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It's hard to believe that Gallant Leaman Group Communications opened its doors just five years ago. Because in that short time, partners Sharon Gallant and Brian Leaman have established a full-service healthcare communications agency with an enviable client base not only in Canada, but around the world. In fact, with Rx, OTC and consumer clients in Europe, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa as well as in Toronto and Montreal, Gallant Leaman Group has proven to be a truly world-class business.

We spoke to Sharon and Brian about how they started and grew their business and about some of the challenges facing agencies today.





*Tell us how and why
Gallant Leaman Group
came into being.*

Sharon: Brian and I started working together in 1997 when we met at Publicis. In our tenure there (Brian as Vice-President and Creative Director; me as Executive Vice-President and General Manager of WellCare), we shared a vision of what an agency should be: a place where creativity and strategic thinking work hand-in-hand, seamlessly and effortlessly. We also shared a deeply held belief that a successful agency had to be tailored to meet its clients' needs, but be flexible enough to adapt to an ever-changing marketplace.

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And therein lay the blueprint
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Communications.**

Because both Brian and I had worked on consumer brands (and still do), we were able to see that the monolithic agency model just doesn't work in the healthcare domain. Pharmaceutical marketing demands a whole other level of expertise—and that's a complexity that's at odds with the way most consumer agencies function.

Brian: Sharon and I felt we could create something that was truly better than what was out there. We believed that we had a different, client-centric agency model that would serve the industry well. And therein lay the blueprint for Gallant Leaman Group Communications.

Right from the start, Sharon and I saw things in the same way—it was so refreshing. We had an effortless ability to complement each other. And the result is an agency in which there is absolutely no barrier between strategy and creative. To this day, this complicity drives our agency, our staff and our business. It's our DNA.

*Did you have a client base
when you started?*

Sharon: None at all. We built the entire agency from the ground up. But we were known in the Montreal and Toronto marketplaces and were extremely honoured that some of the clients who knew us followed us. We've tried to build on the trust that our clients have put in us and have always believed that winning a piece of business is nothing more than an opportunity to prove that you actually deserve it.

Both Brian and I knew that we were entering an increasingly competitive marketplace where "good enough" isn't good enough and that to survive and thrive, we needed to do things better, smarter and faster than the rest.

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*Do you have
an agency philosophy?*

Brian: We're in the business of producing and developing ideas. But those ideas need to be anchored in science, strategy and solid understanding. And that's the basis of our philosophy. We call it "ideas rooted in knowledge."

As our logo, we chose a mighty oak. We felt that it was the perfect representation of what we're about—the solid roots, the flourishing brands.

For us, a good concept is not only one that's unique and surprising, but one that grows out of knowledge. The most important part of a tree is its roots—the stronger and healthier the roots, the stronger the tree. We never present an idea that doesn't have deep roots. It just wouldn't stand the test of time.

*Isn't it rare for strategic and
creative people to work together
so effortlessly?*

Sharon: That's a good question and the answer is yes. It's very rare. Brian and I have career track records in worldwide agency networks and we can attest to the rarity of this kind of partnership, both here at home and throughout the agency world. But the truth is that we immediately clicked. We still share the same enthusiasm for marketing and communication and we both have enormous respect for each other's abilities. We rarely disagree and always make decisions based on what's best for the brand, never letting egos get in the way of solid judgment.

Brian: Sharon is an exceptional businessperson; a rare mix of leadership, intelligence and ability, all driven by the sort of relentless energy you don't often see outside of a boxing ring. Her strategic insight is a driving force behind our creative product.

At Gallant Leaman Group, the compliance between our various departments is a key factor in our ability to deliver ideas and develop them. This has grown directly out of Sharon's and my strong partnership.

We have always been
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*Has growth been an issue for
Gallant Leaman Group?*

Sharon: Rapid growth is a challenge for any business, but in a marketplace that is so competitive and where clients are increasingly demanding, it's a challenge that needs to be addressed seriously.

We never accept a mandate that we can't fulfill, or one that will compromise our existing clients. In fact, we have been known to resign a few where our agency philosophy or the well-being of our valued staff has been compromised.

We have always been an entrepreneurial agency, fully prepared to do what it takes to not only win business, but to deliver in spades. This is and will always be, our promise to the market. It's a philosophy that has resulted in considerable organic growth.

Is it difficult to find the right staff?

Brian: Yes. Really good people are few and far between. And our business is all about having the right team. Their ability, talent and hard work are what we offer to the market. It's our point of distinction. In our five years, we've had to make some tough decisions, but the result is that we now have forty outstanding individuals working with us.

Gallant Leaman Group is a meritocracy—a place where the best people do their best. It's a very rewarding environment for the right kind of person. There is a palpable feeling of teamwork in our office. We're a bit of a band of brothers and sisters and egos are left at the door. There's a sense of ownership of the work we do that I have never quite experienced before.

