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Focus Testing Creative Concepts for the Cannabis Public Education Campaign Executive Summary

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Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Earnscliffe Strategy Group (Earnscliffe) is pleased to present this report to Health Canada summarizing the results of the focus testing of creative concepts for the Cannabis Public Education Campaign.

The Government of Canada has committed to legalize, strictly regulate and restrict access to cannabis. Canadians generally view cannabis use as socially acceptable, but are ill-informed about the health and safety risks. This is especially true for youth. To get ready for, and to support, the new legislation, public education is critical to ensure Canadians are well-informed about the health and safety risks of cannabis use and about current laws.

Focus group research was required to explore the views of the general population, with a special attention to youth and young adults, on the effectiveness of new creative concepts for the Cannabis Public Education Campaign. Feedback from the research will enable Health Canada to develop content that resonates with the target audiences, and explore the extent to which it enables them to take action. The total cost to conduct this research was \$97,467.46 including HST.

To meet these objectives, Earnscliffe conducted a comprehensive wave of qualitative research. The research included a series of fifteen focus groups in five cities across Canada: Toronto, ON (January 8); Vancouver, BC (January 9); Halifax, NS (January 9); Regina, SK (January 10) and, Quebec City, QC (January 10). The focus groups in Quebec City were conducted in French. In each city, a focus group was conducted with: young adults (18-24); youth (13-17) and adults (25+).

The research explored participants' reaction to the creative concepts and content, including the clarity, credibility, relevancy and value to the audience and general appeal. The research also tested the concepts' ability to motivate the audiences to take personal action, and elicited suggestions for potential changes to the concepts and creative material to ensure the messages and products resonate with the target audiences. Similarly, participants were also asked to evaluate a series of statements relating to cannabis to determine the credibility and relevancy of each and any personal action the statements might elicit. Finally, the research explored participants' reaction to terms related to cannabis, recreational and medical cannabis use, and addiction, with the goal of determining which terms participants use colloquially, and those which are viewed as appropriate for use by the Government of Canada.

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.

Reaction to Campaign Concepts

- From a positioning perspective, some concepts led to an initial degree of confusion about a perceived contradiction in the Government’s position on cannabis. Specifically, participants questioned why the Government, perceived to be moving towards legalizing recreational cannabis use, would provide messaging that indicates the substance is actually harmful.
- Discussions suggested that the more that messaging about harm would be framed as “make informed choices” or “enjoy responsibly,” the less resistant participants claimed they would be to whatever facts were presented regarding risks.

HONEST CANNABIS QUESTIONS, HONEST CANNABIS ANSWERS.

- Of the concepts tested, this concept seemed to come closest to hitting this mark. Participants felt that the overall approach and tone of this concept was much more open and neutral. The key strength that propelled positive reaction was the open forum ‘pop-up space’ in which real individuals could ask their own questions, in their own words, of real experts in a no-judgment safe space.
- Participants felt that this concept presented an open and neutral position. In comparison to other concepts, there was less confusion about the Government’s perceived intention to legalize cannabis and the inclination to warn about potential health and safety risks.
- The availability of real experts (authentic, identified, impartial and non-judgmental) was also an important differentiator. Participants would be keen to hear from a variety of experts representing a variety of relevant professions as well as those with lived experience.
- Participants were readily able to think of questions they might want answered in the ‘pop-up space’ including questions surrounding benefits to use, long-term health risks, different ways to consume cannabis, effects on driving, and experiences from other jurisdictions where cannabis has been legalized.

EXPERTS KNOW

- Reaction was generally positive, primarily because it relied on experts to provide (hopefully) unvarnished facts.
- The choice of experts, the tone of their presentation, and the credibility of the facts will clearly be factors that determine whether or not the final creative will resonate and be impactful. Participants pointed out that the experts need to be authentic, identified, impartial and non-judgmental. The tone needs to be one that is informative without being alarming.
- The presentation of numerous consequences related to cannabis use was appreciated, particularly among adults.

- Participants generally assumed that the experts presented had no personal experience with cannabis, and one frequent request was for the group of experts involved in communicating about non-medical cannabis include people with lived experiences.

CLEAR THE AIR

- Reactions to this concept tended to be more negative than positive, particularly among youth (13-17) and young adults (18-24).
- The confusion around the perceived contradiction in the Government’s position was particularly acute. The sense was this concept was designed not to merely inform, but to actually deter people from using cannabis recreationally. In short, the message was not as “balanced” as participants felt it should be, and for some younger participants, it was too judgmental.
- Participants felt that the lack of supporting evidence was a limitation of this concept, allowing information to be discounted or discredited.

Reaction to Specific Messages

- Most of the statements were met with generally neutral reaction – they were seen as common sense and information that participants had heard before.
- Statements that conveyed that the Government was providing useful, factual information in a neutral voice with the message that one should make their own “informed choice” resonated with audiences of all ages.
- Views of experts were thought to be credible in general, though participants did not always agree on the definition of best experts. The majority felt “experts” should include people with lived experience to enhance credibility.
- Messaging about addiction, whether in the statements tested or in the concepts, met with mixed reactions largely based on one’s pre-existing opinion. Several challenged the messaging or indicated needing to see a credible source cited before they could accept that cannabis truly is addictive.

YOUTH

- Statements perceived as frightening or containing unexpected information were effective and left many youth participants wanting to know more.
- Messaging about cannabis getting in the way of your goals was credible.
- For several of these messages, some youth were inclined to challenge the assertions presented by claiming to know regular cannabis users who had never suffered any of the consequences discussed.

YOUNG ADULTS AND ADULTS

- Reaction tended to be similar among young adults and adults.
- The suggestion that combining cannabis use with other substances increases health risks was generally accepted if not felt to be a little common sense/obvious.
- The message about additional research on cannabis use for medical purposes triggered mixed reactions. Some appreciated the notion of more research. Others felt it raised a contradiction - either this research must already have been undertaken if it is already approved for medical use and if not, then it begged critical questions of the decision to permit it.

Reaction to Specific Terms

- For the most part, participants of all ages understood most of the terms presented to them, except THC.
- For some categories of terms, there were clear generational differences in terms of colloquial reference to cannabis and cannabis use.
- Most of the terms participants said that they use in reference to cannabis were not generally consistent with how they would prefer to hear the government refer to cannabis or cannabis use, with a few exceptions.

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 Communications Policy of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. 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: January 26, 2018

Stephanie Constable
Principal, Earnscliffe