

hed: How “Get Lost” Got Lost

sub: It’s one of Montana’s favorite homegrown slogans. So why is the state contract that created it now in the hands of a Milwaukee advertising agency?

by David Madison

You’ve seen the green “Get Lost” stickers. You remember the geographic outline of our state and the simple slogan. It’s Montana’s “Got Milk” and in the world of 406-centric bumper art, it’s a standard bearer.

“I don’t know if I remember an ‘ah ha moment,’” says Jeff Welch, CEO of MercuryCSC, the advertising agency in Bozeman that hatched the “Get Lost” campaign in 2010. “It’s a process of pushing and changing words and changing images until you get to a place and you’re like oh, this is it, this is good.”

The “Get Lost” campaign was a recession recovery effort aimed at the drive market—people from Billings and Salt Lake and Spokane—who would like to “Get Lost” in Montana.

“Get Lost” the slogan sounds like a local joke and that might be what gives it power. MercuryCSC also gave us: “There’s Nothing Here.” The double meaning in both made them catchy. But when he first heard the pitch for “Get Lost,” Welch wasn’t sold.

Then his staff and partners went to work persuading him. “So we ran with it,” says Welch. “And it went bigger than we ever expected. We had no idea. You just started seeing the stickers around. Then people would send you a photo and it’s on a car in Croatia. Or a Delta airlines vehicle going through the airport in Minneapolis.”

Someone covered an entire car in “Get Lost” stickers.

“I think the beauty of ‘Get Lost’ was you’d see one on a Subaru, someone who probably had it on there for the intended purpose, which is ‘Go out and explore this great place where we live and love. And ‘Get Lost,’” explains Welch. “Then you’d see it on the back of a pickup that had a gun rack—a beat up old pickup, and it was like, ‘No, really: get lost. We don’t want you here.’ That duality is what ended up being the genius. You get lucky sometimes.”

During the nine years MercuryCSC held the coveted Montana Office of Tourism contract for marketing Big Sky Country to the world (first rule: no lasso fonts), it guided the state’s creative voice and media reach when it came to spending the roughly \$1 million per year allocated to increase visitor numbers statewide.

Today, MercuryCSC is no longer part of the team pushing Montana as a travel destination. It opted out of a bidding process in 2016 that saw as much as \$7 million in state funding flow away from local Montana agencies and into the portfolio of Wisconsin firm Hoffman-York.

Hoffman-York’s website shows off high-end advertising campaigns for Yamaha outboard

motors and Wahl electric shavers. The agency motto “Return On Ideas” has a clever, efficient air to it. The web portfolio features an animated family of dogs driving a station wagon and a comedic scene where a man is eaten by a U.S. Postal Service curbside mailbox. It’s all first-rate work, but none of it promotes tourism. It’s not destination marketing.

Montana is one of 49 states—Washington killed its office of tourism—competing with one another and the rest of the world for tourism dollars.

That’s why, according to a “Fast Facts” sheet from the state, “The Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development markets Montana to maximize non-resident spending.”

Between 2011-2015, Montana’s marketing efforts helped increase visitation by 11.2 percent. At the same time, tourist spending increased by 31.8 percent. In destination marketing speak, these are “high-value visitors.”

MercuryCSC’s Welch sums it up this way, “Just about any metric would show you tourism in this state is in the best place it’s ever been.”

So if things are going so well, why the big change in agencies? Creative professionals in Montana are asking themselves that lately, especially those who worked on “Get Lost” and other past campaigns. They look back and recognize how local, Montana agency work culminated in the tourism success we have today.

That’s why, this past August, when news broke about Montana’s marketing team getting outsourced to Wisconsin, many wondered: Who better than Montanans to tell Montana’s story?

If this were an advertising pitch deck and you were groggily watching a PowerPoint, here is where you’d see a slide reading: “How did we get here?”

Let’s start in the late 1980s when Wendt Kochman in Great Falls held the state tourism contract. That lasted for 14 years until Mercury in Bozeman filed a formal complaint about the state’s RFP bidding process. Mercury complained Wendt Kochman “did not follow the rules,” according to a 2003 story in the Great Falls Tribune.

Mercury Advertising officials argued that Wendt Kochman distributed a self-promotional piece to the RFP committee members after the RFP was released. This was considered by some to be akin to jury tampering and therefore unfair to competing agencies that did not get the same chance to fully introduce themselves to the committee responsible for awarding the contract.

