

travel's new hot spot

Boston-based ism is winning premier accounts by fashioning itself as a **top advertising agency** with a dedicated specialty in travel and leisure.

By James Shillinglaw



Emirates has quickly established itself as one of the savviest, fastest growing and most profitable airlines in the world. When it comes to marketing and advertising, the airline has assembled a global roster of agencies that reads like a who's who of the ad industry—St. Lukes, Strawberry Frog, Leagas Delaney and BBDO, to name a few. So when it came time for Emirates to appoint an agency that would help support the critical launch of its North American routes, more than a few heads turned when the airline's carefully orchestrated review process led it to select Boston-based ism.



l. to r.: Leopold, Watson, Minihan

You might ask, just how does a little-known advertising and marketing firm earn the confidence of one of the world's top airlines? It's a question that many larger agencies are asking themselves these days, as they've seen ISM outsmart them for top accounts and assignments for such plums as Emirates, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, American Express, Barbados, Best Western and even Harley-Davidson.

ISM's recent success is no accident. While the firm is more than two-decades old, ISM President and CEO Gary Leopold is following a broad plan to shed the agency's relative obscurity and to position the company as a leader within the very select niche of travel and leisure. "We've taken some pretty significant steps to elevate our story," says Leopold. "In many ways, we're a brand-new, 20-year-old company."

Over the past several years, Leopold and his team have refashioned the agency by building up its creative and interactive resources to compete on a national basis, launching an executive-level consulting practice, strengthening a blue-chip roster of clients that is the envy of ISM's larger competitors, and relocating to sleek new offices that reflect the agency's confident new personality.

Just as significantly, ISM has expanded its focus from travel into one that targets more categories within the leisure space as well. It's a move designed to gain access to a greater pool of clients, including those not directly in the travel industry. "Our experience in understanding what motivates travelers to spend their discretionary income and choose one brand over another relates well to a variety of products and services in the leisure space," says Leopold.

To support its vision, ISM has assembled an impressive group of travel industry experts and senior-level talent from the world's premier communications and branding agencies. "It's unlike anything you'll find in another agency," proclaims Leopold, "and we're able to optimize their talents by instilling a collaborative environment where thinking and problem solving are really fostered." To demonstrate that such a statement doesn't come off as shameless bravado, Leopold quickly rattles off the credentials of just a few of the senior members of ISM's team.

Bill Watson, ISM's Chairman, has nearly 30 years of experience in travel, including stints in the airline industry, serving as ITT Sheraton's Head of Strategic Marketing, Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President of Marketing for Best Western, and a founding member and Chairman of THISCO, which today is the publicly traded Pegasus.

Bob Minihan, the firm's highly respected Executive Creative Director, joined ISM several years ago and has become one of Leopold's partners in the business. He held similar positions with Arnold and Holland Mark, where he won considerable credit for reinvigorating the agencies while winning a slew of awards, including two Cannes Lions, as well as landing accounts such as Dreyfus while up against much larger competition.

But it's not just in the senior leadership team that ISM exhibits such a depth of talent and experience. "We've carefully rebuilt the agency with people from different backgrounds," says Leopold. "We've taken our foundation in marketing consulting and built around it, forging an incredibly well-rounded team that can manage every aspect of a travel or leisure brand. If you want great ads, if you want a great brand platform and memorable television or digital marketing, we can do that. But it's all interwoven with people who really understand travel and the leisure mindset."



According to Minihan, ISM seeks to differentiate the brands of its clients by helping them tell their individual stories. “In many ways, brands have become highly commoditized and travel has lost some of its allure,” he says. “Companies are somewhat disconnected from their customers and there is very little brand loyalty. It’s our job to get people back to storytelling—to help people get back this fascination, this romance with travel.”

What ISM tries to do, Minihan says, is to examine the customer experience holistically. “We look across the entire customer experience and work to understand where value can be added,” he says. “How can we reshape an experience or provide a strategy that might connect to a customer in a more emotional way? It’s not always about advertising, it’s about this whole continuum—the product, customer experiences and interaction, marketing, communication and ongoing dialogue—and figuring out how it can all work together.”

ISM has strengthened its expertise in travel even further by forming The Prism Partnership, the company’s consulting arm, which specializes in marketing, technology and business operations. Housed within ISM and managed by Watson, the practice combines his considerable experience along with that of Leopold and a sage group of industry experts, including: Maureen O’Hanlon, who was formerly Executive Vice President of Marketing and Sales for Radisson Hotels Worldwide; Elaine Hendricks who served as Director of Research and Strategic Marketing at Best Western; and Mark Haley who formerly served as President of a technology consulting firm specializing in the hospitality industry and held a variety of posts at Sheraton.

