

AGENCY OF THE YEAR

The Curious Case of Colle McVoy, Adweek's 2023 US Midsize Agency of the Year

How the 88-year-old Minneapolis firm is building a culture to last



Colle McVoy has a relationship-focused philosophy and culture of curiosity. Colle McVoy



By **Paul Barbagallo**

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At the Wyman Building, there's no ambiguity about what you're in for. Every Tuesday and Thursday, on the uppermost floors of this tawny-stoned warehouse in Minneapolis' Warehouse District, the din of conversation never really ceases. Everywhere, people are meeting, pitching, "speed dating" and participating in "collision sessions"—a type of hackathon designed to tap into the energy of community and all its humanness—in seemingly one frenetic thrum.

To a prospective client, the in-person, startup-like world of Colle McVoy might serve to illustrate the resiliency of an 88-year-old, midsize, Midwestern creative agency in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. It might give color and context to why "relationships" is the firm's new competitive positioning. It might even explain why the agency has appeared perennially on one or more of the "Best Companies to Work For" lists in reputable business publications—and how it's managed to lure top talent away from the coasts. These people don't seem to mind coming into an office twice a week!

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SOMETHING TO CROW ABOUT!

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Jim Perdue
Kyle Perdue *Chris Perdue*

Case in point: In 2021, Colle McVoy lost a major client, Land O'Lakes, which had been with the agency for more than 28 years. That kind of loss might devastate a small or midsize firm. Yet since August 2022, the start of Adweek's review period for Agency of the Year deliberations, Colle McVoy has grown by 25%, driven by an 88% business-win rate. The company added recognizable and stalwart American brands such as Craftsman, Whirlpool, Goodyear, **La-Z-Boy**, DeWalt and Haribo of America to its client roster. In the same period, Colle McVoy added 60 new employees and experienced no layoffs; notably, almost 40% of the new hires were BIPOC.

"When people walk through the doors, they tell us they can feel something unique," said chief executive officer Christine Fruechte. "We agree. Our culture has been a key to our success."



Key wins: Craftsman, Whirlpool, Goodyear, La-Z-Boy, UnitedHealthcare and Haribo

Losses: None

Revenue: 25% growth year over year

Strategic moves: Optimized team structure for hybrid working model; advanced an "intentional togetherness" strategy for in-office work two days a week; launched a "quick turn" content factory to make the brief-to-ideation process smoother and more cost-effective; optimized B Corp certification

Diversity: Since August 2022, Colle McVoy added 60 new employees and experienced no layoffs; almost 40% of the new hires were BIPOC. Company has doubled BIPOC representation since 2020. Since 8/1/22, 12% of promotions at the agency have been BIPOC employees and 74% have been female employees.

It was the culture that inspired turnaround specialist Jessica Henrichs to join Colle McVoy in 2019 with the remit of reinventing the agency's business and operating model. Just before the start of the pandemic, Henrichs "reset" the company around four priorities: business development, client relationships, capabilities and talent. She united people from disciplines that would benefit from closer collaboration, such as brand experience and brand strategy, PR and creativity, and connected media and data science. Her North Star throughout was matching "talent to task" to ensure every employee was more focused, engaged and set up for lasting success.

Even Colle McVoy's return-to-office strategy was developed with culture at the center; Henrichs, now the agency's president, wanted Tuesdays and Thursdays to be reserved for "what we do best when we're together," rather than endless Zoom calls.



Amid the pandemic, as the company grappled with how to recruit top candidates and retain employees to stay competitive, Fruechte and Henrichs rethought how they were shaping and building a culture that brings people together around a common cause. Understanding that many top performers in the advertising world want workplaces where they can intertwine their beliefs with the company's, Colle McVoy decided to seek B Corp status.



This meant serving not just shareholders but also the environment, community, employees and consumers. The official certification in May has brought a new energy to the agency and client conversations. "Clients look for competency, but also character," Henrichs said.



Cultivating a culture of curiosity

Becoming a B Corp may have been more seamless for Colle McVoy than other agencies, as the company has long encouraged open-mindedness in its employees. Collision sessions are designed to prompt "low-ego" brainstorming among staff. Meetings are positioned as problem-solving opportunities. And people take responsibility not only for their own actions and mistakes, but also their own learning.

"We recruit for curiosity," said co-executive creative director Dustin Black, who has been with the agency for almost 15 years over two stints. "We look for candidates who think beyond the surface, those continuous learners who are driven by innovation."



Curiosity, Colle McVoy has found, encourages people to take an interest in one another’s ideas rather than focus only on their own perspectives. That leads them to work together more naturally: Conflicts are less heated, and groups achieve better results.

Gil Muiños, co-eed, explained that Colle McVoy's culture of curiosity extends far beyond an idea. People are encouraged to challenge their assumptions about the industry, technology, media format and even themselves.

"If you're truly passionate and truly curious, clients can read that," Muiños said.

Colle McVoy's relationship-focused philosophy and culture of curiosity manifest in the bottom line.

