

My Journey Through Recovery Took Me From Jail to Cannes

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Let me begin by stating that I'm not from the advertising or marketing world. So you can imagine my surprise when I was invited to attend the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity to present a project to the Titanium Lions jury. I had no idea what to expect. I hadn't even met the team I was working with in person. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

How it all began

My expertise lies in the addiction and recovery realm. As an opioid survivor who struggled with addiction for years, this topic is near and dear to my heart.

About six months prior to Cannes, I received an email from a team at Serviceplan Munich inviting me to join a project they were working on. The team had been researching people who managed to quit opioids—people who shared their stories with thousands of others and were happy to do so.

After weeks of research, they found my Soberdogs videos on TikTok and YouTube and contacted me. Connections like this cemented in me the marketing power and reach of social media—it's absolutely incredible that a team in Germany found a TikTok I shared and were able to reach out.

The project was about a recovery helpline called 855-HOW-TO-QUIT. Callers who were struggling to quit opioids were able to

dial the extension of the unique imprint code from their opioid pills, which led to a story from someone who quit that same pill.

The concept blew me away. I had never seen a campaign about opioids in such a precise way, and with pills as the main element. It reminded me of an experience during my time in jail: A speaker resonated with me because I could relate to his story. And now I could be that someone for somebody else. I immediately got on board.

I'll admit, I initially had some doubts about how seriously a team based in Germany—none of whom were in recovery themselves—would take this project. But that doubt disappeared after our very first video call. They were genuinely interested and had a great idea. And we had the option of reaching even more people. That's the power of advertising and marketing: You can make a real impact on those in need.

En route to Cannes

As I prepared for the trip to France and researched the festival, I began to grasp the magnitude of this event. It's often described as the "Super Bowl" of the marketing industry.

My journey to France had a bit of a rough start. Just as I landed in Europe—for the first time ever—the airline lost my luggage. Along with several others.

But you see, there's always a silver lining. The three-hour wait to retrieve my bag led to an unexpected dinner with three fellow festival attendees, including ADWEEK's chief of staff, Mike Beyman. That dinner sparked the creation of a group chat we called "Lost Luggage," and it's what led to me writing this piece. We've stayed connected ever since.

A brand's thoughtfulness can go a long way

Once I settled in Cannes and met the team in person, it became

clear that everyone involved in this project was deeply passionate about the cause. This wasn't just another assignment—it was a mission to make a difference.

The team welcomed me warmly, with the utmost respect and kindness, going out of their way to make sure I felt comfortable. Before I landed in Nice, they called me to ask if I wanted anything removed from the hotel—specifically alcohol—knowing that many people indulge at the festival. Although I don't drink, I assured them it didn't bother me if others did. Their thoughtfulness and willingness to accommodate my needs left a lasting impression on me.

These experiences help make the meld of industries and people from various walks of life work seamlessly together. And that's what I got to experience in Cannes. Down-to-earth people, full of talent, from different disciplines, ages, and countries, connected because of who we are as human beings.

And thankfully, my experience culminated in being on stage, holding a gold Lion. It wasn't until I returned to New York that I truly realized the significance of what we had accomplished. People spend their entire careers striving to win a Lion, and we won one for "855-HOW-TO-QUIT-(OPIOIDS)."

The real success

Although the awards and recognition are rewarding, the real success lies in the over 30,000 people who have called the helpline, and the more than 5,000 individuals who have been successfully referred to treatment centers.

To everyone in the advertising and marketing world, I hope 855-HOW-TO-QUIT serves as a powerful example of what you can achieve. With people from various companies, nonprofits, and

industries coming together, we channeled our collective passion and expertise in design, audio, visual, and creativity to make this Titanium-shortlisted recovery helpline a reality. By shedding a positive light on a heavy subject, with a unique approach after months of research, we stopped looking at who to blame and started looking at who to seek for support and collaboration.

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