The state responded to Mercury’s complaint by splitting up the contract dollars and responsibilities. Mercury came away with a \$600,000 budget to promote winter sports spending in Montana.

“Obviously any time you lose a \$600,000 piece of business it’s a big deal,” Wendt Kochman President and CEO Carl Kochman told the Tribune. The agency responded by laying off six employees. Mercury would eventually take over all Travel Montana work, bringing those six agency jobs to its shop in Bozeman.

It was a mutually beneficial arrangement for both Montana and Mercury. The agency looks back with fond memories of posting massive billboards in Chicago and taking over the entire Westlake metro station in Seattle, plastering every corner of the place with visit Montana images and text.

Over the years, campaigns grew more sophisticated in the ways each tracked visitors from the moment they are exposed to Travel Montana messaging and to their entry point into Montana on a trip.

In Chicago, the “It’s Time” campaign played to something discovered in focus groups: That a trip to Montana is on the bucket list of many in the Windy City, but they just can’t make the time. So the campaign erected life-sized statues of bison and bears around Chicago and handed out free huckleberry ice cream.

The campaign would go on to possibly inspire a parody by The Onion newspaper, which ran a story with the headline: “New Montana Tourism Campaign Marketed Toward Urban Bison” (see “Buffaloed”).

Mercury says its real, on-the-ground campaign in Illinois generated a 109 percent increase in Illinois resident visitation to Montana in 2015. That helped drive an overall 4.4 percent increase in summertime visits. Other campaigns were similarly successful. The Bozeman Daily Chronicle reports that during Mercury’s tenure, “Montana added 1.5 million annual nonresident visitors, whose travel expenditure increased about \$500 million. The various efforts also tripled the state’s return on investment.”

Then in 2016, it wasn’t Mercury’s work that became the problem, say industry insiders. It was its working relationship with the Montana Office of Tourism.

“Relationships... things go sour,” says Welch about why his agency parted ways with Travel Montana last year. “It happens in this business, especially a 10-plus-year relationship. Things can go in different directions.”

John Godwin, Montana’s delegate to the American Advertising Federation—or Ad Club as it’s known in Godwin’s hometown of Great Falls—watched the building tensions between Mercury and the state, then saw it all come to a boil in 2015. “I believe the relationship with Mercury soured so much that they said, ‘That’s it, we’re done with them.’ And Mercury said, ‘Well, we’re done with you.’”

Godwin points to the arrival of a new chief of marketing in the Montana Office of Tourism as the beginning of trouble between Mercury and the state. A change in personnel and priorities is nothing new in this line of work. What’s special about this parting of ways is that it would end up sending shockwaves through the 2016 Montana gubernatorial race.

It also marked the moment when the once strong grip Montana agencies held on the prized state tourism contract started to slip.

Jenny Pelej took the reins as Montana's tourism marketing chief in 2014.¹ She worked with Mercury for over a year before initiating a bid process where agencies vied for a chance to take Mercury's existing work and run with it.

The first assignment would be to promote a series of videos about experiencing Montana in winter. But from there, the winner would become the new lead agency, blessed with the spoils of a \$7 million contract.

Last April, two Montana agencies—Brickhouse Creative in Bozeman and The Wendt Agency in Great Falls—competed against nine out-of-state firms for the chance to fill Mercury's shoes. It was a daunting challenge for a small firm like Brickhouse in Bozeman. Just to throw its hat in the ring, the agency spent weeks preparing a 100-plus page response to the RFP.

Then on the day all the responses were due, Pelej unexpectedly extended the deadline for the agencies to submit materials. She did this five hours before the cutoff so another out-of-state agency could submit materials. That agency—Hoffman-York—went head to head with Brickhouse and the other bidders in a contest to prove themselves the best fit for the job.

The agencies were judged on their "Understanding of the Montana brand" and "Highly credentialed and qualified staff." Brickhouse stood out as the points leader after the first two rounds of evaluation.

David Thompson, the agency's founder was excited about the chance to apply all of Brickhouse's experience with destination marketing.

"A lot of our clients, although they are based here in Montana, are trying to appeal to people in other places," says Thompson. "So when we were presented with the opportunity to be the voice of Montana to people in other places, it felt like, 'Well, that's something I've been doing for my whole professional life in Montana.'"

