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Focus Testing of Food Safety Marketing Messages and Creatives (POR-19-07)

Executive Summary

Prepared for Health Canada

Prepared by Narrative Research

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Supplier Name: Narrative Research

March 2020

This public opinion research report presents the results of focus groups conducted by Narrative Research on behalf of Health Canada. The research study was done using qualitative focus groups. The research entailed a total of 18 in-person focus groups, namely, three (3) groups in each of Toronto (ON), Halifax (NS), Winnipeg (MB), Red Deer (AB), Vancouver (BC), and Quebec City (QC). In each location, one group was conducted with each of three audiences: parents or guardians of children 13 years or younger and who exhibit a low socio-economic profile; parents or guardians of children 13 years or young and who exhibit a high socio-economic profile; and pregnant women. All participants were 18 years of age or older, with a mix of gender and ages within each group, where relevant. The research was conducted between February 3rd and 19th, 2020.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre:

Évaluation qualitative de messages et de concepts marketing sur le thème de la salubrité alimentaire

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Background and Research Methodology

The prevalence of domestically-acquired food-borne illness is significant among Canadians, with important consequences on individuals' health and accordingly, a significant impact on the country's healthcare system. In this context, Health Canada has conducted annual Safe Food Handling marketing campaigns to vulnerable populations since 2008, part of broader on-going public education efforts. . A shift in approach of the marketing campaign focuses on three audiences most at risk of food-borne illnesses, but also identified by recent research as being among the most receptive to food safety messaging and behaviour changes: pregnant women, parents or guardians of children 13 years of age or younger, and children 11-13 years of age.

Health Canada commissioned qualitative research to inform messaging and creative development of various marketing initiatives. The main objective of this qualitative research was to assess the effectiveness of safe food handling marketing messages and creatives with the two of the three audience segments identified: pregnant women, and parents or guardians of children aged 13 years and younger.

Specific research objectives included:

- Test and ascertain the effectiveness of safe food handling marketing messages and creatives on the two of three current and new primary target audiences (pregnant women and parents of children 0 to 13).
- Assess the understanding of five terms related to food safety.
- Evaluate separate sets of marketing key messages and/or creatives (3 approaches) to determine if the content has a credible tone; is appealing and appropriate to the audience(s); is memorable in the minds of the audience(s); and has the potential to change perceptions and motivate each audience to take intended action.
- Provide direction as to which approach should be used in directing a public education campaign on food safety.
- Identify the preferred means of receiving food safety information.

To achieve these objectives, a qualitative research approach was undertaken. This entailed a total of 18 in-person focus groups conducted from February 3rd to 19th, 2020 with parents or guardians of children 13 years or younger and with pregnant women. Specifically, three groups were conducted in each of




Toronto (ON), Halifax (NS), Winnipeg (MB), Red Deer (AB), Vancouver (BC), and Quebec City (QC). All participants were 18 years of age or older, and each parent group included a mix of gender. Group discussions were held in English with the exception of those in Quebec City which were conducted in French. Group discussions each lasted approximately 2 hours with participants each receiving \$100 in appreciation of their time. A total of 212 participants were recruited across all 18 groups (including 2 stand-by respondents per group). Across all groups, 157 participants attended the discussions, with an additional 13 participants incentivized as stand-by respondents who did not take part in the discussions.

All participants were recruited per the recruitment specifications for the Government of Canada. Recruitment was conducted through qualitative panels stored on Canadian servers, with follow-up calls to confirm the details provided and to ensure quotas were met.

This report presents the findings from the study. Caution must be exercised when interpreting the results from this study, as qualitative research is directional only. Results cannot be attributed to the overall population under study, with any degree of confidence.

Political Neutrality Certification

I hereby certify as a Representative of Narrative Research that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in 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  _____
Margaret Brigley, CEO & Partner | Narrative Research
Date: March 2, 2020



Key Findings and Conclusions

Findings from the *Focus Testing of Food Safety Marketing Messages and Creatives (POR-19-07)* reveal that a public education campaign that presents the risks and serious consequences of unsafe food handling in a serious manner may have an important impact on key audiences' food handling behaviours. Further, showing a familiar setting and situation may help in ensuring audiences feel the threat is realistic, and generally make the message relatable. The ability to learn something new, or to have current knowledge challenged also offers the potential to grab attention and make the public reconsider their current beliefs. This is most important in the case of promoting safe food handling, as concepts that simply reiterate basic food safety advice (e.g., washing hands before and after preparing meat; avoiding cross-contamination by using different utensils for raw and cooked meat), were somewhat disregarded among focus group participants, as the message was perceived as being already known. By contrast, concepts that challenged current beliefs led to greater reflection. Initial discussions during focus groups suggested that there is good awareness of the importance of safe food handling and of basic advice across the three audiences included in the study.

Altogether, this may explain the attraction of a concept referred to as “Blue” for the purpose of testing, that showed a woman rushing to prepare chicken in a household kitchen for a family meal, spreading germs that are visible through a black light, and that are ultimately ending up on vegetables eaten by a young child. This concept clearly suggested that despite some basic safe food handling behaviours, innocuous gestures (e.g. pulling hair behind ear; opening a cupboard door), germs can spread unknowingly and at a rapid pace. This concept brought together the various aspects of what was considered effective communication in this context, namely a serious tone, a familiar setting and situation, highlighting the risks associated with complacency or ignorance when dealing with day-to-day behaviours, the effects of improper handling on others, and myth busting.

