its citizens through text-to-voice over email, cell phones and even landlines in the case of an emergency. Users can also select to receive messages that interest them, like private transportation or seasonal parking information. "The main goal is to bring more intelligence to cities," says Marchand. "We hear a lot about 'intelligent cities,' but not a lot are actually doing something about it."

The web-based technology is a more affordable investment for townships than a native app, and has thus far been implemented in several places across Quebec, including Town Mont-Royal, Saint-Augustin-de-Desmaures and Montreal's Notre-Dame-de-Grâce neighbourhood. "What's different with this solution is there is a UX interface that is common to every city on the platform," says Leblanc. "So there is a unified look and experience. Every town we bring into the mix, we can update the system and keep track of the UX." The technology is scalable for larger cities, and the team plans to pitch it for other public services, including transportation and utility companies.

While 80 per cent of Locomotive's projects are built on the Charcoal platform, sometimes the client's familiarity with another content management system is trump, and the agency comes up with innovative ways to test the boundaries of an existing platform. This was the case with the digital experience for Swimming Canada, which was built on
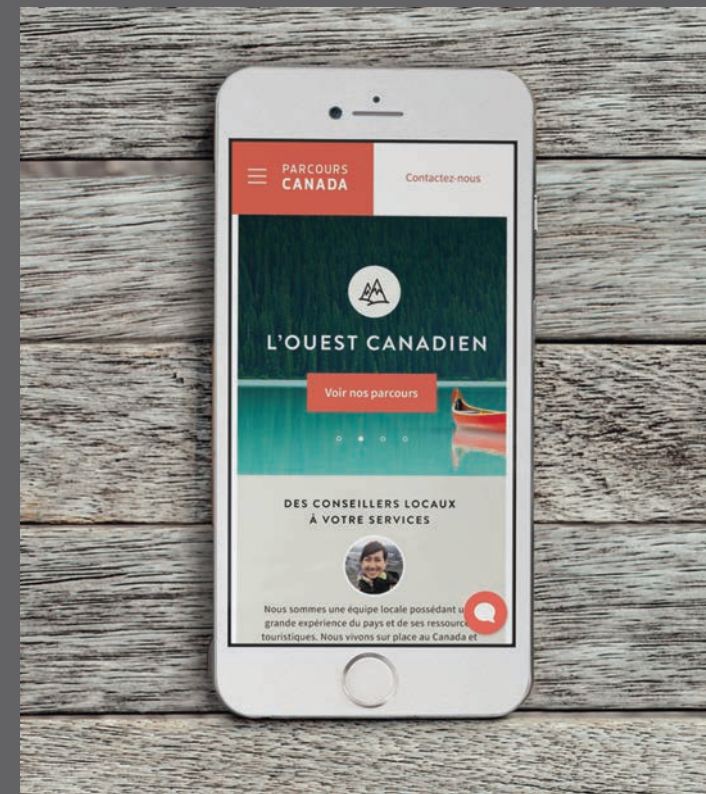
"Charcoal is a very light core component from which to evolve so it can fit anybody's work flow and direction," says senior developer Chauncey McAskill. The dashboard can manage rich content, e-commerce and more.
↓