Thompson felt good about the process, but then Brickhouse's fortunes started to shift. As evaluations of competing bids continued, the scores suddenly swung in Hoffman-York's favor. The agency was scored "superior" while Brickhouse received failing scores in seven different categories. In the end, Hoffman-York won the contract.

"This is a process that is designed to be unbiased and it worked as it is meant to be," insisted Pelej when challenged at the time about the choice to go with Hoffman-York. Many weren't buying it, including Rep. Ken Holmlund, R-Miles City, who blasted off an indignant guest opinion to the Billings Gazette, saying the deal with Hoffman-York,

¹ <http://montanaturismnews.org/news/2014/08/15/mtot-introduces-new-chief-marketing/>

“stinks of blatant cronyism when an out-of-state company gets a contract this large even though they have no experience in the field.”²

Representatives from Hoffman-York declined multiple requests for comment on this story.

As news spread that a Wisconsin firm had carpet-bagged an account coveted by Montana ad agencies, Republican Gubernatorial Candidate Greg Gianforte seized the opportunity. He called for the resignation of Jenny Pelej’s boss—Department of Commerce head Meg O’Leary.³

Looking to flip the script on Bullock, whose campaign ads branded Gianforte as an out-of-stater from New Jersey, the Republican produced a cartoonish ad claiming his Democratic opponent just shipped \$7 million in jobs to Wisconsin.

The ad was inaccurate and ineffective. Ultimately, despite spending more money than any other statewide candidate running for office anywhere in the U.S., Gianforte lost the election.⁴ The controversy died down, but today Pelej doesn’t want to talk about it. She declined multiple interview requests from the Independent, saying through a spokesperson that the Department of Commerce had already spent enough time and resources discussing the controversial bid process.

Others in Montana don’t want to let the issue die. John Godwin with the American Advertising Federation remains adamant: “That’s a lot of money to me,” he says. “But maybe I’m a small town kid.”

Godwin is especially troubled by the disclosure that a relative of Pelej’s is employed by Hoffman-York. It’s not a big deal, insists Pelej, who revealed that the step-daughter of her late uncle works at the agency. The Department of Commerce stands by its decision that this connection did not influence how the contract was awarded.

Maybe so, say Godwin and others, but where’s the wisdom in granting a destination marketing contract to an agency with no destination marketing experience?⁵

“When you have state money involved, there shouldn’t be eyebrows raised,” says Godwin. “There are several areas that make my eyebrows go up.”

Sticking up for Montana’s advertising industry is part of Godwin’s job, so he contacted Pelej’s boss, Meg O’Leary, who reportedly defended the selection of Hoffman-York.

Godwin recalls, “One thing Dir. O’Leary had said was (Hoffman-York) gained some in house content marketing people,” in order to handle all the work it’s now getting from the Montana Office of Tourism.

² http://billingsgazette.com/news/opinion/guest/guest-opinion-why-didn-t-montana-firm-get-state-tourism/article_7f424831-5621-5958-bb9b-a2ffe2d9d12.html

³ <http://lastbestnews.com/site/2016/09/gianforte-bullock-offer-different-views-of-state/>

⁴ <http://flatheadbeacon.com/2016/11/03/gianforte-leads-nation-ads-state-candidate/>

⁵ <http://www.greatfalltribune.com/story/money/2016/08/22/montana-tourism-contact-goes-wisconsin-firm/89125084/>

“That’s a challenging component for an external agency to come up with,” says Godwin. “And that would be especially true if your agency is based in Wisconsin. The content marketing, just coming up with what Montana’s attributes are, they’re going to spend a ton of time immersing themselves in our culture. All of this could be avoided if you just hired someone who knew something about it already.”

The road to a failed destination marketing campaign is paved with good intentions and sometimes, unintended consequences.

Take Durham, North Carolina—“the City of Medicine.” Back in the 1970s, it commissioned a “Laugh-In” style jingle with the tagline “Durham’s got it.” The goal was to bring more shoppers to the city’s malls. Decades later, a newspaper editor suggested resurrecting the jingle and campaign to raise awareness about the city’s unfortunate claim to fame—national leader in new syphilis infections.

In Montana, Havre promotes itself with “Havre Has It.” This provokes laughs among the ill-informed who don’t appreciate all this jewel of the Hi-Line has to offer. They suggest a new catch-phrase: “You Can Havre.”

Some in Billings don’t find it to be “The Magic City.” They’ve rewritten the moniker to read: “Buildings—the Tragic City.”

