

John MacKay has nine—if not 19—different, equally unprepossessing and slightly circuitous ways to describe what he does: strategist, storyteller, change agent, producer, nurturer, promoter, counsellor, workhorse, generalist. Those who know him, however, take the direct route: “He’s it. The best.” Best what, though? Skeptics may

simply call his business “spin,” but its official trade name is public relations. And in an industry not known for subtlety, MacKay’s self-concept is possibly his most attractive feature. That is, if he were just a little bit...plain.

Long and tall, fair and handsome, the man who is principal of Industry Public Relations, to whom such legendary retail icons as Hermès, Birks, Baume & Mercier, Indian Motorcycle and Club Monaco turn for strategic communications counsel, also appears to be entirely without pretense. This is remarkable given his work. Considered the pre-eminent Canadian spin doctor on matters of style, MacKay developed his skills in other equally rarefied environments. He started out directing theatre in the '70s, modelled fleetingly yet successfully in Europe, moved into fashion-show production and, eventually, fashion journalism. He was the editor-in-chief of this magazine (1980 to 1986), before launching his first public-relations concern. From 1986 to 1990, his area of expertise became retail and apparel, but his heart was restless.

“My passion is change,” he says. “I wanted something new—I wanted to put myself on the edge of a cliff.” He found his cliff in California; its name was academia. For much of the '90s, MacKay neither lived in luxe, nor promoted it. Instead, he completed his graduate degree in clinical psychology. In the end, though, he realized that he was more interested in the trip than the destination. “The journey changed me more than I expected,” MacKay says. “I’m more patient, more intuitive, more deeply aware of the goodness.” Idly, one wonders if goodness awareness is a common job requirement in PR.

“John has *savoir-vivre*, which is unusual in this rude business,” says former *Ocean Drive* editor François Guenet, now the associate producer of *D.*, a Quebecois-style *FashionTelevision* produced by *MusiquePlus*. “He has taste and he has vision.”

You can’t credit California, though, for the visionary ways of MacKay. “Zen is too trite a term, too label-y, but John looks inside people,” says Renée Lalonde, a fashion industry insider and former model whose career MacKay effectively launched. “He encouraged me to try the other side of the camera and told me, ‘You’ve got more in you,’” she recalls.

He should know—his own career attests to life after *L’Uomo Vogue*. Being consistently successful in a series of vastly different pursuits proves that. “John is good at everything he touches—or he doesn’t touch it,” Guenet tells me. “He’s always been like that, he really hasn’t changed.” □

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At home in many worlds, public-relations wizard MacKay is the antithesis of schmooze.

By Anne O’Hagan