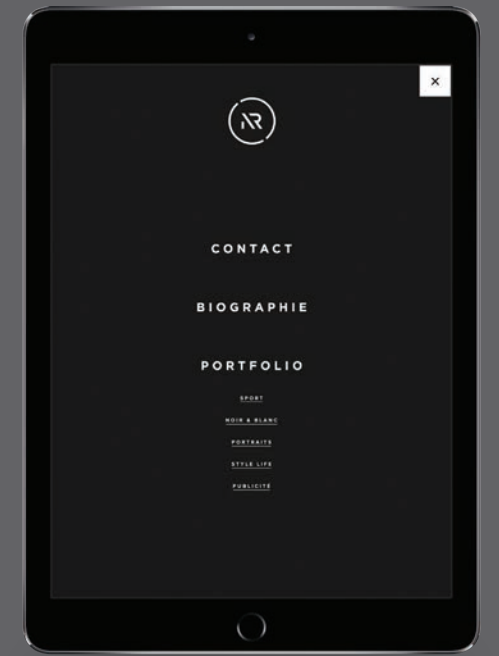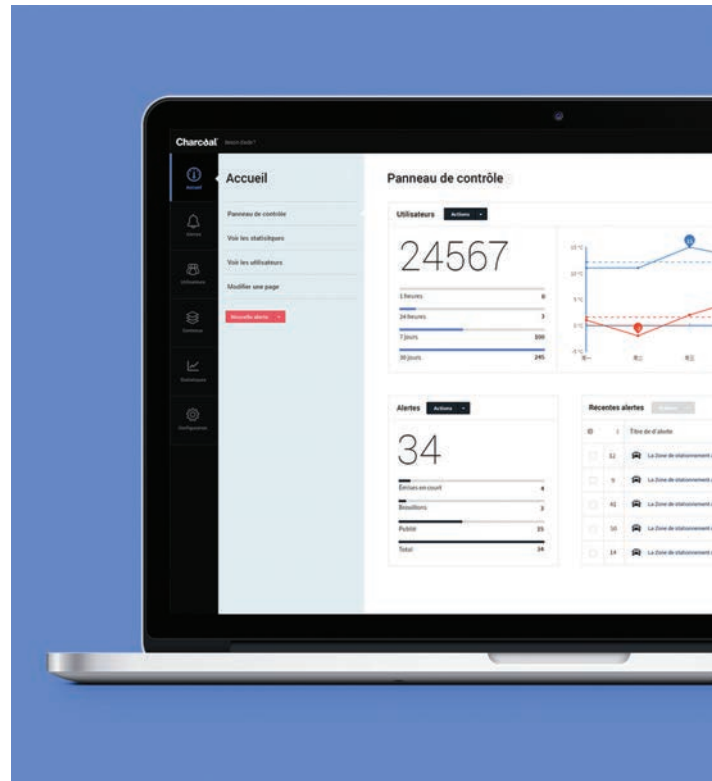
←
A site for photographer Normand Robert fit squarely into Locomotive's sports vertical. "We have a lot of sports fans here so the subject matter interests us," says McAskill.
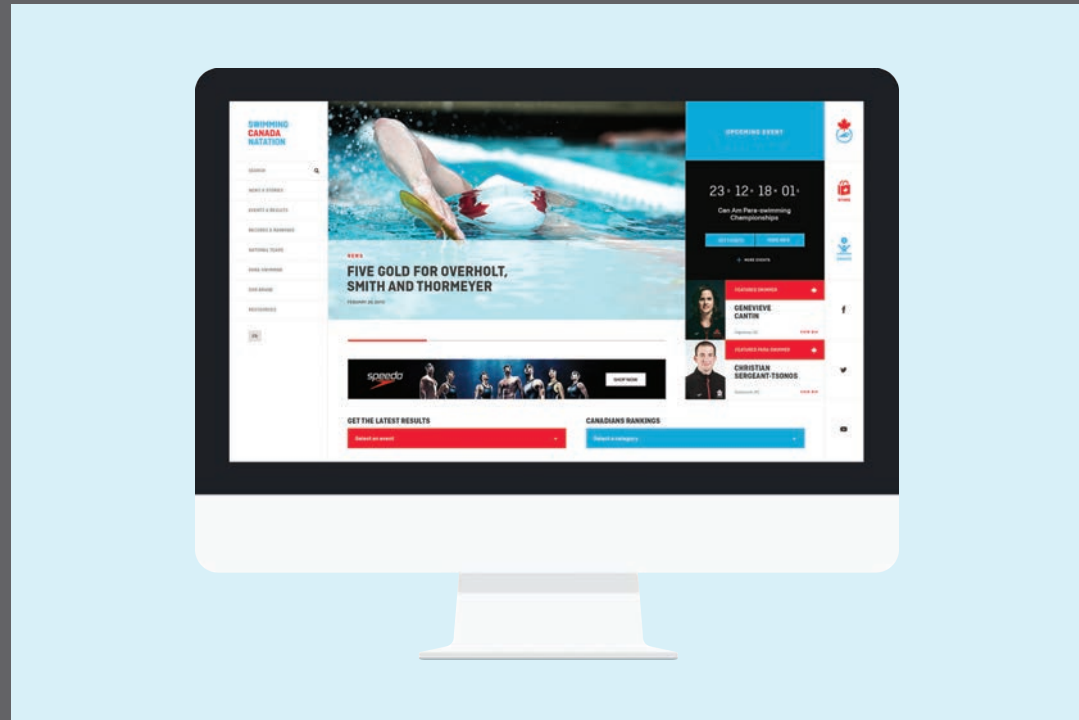
For the Swimming Canada website, "there were multiple layers of data that we had to stack on top of each other," says McAskill. Yet the result is a seamless, easily navigable collection of biographies, swim rankings and event information.
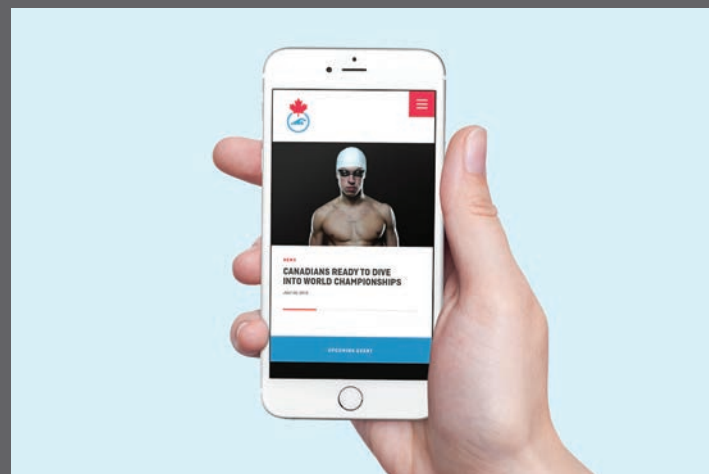
> "It's rare to find a group of people that immediately understand the essence and potential of a brand… We share the same intention and DNA—to make a lasting impact for the people and organizations we work with."
>
> **BEN HULSE**, PARTNER, HULSE & DURRELL

