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Taking Ads to a Whole Nuttier Level

Wexley School For Girls is actually an ad agency, though it has its own fight song

by [Jon Fine](#)

Upon entering Seattle ad agency Wexley School For Girls' headquarters—you know you've found it when you see the row of rubber chickens in the window—you pass a room on your right in which every object is white, including a grand piano, a sculpture of a snake, the shag carpeting, and busts of random folk that include Beethoven, Nostradamus, Custer, Elvis, Napoleon, and some nameless individual wearing a wolf's head atop his own. Just past the reception desk is the dining room of what appears to be a Chinese restaurant. Shortly thereafter you encounter a functional nine-hole miniature golf course, which sprawls out among a constellation of several employee workstations, a 1973 Plymouth Prowler trailer (think Airstream, not horses), and bathrooms done up with wallpaper that would befit a bordello, alongside the sinks of which are large, powder-filled glass jars marked "COCAINE."

The piano, trailer, and golf course are real. The dining room and cocaine are not. I haven't even gotten to the students' drawings of founder Cal McAllister "using some form of martial arts to kick the ass of something else," as McAllister puts it, that blanket part of a wall in another bathroom. (They're his "price" for critiquing their portfolios.) Wexley is not actually a girls' school, nor was there ever such an institution bearing this name, although last year's impromptu Wexley Day parade around the neighborhood might have left some confused bystanders with the impression that there had been.

The 5-year-old agency clearly lays on the "we're crazy" shtick a bit thick. It would all be reason for an extravagant eye-roll were Wexley's work and underlying aesthetics not both legitimately bizarre and legitimately eye-catching. It has snagged business from the likes of Microsoft ([MSFT](#)), Bath & Body Works, Nike ([NKE](#)), and Virgin Mobile USA ([VM](#)).

"We can't change their voice mail," laments McAllister of Microsoft—laments because he claims to want the kinds of clients who are willing to change their outgoing messages. (Wexley is big on outgoing messages. At press time, McAllister's, spoken in low and confident tones by a woman with a British accent, said he was "otherwise engaged in a 'ride the ducks' tour across the River Thames.") Nonetheless, he says, "our challenge is to humanize this giant company." Wexley's ongoing Hey, Genius campaign for Microsoft, a piece of the tech giant's college recruitment effort, eschews much in the way of traditional advertising in favor of attention-grabbing stunts on more than 200 campuses. A potential Microsoft recruit might find an individual standing outside his or her classroom wearing a sandwich board that extols said student's brilliance by name. Or a student might be invited to hop in Microsoft's "jobcuzzi," a portable hot tub wherein a besuited barker asks passersby to, ah, jump in. "Their minds go to places mine might not," says Liz Friedman, a Microsoft group marketing manager who works with Wexley's staffers on Hey, Genius.

Wexley is best understood as an exemplar of the new wave of ad agencies, the sensibilities and rise of which are inextricably bound up with certain corners of the Web. As with Hey, Genius, they're developing a rep for advertising that extends far beyond the traditional confines of print or TV or Web ads. And also for advertising that can work as entertainment on its own, as evidenced by a swing through Wexley's own Web site, which features an admirably

deluded Wexley fight song. For all the ink spilled about the blurring of the line between media and ads, it's still pretty rare to mistake ads for something you'd watch voluntarily. (Early on, McAllister and co-founder Ian Cohen dabbled with the idea of signing on with a Los Angeles-based talent agency. Today a mock-indignant Cohen insists "we are way too good" for Hollywood.)

LIP SERVICE

But Wexley sometimes acts more like a production company and less like an ad agency. It has done brand work—creating the identity and feel of a product—and campaigns for clients in which they retain a small equity stake in the ventures. And there are other ways in which they fall outside the norms for standard ad agencies. In one instance, they licensed an *American Idol*-esque Miss Mobile contest for Virgin Mobile, an idea they had previously trademarked. In another, they are partnering with New York-based cosmetics startup Purpose Built to create a lip-care product.

As with many agencies that came of age after the Web established a media culture of its own, some of Wexley's work centers around letting consumers in on the fun. For a genuinely strange Microsoft Web video campaign in 2007 that featured Tony Little, the eye-poppingly exhortative icon of fitness infomercials, Wexley came up with a way for viewers to make their own infomercials featuring Little. Lest all of this sound like Wexley's work is strictly for jokesters, consider a campaign McAllister and Cohen did a few years back for a Seattle chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Rather than running ads aimed at stopping teens from drinking and driving on prom night, they painted mock handicapped parking spaces in targeted high school parking lots the night before prom that each bore the legend "every 48 seconds a drunk driver makes another person eligible to park here."

Wexley has yet to be mistaken for one of the giants in its field. According to Managing Director Brian Marr, the agency is on track to post revenues north of \$8 million this year, up around 50% from last year, and substantially higher than its lean early days. "Basically, our wives floated us for a year. I don't mind saying that," says Cohen, 40, whose wife is an insurance broker. (McAllister's is a Microsoft executive currently on maternity leave.) It remains to be seen exactly how huge one of America's best and weirdest agencies will become. But at least, one presumes, the days of Cohen and McAllister sponging off their wives are behind them.

Fine is *BusinessWeek's* *MediaCentric* columnist and [Fine On Media](#) blogger .