



# COVID-19 Public Education Campaign – Concepts Testing

## Health Canada

### *Executive Summary*

April 2021

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## **COVID-19 Public Education Campaign – Concepts Testing**

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Prepared for Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada

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This public opinion research report presents the results of 26 online focus groups conducted by Quorus Consulting Group on behalf of Health Canada. The research consisted of a first wave of 12 online focus groups (from January 18 to January 21, 2021) that focused on the general population, 18 years of age and older, and on members of ethnic communities. A second wave consisted of eight online focus groups (from February 10 to February 13, 2021) which focused on young Canadians, 16 to 24 years old. A third wave consisted of six online focus groups (from March 8 to March 10, 2021), which focused on young Canadians, 18 to 24 years old.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Campagne de sensibilisation pour la COVID-19 - Test de concepts

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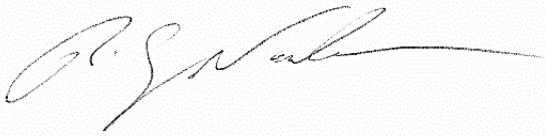


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Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rick Nadeau", is centered within a rectangular area that has a light gray, dotted background. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Rick Nadeau, President  
Quorus Consulting Group Inc.

# Executive Summary

## Background and Research Objectives

In December 2019, a new coronavirus (COVID-19) was confirmed to be identified in humans, quickly evolving into a worldwide pandemic. In response to the rapidly evolving COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Canada, more specifically Health Canada (HC) and the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), launched a multi-phase public education campaign in February 2020.

Public education through advertising achieved a large national reach, increasing awareness, motivating interest and generating engagement with federal information and resources about the virus and preventative measures throughout 2020 and into early 2021. However, even with the rollout of vaccines, many Canadians remained susceptible to COVID-19 as case counts climbed. As a result, there was a need for public education advertising investments to help protect the health of all Canadians.

HC and PHAC commissioned Quorus to conduct exploratory research through three phases of focus groups to be held in the early months of 2021 to assist the development of creative advertising concepts. This research was designed to support the Government of Canada's mandate to pre-test campaign creatives with a media buy over \$1 million and to assist the goals of COVID-19 prevention and public safety measures.<sup>1</sup>

## Methodology

This report is based on 26 online focus groups that Quorus completed between January 18 and March 10, 2021.

- A first wave of groups, held in January 2021, consisted of 12 focus groups, of which eight were with members of the general population, 18 years of age and older, and another four sessions were conducted with members of ethnic communities. In the end, 46 individuals from ethnic communities and 7 from Indigenous communities participated.
- A second wave of eight groups was held in February 2021 with young Canadians, 16 to 24 years of age, with half focused on those 16-19 and the other half on those 20-24 years of age. In the end, 20 individuals from ethnic communities and 3 from Indigenous communities participated.
- A third wave of six groups was held in March 2021 with young Canadians, 18 to 24 years of age. In the end, 16 individuals from ethnic communities and 7 from Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=30682>

communities participated.

In total, 176 individuals participated in the research.

For the first wave of groups, English sessions were conducted with participants in Atlantic Canada, Ontario/Nunavut, and in the Prairies/British Columbia/Yukon/ North West Territories and French sessions were held with participants in Quebec. For the second wave of groups, English sessions were conducted with participants in Atlantic Canada, Ontario, and in the Prairies/British Columbia and French sessions were held with participants in Quebec. For the third wave of groups, English sessions were conducted with participants in Atlantic Canada, Ontario, Manitoba/Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia and a French session was held with participants in Quebec

Qualitative research is designed to reveal a rich range of opinions, reactions and interpretations from participants. It is not intended to be used to measure what percentage of a target population holds a given opinion. The results from this qualitative research are therefore directional in nature. That is, they can be used to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the advertising concepts that were tested to inform the Government of Canada's decision-making process for a concept to produce. As well, this research was designed to provide the Government of Canada with ideas and suggestions to improve the concepts.

## Research Results – Overall

### **Government of Canada COVID-19 advertising recall**

Each of the focus groups started off with a brief discussion on recall of Government of Canada COVID-19 advertising.

While in all groups, some or most participants had seen or heard advertising about COVID-19, not everyone was able to recall specifics. Moreover, upon discussion, many ads recalled and at first identified as sponsored by the Government of Canada, were in fact local or provincial instead.

Some of the Government of Canada ads recalled most often included those featuring Dr. Tam, ads mentioning the COVID alert app, and ads featuring a young Canadian talking about their experience contracting COVID-19. More generally, messages about “following the health guidelines” were discussed, especially some seen earlier on in the pandemic.

In general, the ads seen did not change behaviours, but were rather said to serve as reminders. A few participants said they downloaded the COVID alert app after seeing an ad urging them to do so.

Ads were seen and heard on all media, including radio, television, bus shelters, billboards, and online. Social media was also often mentioned, especially among youth and young adults.

## COVID-19 and impact on life of Canadian youth and young adults

In the groups with youth and young adults, participants were asked to briefly talk about how COVID-19 had impacted their lives. By and large, the impacts discussed fell into a few larger categories:

- Impact on education, mainly because of the shift to online learning;
- Impact on employment, including layoffs, more difficulty finding (part-time) work and shift to working from home;
- Impact on social life, such as not being able to see friends in person, go to malls or restaurants, etc. together;
- Impact on life plans, such as cancellation of travels, changing plans for education, moving back home with parents;
- Impact on physical health, due to cancellation of sports and training, and due to gym closures; and,
- Impact on mental health, due to for example general stress about COVID-19, isolation, and all the factors mentioned above.