Dave Fransen, senior vice president, PR and earned creative, put it this way: "We try to understand our client's origin story, the brand and DNA, where they're coming from, what are the problems that they're trying to solve, but in a very nuanced way that lets them know we respect their history but also want to create their future."

*This story is part of the "Building a Better Agency" **special feature**.*



The Work

Stanley Black & Decker Inc., “Power Tool Ballad”



The 30-second spot for Craftsman features a rock band hyping up a homeowner mowing the lawn and fixing a toilet. Tabata Gomez, CMO of tools and outdoor for Stanley Black & Decker Inc., said it has already seen a lift in sales since the campaign launch.



La-Z-Boy, “The Decliner”

Colle McVoy worked on a prototype for La-Z-Boy called “The Decliner,” an AI-powered recliner that generates an excuse for canceling plans by lifting its handle. Christy Hoskins, La-Z-Boy vp and CMO, said it has garnered more than 1 billion earned impressions so far.

“We’re celebrating this idea of lazy,” Hoskins said. “That’s a little bit of an uncomfortable territory because it has some negative connotations. But what that tells us is that we’ve really tapped into something that is powerful and universal and interesting.”



Cub Cadet, “Ultimate Lawn Mowing Shoe”

Cub Cadet's limited-edition lawn mowing shoe typifies the agency's knack for injecting new life into established brands. Whether the shoes sell is sort of beside the point. It gets people talking about an American Midwestern brand, and that's what Colle McVoy does best.



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Paul Barbagallo is Adweek's svp, executive editor of thought leadership and practical journalism.



