

{GILLES BEROUARD}

THE SNAKE CHARMER

What is the je-ne-sais-quoi that makes a great leader? Havas Worldwide's Gilles Berouard is a case in point - and the group CEO for Eastern Europe has let ZEN in on it all.

■ By Philippe Riboton ■ Photo Tomáš Železný

Don't tell Gilles Berouard he works in the advertising business; he still believes he's educating the masses on his journey to make this place a better world. Regional CEO for Eastern Europe of Havas Worldwide, one of the largest global advertising groups, president of the French Foreign Advisors for the Czech Republic, member of the Young Presidents Organization, and lecturer at leading management Universities and business schools, not to mention a Knighthood of the French National Order of Merit and a member of the Who's Who in France, Gilles Berouard is recognized in the Prague business community as an undisputed leader. But what is it that makes a true leader?

Personification or megalomania?
«For many years, very few people in Prague business circles knew what the RSCG in the company's name (EURO RSCG) stood for», an

advertising insider says. «However, everybody knew that Gilles Berouard was and is the CEO of this agency.» No doubt the advertising business relies a lot on personification: «The personality and style of an agency's CEO defines the character and operating style of the entire agency», explains Prague-based headhunter Richard Hunt. The keen British observer of the Czech advertising scene puts Gilles Berouard right alongside «Godfathers» Marek Šebesták (founder of Mark BBDO), Josef Havelka (formerly with Leo Burnett), Evžen Hart (formerly with Ogilvy, now with PPF) and Petr Havlíček (Young & Rubicam), the industry's five key pace-setters. Such personification, however, is never too far from megalomania. Laurent Goutard, former CEO of Komerční banka, now head of retail banking at Société Générale bank in Paris, a client of Havas and Gilles' long-time partner in tennis, is quick to praise Gilles as «a charismatic leader». A former employee of Havas sees it slightly differently: «Gilles is also a control freak. To cultivate his personal and



Jacques Séguéla on Berouard

"Gilles is the George Clooney of advertising. A George Clooney that would walk like Harrison Ford and have an Alec Baldwin build. He is all the seducers in one person. Quite normal for somebody whose business is about seducing women – I mean female consumers – who, by the way, are 80% of all consumers. He entered the communication world like others enter religion, after his seminary in Sup de Co business school, his stations of the cross at Saatchi & Saatchi and his religious conversion to Havas. A missionary of advertising, he went on to evangelize Eastern Europe as it became the new Europe and made Prague its cathedral, a place for innovation, creation, and passion. A charismatic leader as much as a Charismatic figure, an incredible runner, a hunter of dreams that he makes come true, he never stops teaching talent to his colleagues and success to his clients. The Czech Republic isn't his second «homeland» but his first one; he made it the land for new advertising and this land has recognized it and made him a happy man."

Jacques Séguéla, the biggest personality of French advertising and member of Havas Worldwide board.

HE IS THE GUY WHO CAN HAVE FOUR MEETINGS AT FOUR DIFFERENT LOCATIONS AT ONE TIME

puts a lot of pressure on people by the intimidating economic factors at stake for the company, Gilles still manages to get the best out of people," notes an employee.

This singular attention to detail also shows in the way Gilles announces good news to his own staff. «We pitched back in 1997 as T-Mobile,» recalls Robert Chvátal, former marketing director of T-Mobile Czech Republic, now CEO and director with the betting company Sazka.

corporate image, he chooses the colour of the carpet or the quality of the toilet paper». Richard Hunt disagrees. «Gilles has never allowed success to go to his head; the James Bond theme on his cellphone is just a gentle self-parody.» Hunt recalls another anecdote that took place during the party held when Gilles celebrated his freshly bestowed French knighthood. «In Britain, a knighted man would be henceforth addressed as Sir Gilles. I asked him how I should address him now. «The question is: should you address me at all, from now on?» was Gilles reply. «But there was a big smile on his face, and on mine.» A sense of humour often graces Gilles' character. He showed up dressed in a dinosaur outfit for a farewell party in order to mock those that suggest he had become a veteran, or disguised as Obélix to the annual «broken silence» party devoted to the Roman Empire and its gladiators.

Perfectionist to the smallest detail

Berouard is keen on challenging the image of being a difficult person to work with, disputing accusations that he micro-manages too often. «I am an assistant to everybody in the company», he says. «I am not above the rest of the employees, I am in the centre of the team. My management style is a mix of discipline and determination,» he explains. «I believe one should always feel dissatisfied: that's why I always push my people to run until the very last second.» Jindřich Fremuth, a director at the consumer division of Telefónica Czech Republic and former managing director of EURO RSCG 4D (the original name of the digital branch of Havas), testifies: «Gilles never gives up. He'd say 'the pitch is not lost until the first invoice of your competitor is paid.' Berouard admits to «challenging things all the time and systematically over-delivering.» His staff acknowledges that this translates into long days, nights, and weekends spent in the office... changing various pitches, budgets, and presentations over and over again. «Although this

«Then EURO RSCG won this pitch back, and Gilles insisted I come over, as CMO of T-Mobile, to the agency's little garden and tell his small team this news instead of him. That is putting customers first,» he says.

