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Public Opinion Research with Canadians Qualitative
Research on Agricultural Education
Phase 2: Concept Testing
Executive Summary

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Ce résumé est aussi disponible en français.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Earnscliffe Strategy Group (Earnscliffe) is pleased to present this report to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) summarizing the results of the focus groups with Canadians testing communications material for a marketing strategy about agricultural education.

Public opinion research indicates that Canadians have many concerns as well as a lack of knowledge and awareness about the foods and beverages that they consume and how they are regulated and produced.

AAFC required public opinion research to inform a new marketing strategy being developed to communicate with Canadians, support work being undertaken by the department with regards to the public trust pillar of the Canadian Agricultural Partnership, and better communicate the importance of the agricultural sector and the role of AAFC to Canadians. This project was divided into two phases. Phase 1, conducted earlier this year, sought to better understand the reasons behind the perceptions identified in the quantitative Agriculture Awareness Baseline Survey and how to best communicate factual information about farming terminology and practices, and the agricultural sector to Canadians. Phase 2, covered in this report, tests communications and marketing materials aimed at raising awareness about the agricultural sector in Canada that were developed based on the learnings of the first phase. Feedback from this phase will help AAFC refine creative materials and/or messages for a new marketing strategy, and may also be used to inform policy, service and program development. The total cost to conduct this research was \$141,091.56 including HST.

To meet these objectives, Earnscliffe conducted a comprehensive wave of qualitative research. The research included a series of ten focus groups (nine in-person and one online). The in-person focus groups were conducted in four cities across Canada: Mississauga, ON (July 17, 2018); Halifax, NS (July 18, 2018), Calgary, AB (July 19, 2018); and Montreal, QC (July 24, 2018). The online focus group was conducted with Official Language Minority Communities (OLMC) by recruiting French-speaking Canadians residing outside Quebec (July 23, 2018).

The target audience for the groups was Canadian adults (18+) with a mix of different genders, ages, educations, incomes and ethnic backgrounds. The sessions were approximately two hours in length; although, in Montreal they were approximately one and a half hours long to accommodate for having an additional group with OLMC residents. Two of the focus groups in Montreal, as well as the online group, were conducted in French. One group in Montreal was with OLMC residents (English-speaking Canadians in Quebec).

For the purposes of this report, it is important to note that qualitative research is a form of scientific, social, policy and public opinion research. Focus group research is not designed to help a group reach a consensus or to make decisions, but rather to elicit the full range of ideas, attitudes, experiences and opinions of a selected sample of participants on a defined topic. Because of the small numbers involved the participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly representative in a statistical sense of the larger population from which they are drawn and findings cannot reliably be generalized beyond their number.

The key findings from the research are presented below.

Social Media

- Overall, participants’ reactions to the social media posts were lukewarm to positive. Participants were pleased to learn about AAFC scientists, their work, and plans to promote it more widely in Canada. They also understood the concepts were Government of Canada ads, and felt they were credible.
- Participants named a number of elements in the concepts that they felt would grab their attention. These included:
 - Emphasizing the fun facts about the work AAFC scientists have done, particularly results and discoveries, rather than infrastructure and techniques.
 - A catchy caption, potentially a question, which speaks directly to participants or piques their curiosity. The caption should relate directly and clearly to the images presented in order to be effective.
 - Including a photo of an AAFC scientist allowed participants to establish a more personal connection with them and relate to their work.
 - An explicit invitation to “learn more”, including a link to the website followed by consistent hashtags, was effective.

Campaign Concepts

- Participants’ reaction to each concept tested suggests that each have merits, and AAFC may wish to consider employing all three in some form.
- Participants clearly understood the main message of Concept 1 about the important role AAFC plays in the agriculture and food sector. While the overall look of Concept 1 was very consistent with the look participants had been exposed to while reviewing the social media examples, the majority reacted more positively to the imagery when presented in this form:
 - They found the images were much clearer (not blurry) and the colours were vivid.
 - They appreciated seeing scientists in situations, especially the scientist in the greenhouse.
 - The slogan, “We cover a lot of ground”, was easily understood as it related to the breadth of AAFC’s work when thought of in the context of “From the field to your cart” or “From the greenhouse to your cart”.
- Reactions to Concept 2 were polarized – some felt it was warm and positive, while others felt the visuals looked contrived and unnatural. Those who liked this concept appreciated efforts to make scientists more relatable. Those who disliked it pointed to unusual visual elements such as a scientist as a mother or father, serving dinner or making lunch in their home, wearing their lab coats. Overall, the images, colours, and slogan (or lack thereof) for Concept 2 were among the least appealing and attention-grabbing of the three concepts.
- Concept 3 was the most visually appealing. Participants felt that the colours and images of food were vivid and attention-grabbing. The science factoids were well received, and precisely the type of information participants were eager to receive. Participants really liked the slogan, “A Taste of Science. What’s on your plate?”, felt that it fit well with the imagery, and was an interesting way of linking food to science.

Infographic

- Impressions of the infographic were generally positive. Overall, participants appreciated the clean, well-organized, visually appealing layout. Many noted that the appropriate amount of information was included – it was not too busy. By contrast, many came away feeling the information was a little vague at times and would have preferred more concrete evidence about specific AAFC projects and/or discoveries.

On the whole, when asked, participants felt that this campaign was on the right track in terms of raising public awareness about the agriculture and food sector in Canada. It contained new and interesting information, and spurred further interest in AAFC research. Most importantly, participants came away with the impression that AAFC’s work is much broader than their initial perceptions.

POLITICAL NEUTRALITY STATEMENT

Research Firm: Earnscliffe Strategy Group Inc. (Earnscliffe)
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I hereby certify as a Representative of Earnscliffe Strategy Group that the final deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Policy on Communications and Federal Identity and the Directive on the Management of Communications. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed: 

Date: August 24, 2018

Stephanie Constable
Principal, Earnscliffe