"There are a lot of opportunities and challenges with these sports portals," says Sébastien Leblanc, co-creative director. Locomotive and Hulse & Durrell launched this one for Equestrian Canada in July. "No one is owning the space right now in Canada in terms of broadcasting, news and rich content on the sport. So we are building these platforms to help with that."
→

"Parcours Canada has been a great project," says Leblanc. "We reinvented the client approach online and how to turn a visit into a qualified lead more easily. There's been a lot of good reviews for it, UX wise."
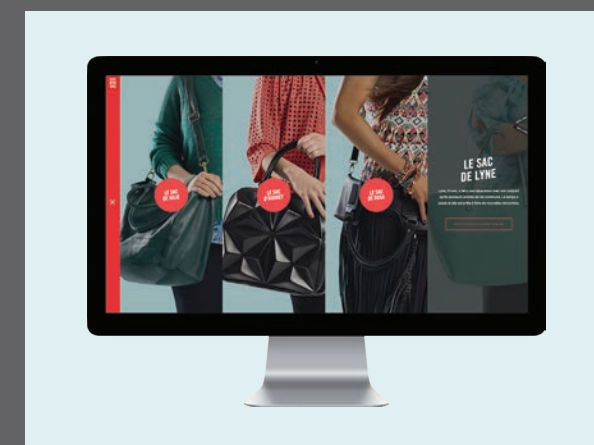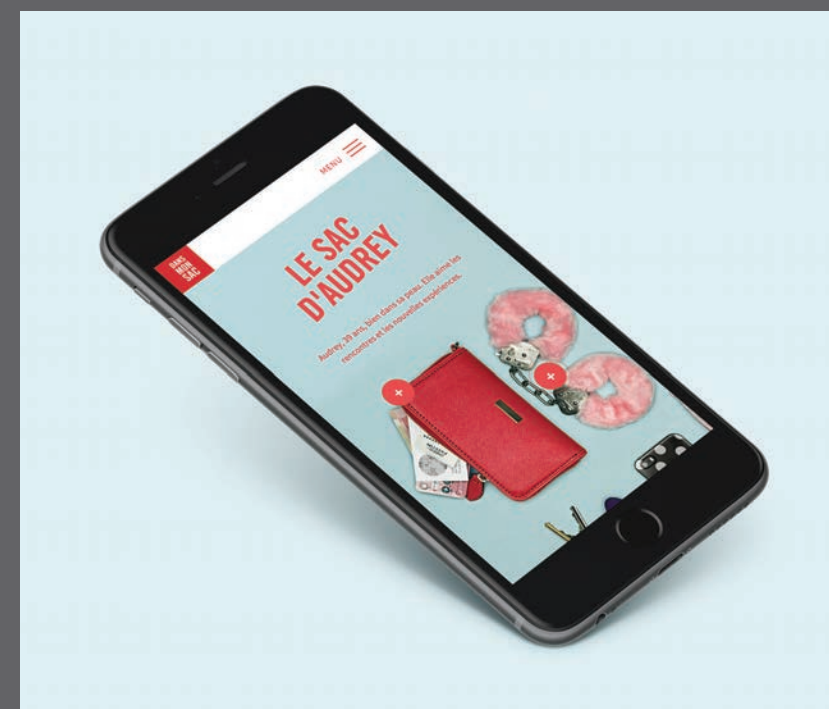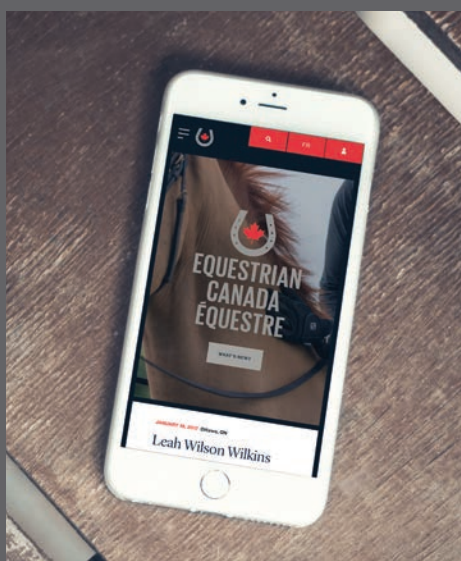
For the digital branding of "Dans Mon Sac" (In My Bag), a sexual health awareness campaign, positive, diverse imagery reinforced the need for precautions instead of traditional fear.
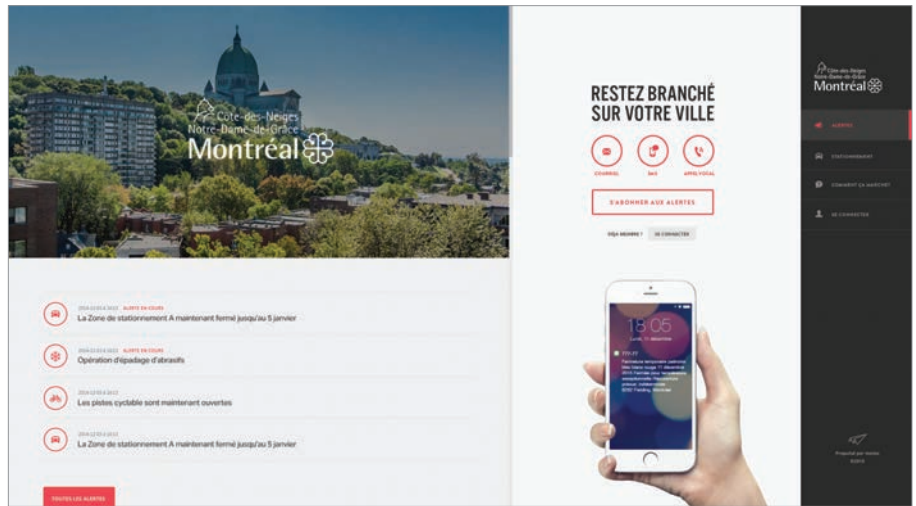↓