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try knowledge and the right blend of advertising skills,” says Watson. “The few other companies that I’m aware of that are focused on the travel industry aren’t operating at this high of a strategic and creative level.”

“For the first time, we really have all the pieces in place,” says Leopold. “I can honestly say we’ve got incredible talent from the top all the way down. We feel really good about where we are. We’re helping clients tell their stories in really innovative ways. Now the challenge is to go out and tell our own story.”

Fortunately, ISM’s story is being written daily by its successes with clients. Susan Helstab, Senior Vice President of Marketing for Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, says her company was originally looking for an agency to augment its own experience on a consultative basis. It selected ISM based on the expertise of its principals and the relationship grew. “One of the things we learned early on with ISM is they just have this amazing ability to retain people who are like-minded, who come with the same kind of qualifications and the same kind of experience and who really fit the culture of their agency,” Helstab says. “It’s really the tone that I think was set early on with Gary and ISM’s founder, Irma Mann and was just perpetuated because of the leadership in the agency.” Helstab also praises ISM’s professionalism. “They deliver really good creative

for us and they manage their accounts really, really well,” she says. “There are no surprises. They keep things on time and on budget. If there’s something derailing, you always know in advance that it might be happening. ISM really sets the standard that we judge all of our other agency relations on.”

Lynn Walka, Senior Marketing Executive for Emirates, says that in the end ISM was selected because it was focused distinctly on the travel industry. She says the



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Homepage takeover developed for the launch of the Emirates A380 with onboard showers.

agency demonstrated that it could provide a wide range of services, including all launch creative for the airline's corporate market, total multimedia, TV, radio, magazines, trade publications, consumer magazines and newspapers and online marketing. With its travel connections, ISM was even able to help market Emirates' cargo services, something few other advertising agencies could match. "I have to tell you they worked day and night with me," Walka says. She lauds Leopold, Minihan and the company's other senior staff as very hands-on executives who don't leave the work to junior account people. "They helped me get it done," she says. "I couldn't have done it without them. Some weeks they were putting out something like ten different creative executions."

ISM also made a memorable impression when they won the Barbados Tourism Authority account. "Instead of coming down to the pitch and showing us samples of the types of ads they were recommending, they actually introduced a strategic brand platform and a brand video," says Bill Silvermintz, Vice President of Marketing-Americas for Barbados. "They were absolutely spot-on in capturing the essence of our brand. That video ran two minutes and 58 seconds before some hardened tourism executives. And at the end, everyone in the room stood up and applauded. I've never seen anything like it."

ISM also has inroads in attracting such leisure accounts as Harley-Davidson. After a national search, the motorcycle company selected the agency to help develop a strategic approach to better support the needs of Harley riders. Scott Habegger, Director of Enthusiast Services Strategy for Harley, says ISM won the business because of its travel expertise and its nimbleness within the travel arena. "We liked the size of the company in that we could work with the key people," he says. "They bring a nice breadth where they understand the consumer and the marketing side—and with Prism they really understand the infrastructure of travel. Combined they really give us a great one-two punch."

So where do Leopold and his team hope to take ISM from here? "Our goal is to have controlled growth," Leopold says. "We'd like to add several more large and visible clients, but we want to continue to focus on our core strengths, which are solving problems and providing solutions for our clients." He says the agency looks for clients that are forward-thinking and who really understand that it's about the experience the customer has with their brand and their products. "We want clients who are willing to try different

things to move their brand and their relationship with their customers to a different place," Leopold says. "We're looking to form a partnership with clients in which we can exchange ideas and where there's an understanding that great work comes out of a process. That work doesn't necessarily have to be straight advertising," Leopold says,

"but can be anything that serves to differentiate a product or a brand. From the beginning, we've always been more about solving people's problems than about being viewed as an ad agency."

In the end, however, it's the way clients perceive ISM that will be the key to its growth. And when even former clients end up praising the agency, ISM must be doing something right. Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace, Director General of the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, retained ISM to develop marketing programs for the trade and consumers, but the agency

was dropped after eight years when the country elected a new government. "ISM was prepared to get in there elbow to elbow with you and help you execute," says Vanderpool-Wallace. "So they are very good in terms of closing the loop, as opposed to many other agencies. As a small country, there's always a great difficulty in terms of finding the talent we need to get things done. They filled that gap for us." Indeed, he says he's even considering restarting some of the programs that ISM had developed and may turn to the firm for more help in the future. Even more to the point, Vanderpool-Wallace lauds ISM's dedication to its clients and their needs. "They developed a bond and a friendship that survives the account," he says. "You get the very real sense that this is being done not strictly for business reasons, but because they have a genuine interest in how we progress through life." +



Bob Minihan, Executive Creative Director

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ISM AT A GLANCE

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