Another approach tested well which focused on information sharing. The concept was referred to as “Cooking” for the purpose of testing, and it was effective for the simplicity of the information presented (a step-by-step account of how to safely verify if chicken is cooked), a light tone that helped focus the attention on content, and debunking current beliefs that the look of cooked chicken and its juices are good indicators of safe internal temperature. It also provided specific information as to the desired safe internal temperature of cooked chicken and techniques for safe cooking (using a thermometer).

Finally, the lighter tone of the concept “Hero”, which featured many of the same elements, namely a step-by-step outline of assumptions countered with correct cooking methods, as well as involvement of an entire family in a familiar setting, was also strong in causing participants to rethink their food handling behaviours. However, this concept used a much more jovial, light-hearted tone, which also had an impact for many.

It is important to note that all three of the above-mentioned concepts resonated with the three audiences under study. While in general the ‘humorous’ concepts resonated more positively with those with average/high SES compared to those with low SES, these three concepts in particular had widespread impact in terms of adoption of safe food handling behaviours.



By contrast, some of the concepts that did not have an impact were critiqued for not using the right tone, setting, or content that would engage and compel the target audience. The use of humour to speak of food safety elicited polarized reactions, with some finding it attention-grabbing, while others felt it inappropriate to speak of a serious topic such as food safety. Across concepts tested, the ones referred to as “Summer” and “Nuggets” used an off-beat and unique type of humour that was difficult to understand and took away from the message. In fact, many did not recall what the “Nuggets” concept was trying to communicate, even minutes after seeing the video. The message being exclusively displayed as copy on the creative without any voiceover or narration, combined with the off-beat humour may have contributed to this. Both of those concepts were considered most appropriate to a younger audience (teenagers or children). As noted above, the type of humour found in the “Hero” concept was more approachable, as it followed a storyline (step-by-step preparation approach) and presented a familiar setting (kitchen and family meal preparation).

The other concepts that took a more educational tone elicited lukewarm reactions. Notably, the “Interview” concept that consisted in a “vox pop” approach on the streets of Montreal was appreciated for providing food safety information in a layperson’s terms, which made the concept approachable, although less credible as the public’s comments were often construed as people’s personal opinions rather than expert advice. At the same time, the concept touched on too many aspects of food safety to ensure the message was memorable. The “Statistics” concept (print infographic piece) generally lacked appeal, as it included too much written information to grab attention and elicit people’s interest. It was considered a more useful reference document than one to raise awareness of food safety.

Other concepts that provided a warning about food safety failed to have an impact. Specifically, the “Orange” concept that consisted of a short frame-by-frame video warning that suggested that the look of cooked chicken is not a good indicator of internal temperature lacked memorability, as the information was only displayed as copy on the creative without a voice over, the tempo was too quick to grasp the message, and it lacked personal relevance. Many indicated that without an ‘answer’ (as to which chicken breast was actually cooked), the concept lacked impact. The “Emergency” print concept generally lacked credibility, included a message that was vague and did not specify the risks or consequences of food poisoning. The image was not considered to be compelling and did not effectively communicate the message.

The two targeted Health Canada concepts for specific audiences that were briefly discussed elicited mixed reactions. The web banner for pregnant women was well received and attracted attention. The implication of grave consequences on the fetus from food poisoning grabbed attention, and the illustration of foods that posed risks invited reflection. The concept was considered relevant, engaging and credible, and was considered most impactful for women in their first pregnancy. By contrast, the web banner targeting parents elicited mixed opinions. The realization that food poisoning could have serious consequences was deemed an important reminder by some parents, while others felt that the concept lacked visual appeal and specific information to capture their attention. For both concepts, the endorsement of the Government of Canada was deemed an important component to establish credibility.



It was believed that to reach the target audience, a public education campaign on food safety should be found in various locations, including schools, doctors' offices, hospitals, public washrooms (including in restaurants), daycares, and grocery stores. At the same time, it should be broadcasted through traditional media (notably television, dailies, outdoors, and transit), and online on social media (Instagram and Facebook particularly) and targeted websites (cooking, news). Pregnant women also mentioned pregnancy apps as being a good avenue to reach them.

It should be noted that participants' reactions to the various concepts presented may have been influenced in part by the context of the testing (focus group sessions) and by the different concept formats (video, static ad, concept for web banner) and video lengths (ranging from approximately 15 seconds to 2 minutes).

Nonetheless, findings from the research suggest that public education campaigns that include consequences, shock or fear, along with showing a situation that is relatable, elicits emotions, or present unexpected information (myth-busting) all contribute to their effectiveness. Attention should also be paid to focus each communication on one or two messages, while presenting the information in a simple way, and on ensuring that the message is self-contained in the marketing material, given the lack of interest in following-up for additional information online. Further, showing the "wrong" and the "right" way would also help debunk myths. Overall, Health Canada would be well served to draw on those findings in the development of its public education marketing on food safety.