Driven by innovation and change

The end result of Gilles' quest for perfectionism shows in the number of prizes his agency has received over the years, which is a very important criterion in his eyes: «We have been awarded the Agency of the Year in the Czech Republic eight times over the past ten years, not to mention that we have received the highest number of creative prizes at the EFFIE (one of the most coveted awards in advertising),» boasts Berouard. His clients know why. «Gilles listens to his clients closely and is capable of putting himself in their position and envisioning their strategy, especially when there is a need to come up with a breakthrough approach and conduct radical changes,» says André Léger, former marketing director of Komerční banka and managing director of the building and loan company Modrá pyramida.

Léger is referring to the very first campaigns Gilles produced for Komerční banka after it was acquired by France's Société Générale. Others followed: T-Mobile, Komerční banka, and Opavia, to name but a few of the leading brands that have trusted Gilles the way a patient would trust a surgeon with his body. And, in most cases, it wasn't simply a case of cosmetic surgery. «Gilles has been instrumental in the rebuilding process of our brand,» recalls Norbert Barré, another former marketing executive of Komerční banka, now regional director with Société Générale in the south of France. «He had the courage to fight 200% for his vision, stick to his strategy at whatever cost, and never give up on his creative ideas.» If it took overruling his managers' decisions, so be it. «He did it once with me,» recalls Helena De La Barre, a former FMCG practice leader at EURO RSCG, now managing director at competing advertising agency VCCP. «But he sent me flowers the next day,» she adds with a smile.

Ambassador of French charm

It would be no exaggeration to say that there isn't a single large French consumer goods or retail company Gilles hasn't worked with during the past 20 years of doing business in the Czech Republic and Central Europe. This can't be attributed simply to the fact that he represents one of the largest French advertising groups or gets accounts as a result of global contracts (French rival Publicis, for example, never got anywhere close to Havas' market share of French business in the Czech





„One must always feel dissatisfied; that's why I always push my people to run until the very last second“ Gilles Berouard (pictured with the author, Philippe Riboton, headhunter and erstwhile publisher of The Prague Tribune monthly).

Republic). Responding to our questions from Rabat, where he now serves as ambassador of France in Morocco, the former French ambassador in Prague, Charles Fries, acknowledged Berouard's contribution to the promotion of French business in the Czech Republic. An unofficial ambassador of the Czech Republic in Paris and a shadow ambassador of France in Prague, Gilles is at his best when he plays with his French connections and unleashes his typical French charm. «He is a unique combination of a French connoisseur and a seasoned global manager,» says Martin Jahn, former Minister of Economics in the Czech Republic, now a global director with the Volkswagen group in Germany. «He always approaches challenges with pragmatism, but with a touch of French charm.» This flavour comes with an accent he seems to cultivate like a personal trademark: “When he arrives at a meeting”, says headhunter Hunt, “he sweeps you along with his new idea of the day, delivered in perfect English but

with that resolutely pronounced French accent, often affectionately mimicked by those who work for him.”

The other trait that sets him apart from the mainstream is a unique time management style. «He's can have four meetings at the same time at four different locations where people are waiting for him,» says an insider. A Paris-based friend of almost thirty years admits that «I can only be sure that we are actually going to meet when he taps on my shoulder.»

Gilles is one of the most social animals in the Prague jungle, known as one of the best public speakers you could ever hope to hear. Among his clients, there isn't a single CEO who, on the occasion of their farewell party, wasn't treated to a spectacular event and a hilarious speech (Laurent Goutard being one of them).

A man of many faces

Sometimes a pacesetter leader, sometimes an authoritative leader, sometimes an affiliative leader, Gilles Berouard is nothing if not a good illustration that «leadership can and should be situational,» as Robin Benyncasa puts it. A two-time adventure racing world champion, a two-time Guinness World Record distance kayaker, and a full-time firefighter, Robin Benyncasa is the author of «How Winning Works», in which she promotes the concept of «kinetic leadership». According to Benyncasa: «Great leaders choose their leadership style like a golfer chooses his or her club, with a calculated analysis of the matter at hand, the end goal, and the best tool for the job.» Call it opportunism if you like, Gilles would not mind. «I may not be the best one at designing processes,» he says, «but I feel my role is about having a vision and communicating passion.» A pioneer in numerous areas, Gilles is preparing his upcoming attendance at TED, a global conference network bringing together the most compelling thinkers on the planet, as well as his participation in Burning Man, a unique artistic event held annually in the middle of the Nevada desert. A man of many faces, Gilles Berouard is without a doubt a fascinating source of inspiration for anyone interested in leadership. A passionate lover of sports (tennis, golf, and windsurfing, among others) and a fierce competitor in everything he does, Gilles seems to believe that anything is possible. Who knows what else we can expect? Remember those six words Frank Sinatra had written on his gravestone: «The best is yet to come.» n

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