

Double diversity, diversity of skill and diversity of self

 By Ann Nurock

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Ann Nurock interviews Chris Bergeron, VP of content experience of Cossette Montreal at The One Club Creative Summit in New York to find out more about the dual challenge in reinventing herself, in terms of her personal life as a transgendered woman and career shift from journalism to advertising.



Chris Bergeron, VP of content experience of Cossette Montreal

Nurock: *Hi Chris, you've got a really interesting life story, would you like to tell us about it?*

Bergeron: Yes, so I have had in a sense two lives and two careers. My first life was as a male editor in... I was running a large, well-read entertainment paper back in Montreal and I spent 15 years in that field. I was attached to perhaps some of the privilege that comes with that and it took me a long time before I had, in a sense, admitted to myself that I am transgendered... that I am actually a woman. It took me so long to find the right environment where I could live my truth, and that environment was in another industry.

So, I had to not only change identities... I had to go and work in a field that wasn't mine, where I had to learn everything from scratch, from the beginning in a sense. So, I went into advertising and I found a space where people are perhaps a little less conservative in advertising than in journalism. In journalism there are more rules. In advertising I think individuality is something that is valued and perhaps diversity a little bit more respected.



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Nurock: *So, in effect you were reinventing yourself in two ways. Firstly, in terms of your gender and secondly, in terms of your career. That must have been pretty challenging?*

Bergeron: On the one hand it was very challenging because obviously it is a lot of intellectual and emotional work that is happening at the same time. You are trying to navigate into a new world, a new career, a new industry and understand its codes – the language, the vocabulary, the skills that come with it and trying to figure out who you are going to be. You

have to imagine the kind of woman that you are going to be and actually actualise it. Then you are in the real world, in a sense and that is something that is difficult.

Where it helped me though is that because I used to be a journalist, what I brought to advertising – to my advertising career – is a sensibility towards content and bringing some of that journalistic approach to advertising. So, there was that idea of double diversity. I was transgendered, yes, but I also brought something new to the table – and that helped me.

■ **Nurock: And what were the biggest challenges that you faced in the agency world?**

Bergeron: There were two. The most obvious was being judged at face value. So, I have had some clients who weren't necessarily super open-minded and called the agency I worked at and said: "Fire that person or you lose the account." I was judged on my appearance and obviously when you are early on in transition and the hormones haven't quite worked yet, you still look quite manly, although you are dressed in a feminine manner – it shocks some people. So, that was the first thing.



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Funnily though, what I found out is that I started being treated as a woman instead of being treated as a man. So, I also got to see how women are treated; that you do have to work a little bit more to be listened to, to have a voice, that it is the guys who usually speak first. So, I had to fight that because that loss of privilege is something that I didn't want to accept and I fought for it so that I would continue to have the voice that I used to have and keep the importance I used to have in a conversation.

■ **Nurock: What success have you achieved in the agency?**

Bergeron: So, I think being transgendered actually helped me in some of my successes. People see that I am working hard at changing and so they accept when I come into a room and tell them that they as a business should change the way they do things. I have extra credibility because of that. They see that I have changed in the public eye and that I'm doing good, and so when I actually tell them that they should change the way they communicate and perhaps be more attentive to their customers and perhaps be a little more creative from a format point of view and all of that, that really helped me. That double diversity – diversity of skill and diversity of self – is something that pushed me to the forefront quite a bit.

Also, because I am a minority, I have to be, I guess, a little bit better. There are no days off; there are no moments where I can slack off in a sense. So, it's really important that I can deliver in every meeting because I am out there to prove that 'trans' people are as valid and as competent as others and that is extra motivation. That helped me win a lot of pitches. I have a 90% rate – I have lost the last three though. Maybe I am losing my mojo but regardless I do have a good rate at winning because of that extra motivation.

When I come into a room, I have to demand, I have to command authority. If not people will not listen at all. Right? And yet when they do listen to me, then they are surprised: "Oh my God, somebody like that is actually saying something that is interesting."

And you know what? They listen to me more because of that.



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■ **Nurock:** *Chris do you think that things are getting easier for you or harder, in terms of acceptance by society?*

Bergeron: Things are getting more polarised. So, there are more and more people who have a better understanding of what it is to be trans and more acceptance of it because they might have seen people in their day-to-day life; they might know somebody; they might have seen people on television. *Orange Is the New Black* – they've seen characters so now they are a little bit more okay with it. Also politicians now talk about trans rights quite a bit. Justin Trudeau in Canada has done it quite a lot as has Barack Obama.

However, there is now a conservative wave that is taking over, that definitely has taken over in the States, and the same thing is happening in Canada as well, where now we have become a hot topic. So trans rights now are being challenged again, even though we have only had rights for – in Canada – maybe three or four years. And now there are political parties that are actually questioning that – again. And there are certain conservative fringes that would want us to have fewer rights than what we have right now.

So, we have to be very careful. We can't take anything for granted. The small amount of liberty that we have managed to get in the last couple of years could disappear quite rapidly. So cautiously optimistic is what I think. There is a critical mass of people who don't want to go back but there is also quite a bit of people who would want to... who feel threatened by difference, sadly.



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■ **Nurock:** *Chris, it's been a privilege talking to you. Thanks so much for your time.*

ABOUT ANN NUROCK

Ann is a Partner at Relationship Audits and Management, a global consultancy that measures and optimizes client /agency relationships. Her proprietary Radar tool is used by 30 corporates globally and as a result she interacts with over 80 agencies of all disciplines. Ann spent 25 years plus in the advertising industry as CEO of Grey Advertising South Africa, and head of the Africa region followed by President and CEO of Grey Canada. Contact details: ann.nurock@relationshipaudits.com | Twitter @Annnurock

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