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FEB. 17, 2025

Spotlighted by AdAge, three Brandcenter alums offer insight into their advertising work – and how VCU helped shape them

Creative thinking and thick skin are among the attributes that Mark McColey, Ross Fletcher and Howard Finkelstein developed during their graduate studies.



Goldfish was rebranded as Chilean Sea Bass for a limited time as part of a campaign that counted Brandcenter alums Ross Fletcher and Howard Finkelstein among its contributors. (Courtesy photo)

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By Audrey Alder

Reflecting their innovation, bold ideas and groundbreaking work in the advertising field, 11 Brandcenter alums from Virginia Commonwealth University have been recognized by industry brand AdAge as being among “62 Creatives to Watch in 2025.”

VCU News recently caught up with three of the honorees to learn more about their journeys, inspirations and how the Brandcenter prepared them.

Mark McColey (copywriting, 2023)

Copywriter at The Martin Agency

What projects and campaigns have you been working on recently?

My art director partner, Zey Masunu, and I have been working on a content series for Google Chrome. Before that, we spearheaded a social activation for UScellular where people could submit screenshots of their group chat and turn it into wrapping paper for the holidays. During my time at The Martin Agency, I've also pitched in on briefs for Axe, Hanes, UPS, Ritz, Royal Caribbean and GEICO

What makes you one to watch?

I've been told my sneezes are entertaining.



VCU Brandcenter alum Mark McColey.

(Courtesy photo)

How has the Brandcenter prepared you for your work?

Brandcenter provided an ideal structure to pivot from a career in television into creative advertising. I've joked that it's closer to a reality competition series – like "Top Chef" or "Project Runway" – than a typical master's program.

Thankfully, people aren't sent home one by one. But there is some similarity in that you're given opportunity after opportunity to flex, to fail, to fraternize.

Being able to experience the full spectrum of "I suck!" to "Am I secretly brilliant?" in an educational environment was huge for me, because I didn't simply go from the former to the latter. It was cyclical. When you get the chance to work at a place packed with creative talent like Martin, it's helpful to be well-acquainted with that cycle. My theory is everyone graduates Brandcenter with a preferred weapon of choice to fight it – it might be hard-earned resilience, newfound swagger or a Rolodex of people you're legitimately awed by ... who are kind enough to gas you up.

What's the most creative solution you've come up with for a problem?

Completely reframing what success looks like. When you work in a creative field, it takes an incredible amount of certainty and energy to push something to where you envisioned it going. It can be easy to get hung up on what (in your mind) something *should* be rather than what is. Sometimes asking "what about this is set in stone?" – whether it's a project or your life choices – can open things up so, so much.

Howard Finkelstein (copywriting, 2005)

Group creative director at Mischief

What projects and campaigns have you been working on recently?

My life these last several months has been consumed by the Super Bowl. I worked on a couple different Super Bowl campaigns for Tubi. I was very excited for the world to see why I haven't called anyone back since August.

What makes you one to watch?

I am very fortunate to work at a place like Mischief that has a specific kind of work we strive to do – work that stands out, that is hard to ignore, that causes a stir. That's the brief to all the creatives, first and foremost, on every assignment.



VCU Brandcenter alum Howard Finkelstein (Courtesy photo)

How has the Brandcenter prepared you for your work?

VCU gave me a strong work ethic and a thick skin. It taught me the difference between good work and great work. A lot of this business is knowing what it takes to make the latter. You have to go the extra mile when coming up with ideas, selling ideas, crafting ideas. You can't settle for good. You have to be willing to fight for great. It doesn't always happen, of course, but it helps to set your sights as high as possible.

What's the most creative solution you've come up with for a problem?

A recent one that comes to mind was for Goldfish crackers. They wanted to remind adults that Goldfish weren't just for kids. So for a limited time, we rebranded Goldfish to a more sophisticated fish and called them Chilean Sea Bass. We changed the packaging and sold them online in limited quantities. It was a super simple idea – smart and dumb at the same time. And the internet ate it up.

Ross Fletcher (art direction, 2012)

Group creative director at Mischief

What projects and campaigns have you been working on recently?

In 2024, my partner, Howard, and I led the Chili's account during one of the best years in their business's history. We also led the Goldfish brand, getting our Chilean Sea Bass name-change stunt on the "Today" show, "Late Night" and almost every show in between. And we brought first kisses back together for an awkward but sweet reunion for Eos lip balm.



VCU Brandcenter alum Ross Fletcher.
(Courtesy photo)

What makes you one to watch?

For Chili's, we're developing a wide range of ridiculous cultural plays, and even making a Lifetime movie. Goldfish is coming back with a celeb-cast comedy TV campaign this spring. And we've got two Super Bowl campaigns for Tubi. It's a great time to be at Mischief, and we're making the most of it.

How has the Brandcenter prepared you for your work?

VCU Brandcenter helped teach me how to think. How to dig deep for the best ideas. How to have a high bar in the work. Thanks to the support of my professors, it also taught me how to mentor and support younger talent.

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