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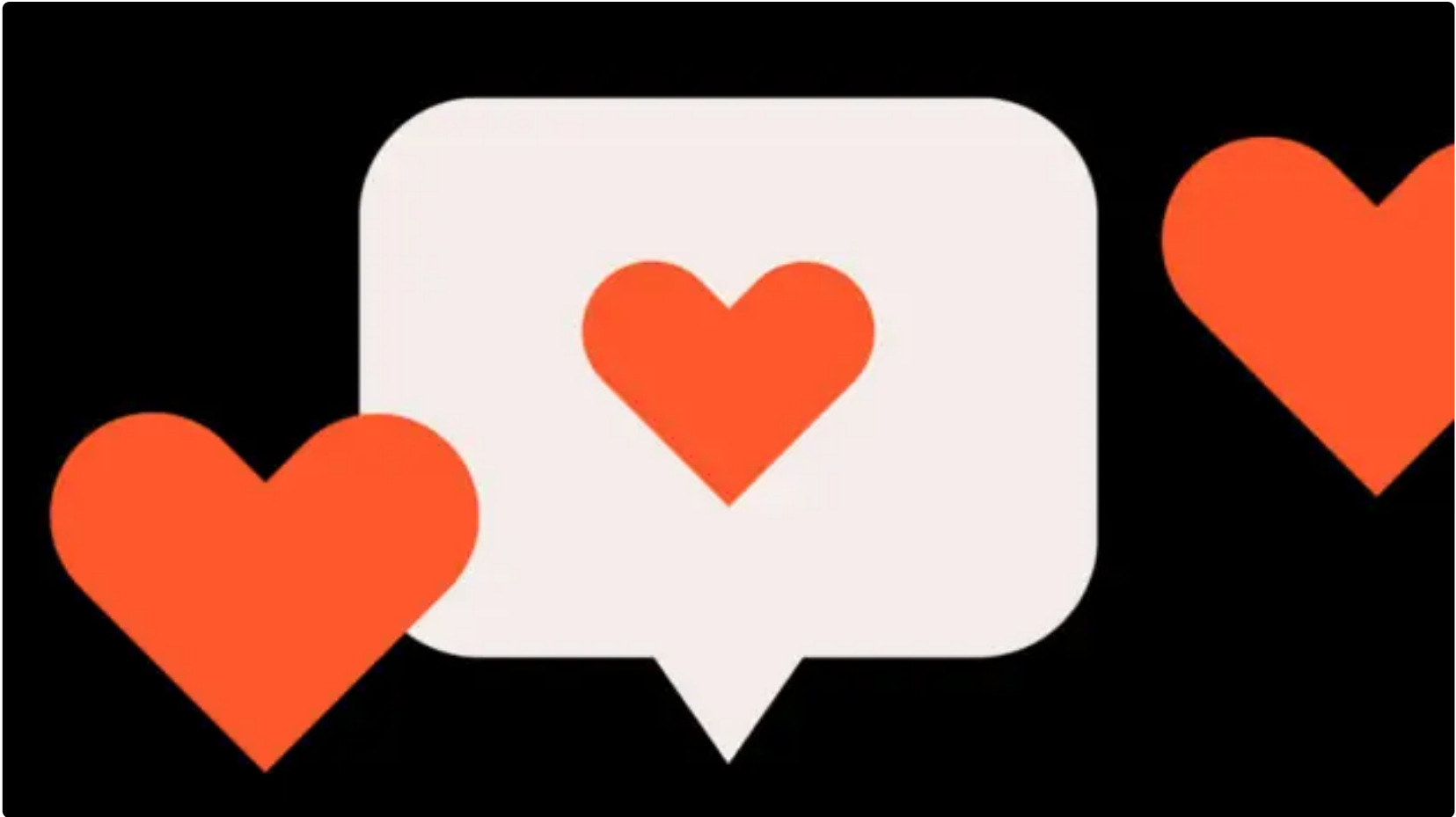
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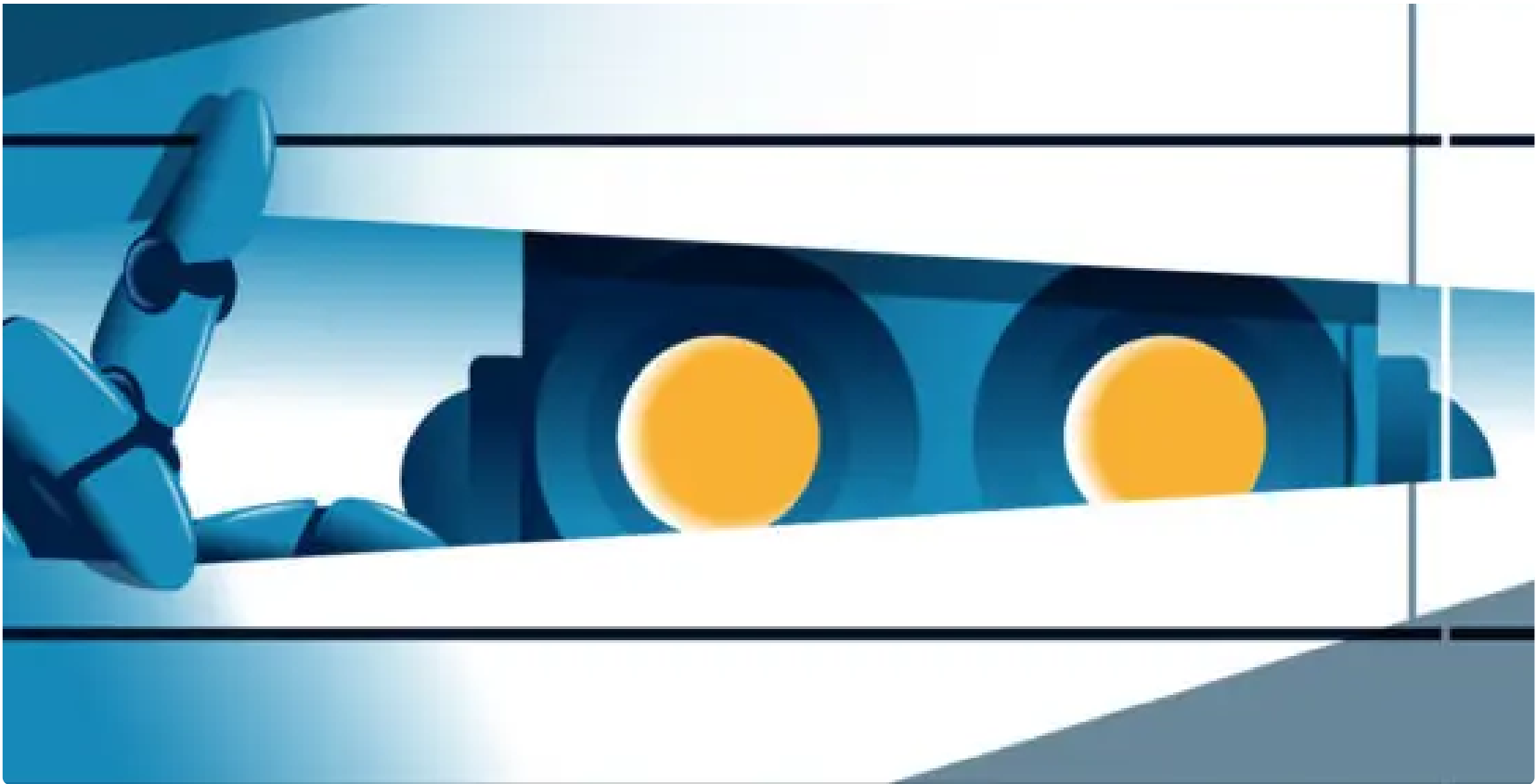
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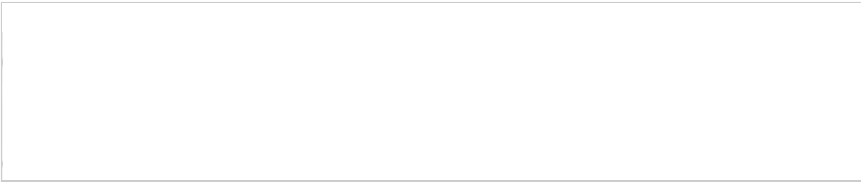
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