A curious marketing tragedy unfolded in 2016 when the \$5 million “Rhode Island: Cooler & Warmer” campaign tried to pass off footage of Iceland as scenery from the Ocean State.⁶ The blunder spun out of control just days after launch. Campaign parody images circulated online showing the Great Wall of China and Waikiki Beach with the tagline “We Are Rhode Island.” The blowback was fierce enough to force Rhode Island’s chief marketing officer to resign, even as Gov. Gina Raimondo tried to help with damage control.

Through it all, Gov. Raimondo would not talk about who was responsible and “avoided answering the question of whether it was a mistake not to seek homegrown talent in the first place, especially from the estimable Rhode Island School of Design,” reported The New York Times. Rhode Island soon demanded repayment of \$20,000 from the Providence ad agency responsible for including the Iceland footage in an associated campaign video.

As industry bloggers noted at the time, “It wasn’t supposed to be this way. For a while, it looked as though the campaign was shaping up nicely... legendary designer [Milton Glaser](#), of ‘I Love New York’ fame, was brought in to design a new slogan and logo.”

Glaser is a heavyweight. He’s in the upper echelon of snappy sloganeers—the people who brought us “Make it Jamaica” and “Virginia is for lovers” and “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

⁶ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/07/us/a-new-rhode-island-slogan-encounters-social-medias-wrath.html?_r=1

When asked about what went wrong with the “Cooler & Warmer” slogan, Glaser blamed the rollout.

“People became crazed by the idea that they didn’t get it,” Glaser told The Times. “If you rolled it out over weeks, you could have made a case for it. But in the absence of a real presentation, and the presence of so many mistakes, the whole thing became enshrouded in negativity. The social media thing is a killer.”

The reaction on Twitter wasn’t kind, but it was also playful and goofy:

“How about: ‘Rhode Island: Better than You Think’.”

“When we legalize pot, Rhode Island will be ‘Higher and Lower.’”

“Maybe they were hoping for a debate like Miller Lite’s ‘Tastes great. Less filling.’”⁷

Of course, no state marketing campaign wants a debate. It wants you to be inspired and get onboard with the state’s brand.

Back in 2006, Peter McMillin—director of Washington’s tourism office—told National Public Radio his state’s “Say WA” brand building effort was all about: “Putting you in a position of participating; take, for example, being ready to go fishing. The Say WA moment is having that fish caught. You have it in the net or you’re looking straight at it and saying, ‘Man, this is a ‘Say WA’ moment, so it’s the job; it’s the fun.’”⁸

Others in the tourism industry didn’t see it that way. The signature phrase for this \$442,000 marketing push left the Seattle Hotel Association and Washington State Lodging and Hotel Association scratching their heads.⁹

The state doubled down, insisting, “Say WA is a distillation of the sense of wonder that comes with discovery. It describes the moment when an experience becomes emotional. Where the traveler is no longer an observer, but a participant. The Say WA moment.”

In 2011, budget cuts delivered a different kind of “Say WA” moment. Washington lawmakers voted to become the only state in the nation with no statewide tourism office and allocated no state money to promote itself to travelers.¹⁰

The slogan of the moment in Montana is “The Sky’s The Limit.”

Daniel Iverson, spokesperson for the Dept. of Commerce, says “The Sky’s The Limit” is about more than making Montana attractive to potential visitors. It also reflects changes

⁷ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/07/us/a-new-rhode-island-slogan-encounters-social-medias-wrath.html?_r=1

⁸ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5353303>

⁹ <http://www.bizjournals.com/seattle/stories/2006/03/13/story2.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/12/us/12tourism.html>

inside the department, specifically a merger between the tourism and the business resources divisions.

“So when we came up with ‘The Sky’s The Limit,’ that’s the first campaign that we launched since this merger occurred and it was designed to tie in both pieces,” says Iverson. “It could apply to tourism promotion and it could apply to business and economic development. And it’s all about being able to reach your potential in Montana and leveraging Montana.”

With tourism, “The Sky’s The Limit” branding includes a series of impressive videos about experiencing winter in Montana. And while “The Sky’s The Limit” is the customer-facing tagline in play right now, it could change over time, with input from the state’s new lead agency, Hoffman-York.

Slogans of the future may also be influenced by a current study underway by San Francisco-based Destination Analysts. This marketing research agency plans to release results from its Montana study during Gov. Bullock’s upcoming Conference on Tourism and Recreation in March.

