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THE MAGAZINE ABOUT MAGAZINES

MAY 2003

www.mastheadonline.com

\$3.95

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# Bucked

## An insider's view on the demise of the *Calgary Straight*

BY MICHELLE GREYSEN

**W**hy was the thriving Vancouver publication *Georgia Straight*, founded by the unquestionably successful Dan McLeod, so unsuccessful at spinning off a sister publication? Many wonder the same question, including the dozen or so people out of jobs when McLeod shut the *Calgary Straight* last October.

Among the more than 45 Calgary staffers who came and went through the continuous revolving door during the *Straight's* four-year life, the opinions on what went so horribly wrong are varied and outspoken but all have a common thread—Calgary and Vancouver are not the same.

The difference between what McLeod mastered in Vancouver and what he abandoned in Calgary is as opposite as a hippy and a cowboy. Not that all Calgarians are cowboys—far from it—but the sophistication and success of Calgary's world-renowned business community grew from solid small-town family values, not the hippy, free-love roots of Vancouver's *Georgia Straight*. What works in Vancouver does not work in Calgary any more than what works in Toronto would be seamless to integrate in Vancouver. In his 35-year rise to the top as publisher of the most widely circulated alternative weekly in Canada, McLeod has won many honours, including two industry lifetime achievement awards. Somewhere along the way, however, he seems to have forgotten the first basic rule of the publishing world—know your market!

The Calgary enterprise was founded on a monumentally naive assumption: that head office could manage, Vancouver-style, a room full of inexperience in Calgary to replicate another *Georgia Straight*. An equally fatal assumption was that the music and entertainment advertisers strongly anchoring the Vancouver title would also become Calgary's bread and butter. Nothing was

further from the truth. The Calgary product struggled from day one with limited funds and lack of experience; as McLeod himself put it, he learned the hard way that if you pay peanuts you get monkeys. His turning point in Calgary came in the third year when he installed his brother to look at the problems of why his Calgary alt weekly couldn't get off the ground. Said brother, with no publishing industry knowledge, had enough business sense to recognize that what Calgary needed was an experienced, in-house, day-to-day publisher to put it back on track.

That's where I came in. Hired as associate publisher in March of 2001, I tackled the huge task of making a viable, saleable product as quickly as possible. With a newly established team we battled the

the Vancouver office, was plain old simple nepotism and what it can do to any strong unit if not introduced professionally. Dan's own lack of faith in Calgary didn't help and it was a huge morale hit around the room when we read in horror Dan's own comment in *Masthead's* profile of him ("Straight Up," July/August 2002) in which he described the *Calgary Straight* as "possibly my greatest mistake. I don't think it will ever make money."

Now known as his "greatest mistake," Calgary felt like a shamed, illegitimate child. Then came the decision to transplant the entire production process to Vancouver in a one-week process with no parallel testing and no procedures in place for sales or editorial support. A young, inexperienced family member was put in charge. I believe that was the death knell for the already struggling but surviving product in Calgary. In Vancouver, the integration of the McLeod second generation combined with staff departures were insurmountable challenges. Within weeks the entire Calgary product was in a death spiral and in a week of impassable production issues and family squabbles, Calgary was doomed.

The lessons to learn as a publisher are to know your target market and build and support a strong team to capture those goals. Seems simple but perhaps at the top, 35 years later, the simple gets overlooked. Many have called Dan McLeod an eccentric, brilliant man and working directly under him as associate publisher in Calgary

I will echo those sentiments.

I spent my last week on staff in Vancouver sitting around the McLeod kitchen table with consultants from the U.S. he had hired and welcomed into his home to strategize and help build the best products possible.

I returned from the meeting buoyed with optimism and returned to fill the Calgary staff with the dream. Less than a week later we were all dismissed, the doors closed with one week's pay in lieu of notice and no explanation. Staffers were escorted out, the desks and chairs went in the garbage containers in the parking lot and the dream was over.

The number of calls and notes from the business and arts community to the unemployed staff was staggering. Calgary misses its arts and entertainment weekly even if it was a thorn in the side of its Vancouver parent. ■

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previous history and created solid relationships, nailing the strong support of the arts community with a consistent, respected weekly product. We were well on our way to turning the corner as we approached our fifth year.

What stopped us dead in our tracks, and also caused a huge shake-up on the home front that's still rippling through