We talk a lot, laugh a lot and get a lot done.

Has the business changed over the years?

Sharon: Absolutely. I think all business has changed and healthcare marketing and advertising is no exception. Clients expect more for less, better work done faster—and they expect it all a lot sooner. Technology has made us all think and respond quicker and communicating no longer requires any effort. In fact, quite the opposite—it takes somewhat of an effort to get away from the countless channels of communication in our lives.

What do you believe an agency needs to be these days?

Brian: As media integrate and interconnect, a magazine (for example) is no longer a self-contained entity, it's a stepping stone to a website. And a website is not a final destination, either, it's a gateway to product information, an email, a downloadable brochure, a video, etc.

And it doesn't stop there. It never stops—because even after a sale has been made or a consumer has shown interest, there are follow-ups and surveys and offers for continued loyalty.

Communication flows through our lives like the air we breathe—and we're all breathing the same air. And yet, some marketers still have unrelated strategies at various stages along the communications highway. At Gallant Leaman Group, we take a more holistic view because we believe that a brand should speak with one voice. As people connect from one medium to the other, they should have a consistent brand experience, with each medium communicating in its own way.

How does an agency maintain superior performance while growing and responding to client needs, new technology, new products and volatile markets?

Sharon: I get asked that question a lot, actually. Some people believe that an agency's focus must be on a portfolio of services, businesses or products that will constantly change with market forces. I say, "not a chance". We believe our primary focus should be on a portfolio of people's skills. We believe in people as a competitive advantage. And that approach will help us succeed regardless of economic conditions.

Brian: Sharon and I have always believed that the best work is done by passionate, happy people. We strive to hire top talent from diverse backgrounds and experiences, to create a team environment where A-list players can grow and develop, both professionally and personally.

Our people are truly our competitive advantage. We bring together the best minds in the business. We're an agency of self-sufficient, autonomous thinkers working collaboratively. Our people love what they do and they love doing what they do better than anyone else.

How would you define the perfect client-agency relationship?

Sharon: Mutual respect, collaboration, transparency, enthusiasm and trust. We truly believe that good clients get good work and that their enthusiasm inspires agencies to go the extra mile. We've walked away from one-sided client relationships and don't believe in doing business "at any cost." There are agencies that do and that's their choice, but one-sided business relationships invariably go down a road that we don't want to go down.

We are blessed—and I do mean truly blessed—with a roster of clients that allows us to do our very best. We can't ask for more than that.

Do you think that business is becoming too demanding on its suppliers?

Brian: There's an old story about a ploughman who didn't have a lot of money, so he trained his horse to eat a little less each day. Just when he got the horse trained, it died. To answer your question, we're beginning to see a lot of dead horses out there.

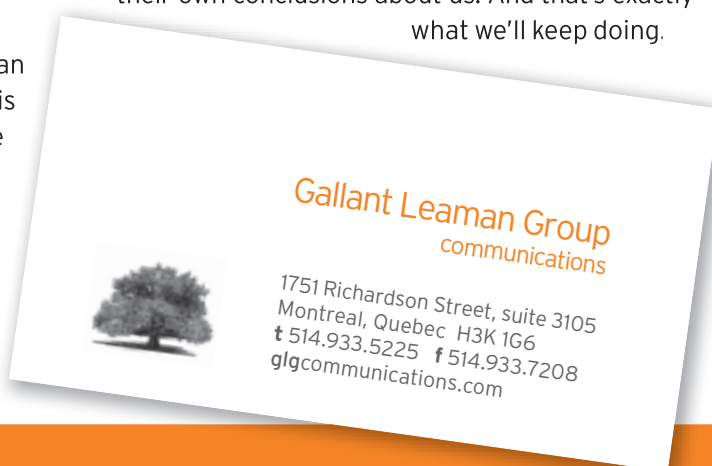
And yet we've flourished under these conditions and will continue to deliver real value to our clients. I have no doubt that things will continue to be demanding, so we'll keep improving our processes, always looking for ways to meet new demands. We believe that if a job *can* be done, we can do it.

When we first opened our business, we decided that we wanted to be very good rather than very big. We've always believed that great things come from doing great work and that's what we've tried to do.

What are Gallant Leaman Group's plans for the future?

Sharon: That's a tough question. When we first opened our business, Brian and I decided that we wanted to be very good rather than very big. We've always believed that great things come from doing great work and that's what we've tried to do. The fact that we've taken root in the market has come, we believe, from delivering on this promise. And it has earned us the right to partner with great clients.

We've kept our heads down, worked hard and allowed clients and prospective clients to come to their own conclusions about us. And that's exactly what we'll keep doing.



Gallant Leaman Group
communications