"What I like is that we do some huge projects that are very dense in their planning and strategy, but we also do smaller ones that are often fun design-wise. And our team spirit really speaks out in projects. It's very democratic."

SÉBASTIEN LEBLANC, CO-CREATIVE DIRECTOR, LOCOMOTIVE

→
The Memo citizenship awareness platform provides relevant alerts and news for townships in Quebec, and is scalable for larger cities.

Wordpress. Locomotive created a modified blog site that would merge third-party data from a European company's swim rankings and Swimming Canada's own internal database.

Swimming Canada was the agency's first foray into the world of sports organizations and into an ongoing relationship with Vancouver-based design studio Hulse & Durrell, which has become well known for its recent rebrands of Team Canada and other national sports associations such as Curling Canada and Equestrian Canada.

Marchand sees the relationship as serendipitous—Locomotive answered a RFP for the Swimming Canada site without having any brief on Hulse & Durrell's rebrand. "We did a visual pitch, and without even speaking to them, we created an interface," he explains. "And they were like, 'Did we speak before? Because it was exactly what we were thinking!' We connected."

They're now providing their digital expertise to several more of Hulse & Durrell's sports rebrands including Volleyball Canada, Rugby Canada and CIS Canada, the body for Canadian interuniversity sports. "It's hard to get into these organizations so we are really happy they got us on board," says Marchand. "The important thing is that with every brand Hulse & Durrell builds—each has their own identity and own pillars, but it's a whole system. They want to create a unified Canadian sports brand with one line of conduct."

Working with the same agency for the digital extension helps maintain that cohesiveness. "The structure we've built—we use the same toolbox from sport to sport," Leblanc explains.

Along with passion, that nimbleness is what makes Locomotive one of the country's best digital agencies, says Ben Hulse of Hulse & Durrell.

"It's rare to find a group of people that immediately understand the essence and potential of a brand," he says. "We share the same intention and DNA—to make a lasting impact for the people and organizations we work with."

Locomotive has also forged an informal relationship with KBS Montreal after they recently moved into the agency's new space on Saint Laurent Boulevard. They have collaborated on a few projects with Locomotive lending some production expertise. "They wanted to consolidate their clients and ensure they could provide digital expertise, which is where we come in," says Marchand.

As for that ever-expanding client list, Locomotive is rock-solid in their desire to both excite the team and lend that "punk rock attitude" whenever they can. The studio just finished a web platform for Action 500, a paintball course and go-karting track (definitely punk rock)—and one for US-based trade show booth designer InterGlobal Exhibits (decidedly less punk rock). But Locomotive's effort will present the company in a modern light. "Their strategy for the brands they work with is 'own your colours.' So we started with that," explains Marchand. "And directed some edgy content about the process of [booth design]. Sometimes you need to tone down the [rhetoric] a bit and let the project speak for itself. They're going to look like a cool agency now."

For Leblanc, that balance is key. "What I like is that we do some huge projects that are very dense in their planning and strategy, but we also do smaller ones that are often fun design-wise. And our team spirit really speaks out in projects. It's very democratic," he says. "If the agency was a country, we would probably be like Norway."