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THE MEDIA BUSINESS: ADVERTISING; Creative Firebrand Settles In At Ketchum's Staid Office

By Michael Lev

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STEVE PENCHINA thought the New York office of Ketchum Advertising was hardly the place for him. The 45-year-old creative firebrand cut his teeth on "Try It, You'll Like It" for Alka-Seltzer at Wells, Rich, Green and later joined Needham Harper Steers, where he helped create the Xerox campaign in which a monk uses an office copier to duplicate manuscripts. "It's a miracle!" the other monks marvel.

But Ketchum is considered a staid middle-of-the-road place that makes sensible advertising for a dairy, a bank and a pharmaceutical company.

"Kind of beige," Mr. Penchina said.

Several months ago, Mr. Penchina said it would have taken another act of God to persuade him to accept the position of executive creative director at Ketchum Advertising/New York. Yet now he is settling into the position, ordering new office furniture and preparing to hire new creative talents to improve Ketchum's sleepy reputation.

"Historically, it's almost impossible to turn around an agency creatively, and that was my point of view when they wanted to hire me," Mr. Penchina said. "They certainly didn't have a glowing creative reputation. I had worked too hard and too long to build my reputation to end up in a place where I couldn't excel. I kept saying no."

But Ketchum, the Pittsburgh-based advertising agency that has higher-profile offices in Los Angeles and San Francisco, convinced Mr. Penchina that it wanted to transform its presence in New York. As part of its commitment, the company said it is moving Bob Kroyer, the president of Ketchum Advertising/USA, from Pittsburgh to New York this summer.

"It's important that we make a visible commitment to New York," said Thom Miller, president of Ketchum's New York office.

J. Craig Mathiesen, president of the agency's Los Angeles office, which has the $110 million Acura account, said Ketchum's future growth prospects were tied directly to the fate of its New York office.

"Los Angeles is doing fine; San Francisco is doing fine," he said. "But New York is so much bigger. It's the only market where you can go out and get two or three new clients and add $100 million to your billings."

Ketchum/New York now has about $100 million in billings. The clients include Accutrim, Doan's pills, Lady Stetson fragrances, Shawmut Bank and H. P. Hood dairy.

Mr. Penchina said he envisioned doing exciting new campaigns for Ketchum's existing clients. That will draw more business, he said.

"This is going to be a substantially different place creatively within 8 to 12 months," he said. "I'm going to hire the best young talent I can find and let them fly. What our business boils down to is talent."

Mr. Miller said Ketchum executives looked at as many as 50 job candidates before hiring Mr. Penchina. In selecting him, they liked the fact that Mr. Penchina hangs his creativity on his sleeve, laughing animatedly at himself, calling himself "meshuga" and then dreaming up bright, daring ideas.

Just as important, Mr. Miller said, Mr. Penchina has a background in agency management. Mr. Penchina and a partner, Arthur Selkowitz, formerly ran Penchina/Selkowitz, an upstart agency that turned heads when it won a big piece of business from Burroughs, the computer company. The agency had a good run but closed after losing several clients to corporate mergers, including Burroughs, which merged with Sperry to become Unisys.

"With Steve, I think we're going to surprise people," Mr. Miller said.

Mr. Penchina immodestly agrees. "In my opinion, they made a very wise choice hiring me."

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