

# New campaign urges students to 'rule the world'

By GEOFF KIRBYSON

Don't look now but accountants are in danger of being accused of moonlighting as stand-up comedians.

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario (ICAO) has just launched a new recruitment campaign called "Rule the World" targeted at "the best and brightest" high school and university students. It asks them if they're "interested in world domination."

That sounds about right. After all, don't most accountants count *Gladiator* and *Dirty Harry* as their favourite movies?

Jon French, associate director of career information at the ICAO, says the time had come to show the fun and funny side of the accounting profession with a message that's bound to garner second looks, bewilderment and guffaws.

"We wanted to develop something for the keeners on campus to let them know the CA designation would put them in position to make a difference, put them in a leadership position in business and provide them with an opportunity to make a difference in their world," French says.

He acknowledges the institute is rolling the dice in running a campaign that flies in the face of long-held accounting stereotypes,

and displays a sense of humour.

"Whenever you do something a little different, so tongue in cheek, there's a little bit of risk involved. We were required to put ourselves in the minds of today's student. We've heard the stereotypes, I hear them quite regularly. We know that the perception isn't always the same as the reality," he says.

"We were willing to take the risk to connect to the students to help get our message across."



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The ICAO campaign comes just a couple of months after the Certified Management Accountants of Canada copyrighted the

term 'Creative Accountants' as part of their re-branding efforts. The certified management accountants' goal was to reclaim the word 'creative' and dissociate themselves from fraud and cheating, as well as to let the public know that CMAs have a broader skill set — and sense of humour — than most people think.

Barbara Bowes, president of the Legacy Bowes Group, a Winnipeg-based human resources and executive search consulting firm, says the ICAO's branding strategy is "smart. They want to make their profession the profession of choice, just like companies are trying to make themselves the employer of choice," she says.

French says the institute conducted focus groups early in the year and discovered "ruling the world" has different connotations for different people.

"Our purpose was to show students that whatever their personal definition of ruling the world or having an impact, the CA (designation) would provide them with the training, the experience and skill set to have that sort of an impact," he says.

French says the ICAO realizes it isn't just competing with the other accounting designations for students but consulting firms and investment banks, as well.

He adds while many career choices can be derailed by a poor-performing economy, becoming a CA is "inflation proof." While there might be slight fluctuations in the number of accounting jobs available at any one time, the industry doesn't see the huge downturns that hit other sectors when the economy falters.

"You always need chartered accountants. When the economy goes down, there's restructuring or M&A work. The amount of work from publicly traded companies will always be there," he says.

The ICAO campaign received an enthusiastic thumbs-up from Alan Macnaughton, an associate professor at the University of Waterloo's school of accounting and finance.

"It helps to be a bit edgy. It's hard to get those eyeballs (to pay attention to recruitment campaigns), particularly with young people," he says. "I'm not a marketer myself but I do teach these students. You've got to get their attention. Maybe (somebody) should start a Facebook group. I think we need a good television series, a *House* for accountants where (the star) is cranky and dumps on everybody but has genius solutions."

Macnaughton says while it might seem incongruous, interest in the accounting profession spiked in 2002 after former Big Five firm Arthur Anderson was found guilty of shredding documents related to its client Enron, the now-defunct energy company.

Having "a few crooked accoun-



tants was really good for enrolment. Once you have some criminal indictments, people say, 'well, they're not boring.' At first you think, 'this is a bad sign,' but as soon as you hear about accountants being unethical, other people now find them interesting," he says.

Macnaughton says he remembers when the Catholic church attracted more applications under equally odd circumstances — by advertising in *Playboy* magazine.

"Whatever works," he says.

Macnaughton notes while the ICAO campaign might help change the public's view of accountants, that shouldn't be its goal. Instead, it has to focus on getting people who are interested in business and economics to "move a little bit" across the border into accounting.

"To get somebody who thinks that accounting is awful and they want to be a painter ... I don't think any of those people are going to change their mind for an ad," he says.

Gary Hannaford, chief executive officer of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Manitoba, says he and his team will monitor the success of the Ontario campaign to see if a humorous approach might work in Western Canada.

"It's certainly something we'll

take a look at to see if it would be effective. We'll learn from the results of their program," he says.

Hannaford says it never hurts for people to understand that CAs do, indeed, have a funny bone.

"We're human beings and we can have a sense of humour," he says.

The ICAO also realizes that money talks with young students. That's why it's quick to point out a first-year CA in Ontario earns an average of \$71,000 annually and once they're established in their careers, average yearly earnings jump to \$194,000.

French notes the institute also emphasizes to students that CAs aren't restricted to working for large accounting firms.

Many graduates work their way into prominent positions in a myriad of businesses, not-for-profit organizations, government agencies and academia. Many more run their own businesses, he says.

And they're not restricted to work in their native land either, French adds, as the domestic designation is internationally recognized. He says the majority of the province's 33,000 practicing CAs work in Canada but 2,600 of them are currently stationed in 88 countries around the globe.

Perhaps a good jumping off point for world domination.