Iverson says this is the first deep analysis done by the state since it established Montana’s three “brand pillars” a decade ago. The three pillars remain based around unspoiled nature, outdoor experiences and small-town charm. These are the values that are supposed to influence all of Montana’s destination marketing decisions.

The most recent research from Destination Analysts takes a deep look at the brand pillars and includes a survey of 6,000 leisure travelers in the U.S. and Canada.

Initial findings include:

- 61.7 percent consider Montana to be “somewhat exciting” as a travel destination.
- The most enthusiastic of the bunch are married urban males with a college degree who earn at least \$80,000 a year.
- The number one “extremely important attribute” to these travel consumers is “scenic beauty.” At the bottom of the “extremely important” list is “beach activities.”

In the Destination Analysts’ PowerPoint laying out the recent data, there’s a photo of a man who appears to enjoy beach activities. The headline touts: “Ideas for Thinking about Montana and Your Role in it’s brand.” There’s a massive body of water behind the man in the photo. It might be Fort Peck Reservoir or Canyon Ferry, or it could be Iceland. It’s hard to tell.

The man in this image is talking on his cell phone and giving a thumbs up—the way someone might when their current phone call is more important than the authentic experience of the moment.

The Dept. of Commerce sometimes imagines this guy as someone from Connecticut.

“The guy in Connecticut for example,” says Iverson, the commerce spokesperson, as he explains industry terms like “geo-fencing” and “psychographics” and how mobile devices and social media allow marketers to track customers right down to how much they tip the barista. Iverson says they can track the guy in Connecticut from a click on an ad in his Facebook feed to the moment he lands in Montana and throughout his travels.

“We know that was a successful conversion,” says Iverson. “And we should be doing more of whatever that was that made that happen.”

Iverson won't reveal exactly what his department will be doing more of in 2017 and there's no sneak peak at future slogans. Right now it's hard to tell what the future of destination marketing looks like in Montana. In the coming years, the switch from local Montana creatives to the team at Hoffman-York will be judged by the consumers who show up ready to buy into the Montana experience.

Looking to further capitalize on the state's brand, the upcoming Governor's Conference on Tourism and Recreation will include a new “Shark Tank” style event where start-up dreamers pitch their ideas in a competition for small business seed funding.

It makes sense to hold this event at a tourism conference because so many products are tied into Montana's postcard identity. Take Montucky Cold Snacks tallboy beer.

The Cold Snack story and brand sprang from conversations between two friends at Bozeman's Bacchus Pub.

As the story goes, “Our first shiny blue cans hit the market in the fall of 2012 and since then, Montana Cold Snacks has garnered statewide distribution in Montana and has expanded its range to include Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado and Texas.”

The electric blue 1970s throwback design makes some consider growing a mustache and working more belt buckles into their wardrobe. It seems targeted at Rainer and Keystone Light drinkers who want a bit more Montana in every post-outdoor-adventure sip. Same watery domestic buried in the snow by the car, but in a new can.

The Cold Snack's national market penetration could carry the added benefit of making more people curious about visiting Montana. This beer plays up the Montana experience and mystique. That's a hallmark of good destination marketing.

Another key attribute is business efficiency. Or at least that appears to be a growing priority for Montana's Tourism and Economic Development office.

To state tourism work, Hoffman-York brings a streamlined, one-stop shop approach. It's different from the previous, Montana-focused system that allowed local agencies to partner with outside vendors. This kept the creative in Montana, but gave every campaign a global reach if necessary by partnering with outside public relations and media buying agencies.

Today, state officials maintain the decision to go with Hoffman-York was the right one and future market research will bear this out.

“We do remain confident we made the right decision and I hope people will see the results of that when those metrics come out,” says Iverson, again plugging his department’s commitment to efficiency. “We did this very much to bring multiple services under one roof.”

Sometimes that’s not possible. Again, consider Montucky Cold Snacks. The idea was hatched in Montana, but the beer comes from some place else.

Its brand is 100 percent Montana, but it’s brewed in Lacrosse, Wisconsin.

The Cold Snack website promises that, “As our sales have increased... we are now in the midst of planning a brewery of our own in Montana.”

The company says it wants to market a product with “core values around giving back to the communities that supported it as well as celebrating the fun, active, outdoor lifestyle that encompasses Montanan life.”