### Research Results – Wave 1

Four concepts were tested in the first wave of research, namely:

- A. “Marathon,” featuring a runner and an analogy between running a marathon and people dealing with the realities of pandemic life;
- B. “A year,” featuring many different Canadians in situations and settings that have changed for many during the pandemic;
- C. “Tougher,” an ad about Canadian winter during the pandemic and people looking out for each other; and,
- D. “Can’t go halfway,” showing scenes of people doing things halfway, including following COVID-19 protocols.

“**Can’t go halfway**” was most often chosen as the top concept and recommended for production. Participants in the young adult groups in particular felt this would be the most effective ad, as it was seen as attention grabbing, slightly humorous and unique, making it most likely to stand out and be remembered. Among the adult group, this concept also often made it into the top two. It was also often said to be relatable, as the behaviours shown (people not distancing and not wearing their masks properly) were often seen in the community. The main message of following these guidelines completely, and not halfway, was said to be straightforward and easily understood.

In general, **“A year,”** was seen as a particularly strong concept in the adult groups. It was seen as relatable, inclusive and more positive and encouraging in tone than the other concepts. Many participants saw themselves and their situations reflected in this concept, giving it a broad appeal and a wide target audience. Its main messages of staying the course, being in this pandemic situation together and to continue following public health measures were generally easily identified and understood and seen to serve as reminders rather than as new information.

**“Marathon”** had its supporters, particularly among young adults. The idea of pandemic fatigue was easily recognized and resonated in particular with this cohort. However, it was also seen as perhaps too narrowly focused and not as relatable to those who do not run or see themselves reflected in this ad. There was also some sense that the story was a bit disjointed, as it jumped from the runner to seemingly unrelated scenes featuring other people, and back to the runner again.

The concept of **“Tougher”** received mixed reviews. While the idea of a “COVID-19 winter” and how this might be tough was clearly understood, the main critique of this concept was that it was trying to say too much and did not say anything clearly enough. There was also the general sense that the winter idea might not work for a number of reasons: winter would likely be over by the time this ad would run; many Canadians enjoy winter and might not appreciate how this season was being portrayed; depending on which region of Canada people live in, winters may not look the way they are depicted in this concept.

All ads were seen as targeted to “all Canadians,” regardless of age, gender, location or ethnicity. Participants identifying as belonging to an ethnic or Indigenous group also felt that they were represented. Two concepts (“Tougher” and “A Year”) were called out for being the most inclusive and representative of different ethnic backgrounds represented in Canada. Feedback on whether any ad produced should be translated into languages other than the two official languages was mixed, but in general there was some support for the idea of translation in order for the ads to be featured on popular ethnic media.

## Research Results – Wave 2

The four concepts tested in the second wave of research were:

- A. “No fun alone,” showing a man dancing alone in an empty club;
- B. “Where we started,” featuring a young man leaving to see friends, only to end up back in his living room instead;
- C. “Everyone loses,” an ad showing businesses closing; and,
- D. “Open house,” featuring a group of young people gathering indoors, followed by scenes showing other people seemingly also at the party.

Overall, **“Where we started”** and **“Open House”** received the most positive reviews.

Among the young adults, **“Where we started”** was most often seen as the winning concept. It also made it into the top two among the younger cohort relatively frequently. Its identified strengths were related to it having a clear and realistic message of circularity or not moving forward if guidelines were ignored, and it clearly showing the consequences on society of people not following the public health guidelines. It was also said to have a broad appeal because “everyone” was living this reality and was getting tired of isolation. Of all concepts, the “or else” message was the most evident in this storyline. It was also said that it made good use of the familiar images of hand sanitizer and masks. As well, the unexpected twist set it apart in the landscape of COVID-19 advertising.

Many participants, and in particular those in the younger cohort, gave high ratings to **“Open House.”** It was seen as recognizable and quite relatable because not being able to gather with friends was high on the list of negative impacts of the pandemic and something that many wanted to do again. The message focusing on the spread of the virus to others also made it a powerful concept, and the inclusion of people from different groups (family, friends, those seemingly unrelated like the postman) gave it a wide appeal. The emphasis on “others” was noted by youth who repeatedly explained that they are following public health measures to protect those around them more than to protect themselves. Besides the strong message in general, the image of the grandmother was also often said to be particularly effective, making an emotional appeal or connection.

The concept of **“No fun alone”** was appreciated by a smaller group of participants, and also had its detractors, making this a weaker concept overall. While some said they saw the humour in this ad and that it might work with the right (dramatic) production, it often fell flat. Specifically, it did not have the same broad appeal as the top two concepts, mainly because many (younger) participants said that dancing or going to clubs was either not something they did in general, or not something they desired doing at the moment. There was some positive feedback about the general message of this concept, which was seen as not as accusatory or finger-pointing as other concepts. Some also liked that the concept was empathetic to their situation.

**“Everyone loses”** received mixed reviews at best, with quite a number of participants not grasping the overall concept and the ideas it was trying to convey. It was not immediately clear to everyone why the lights were going out or how that was related to the actions of the individual. The message focusing on the economic impact of people’s actions also received mixed feedback, with some appreciating this and others saying that this was not what the Government of Canada’s main concern should be. There was also a sense that it was narrowly focused on certain types of



businesses that not necessarily everyone felt were essential or should be prioritized. Those who did enjoy or wanted to be able to resume going to restaurants or gyms were more likely to say the concept appealed to them. However, it was said that in many areas of the country, these businesses were already closed.

### Research Results – Wave 3

The last wave of the research also tested four concepts, a few of which were repeated from Wave 2:

- 1A “Know where to go,” featuring a young man in the gym deciding whether to visit his grandmother who asks for help;
- 1B “Young and restless,” a soap opera-type concept showing a young man contemplating visiting his grandmother;
- 2A “Where we started,” featuring a young man leaving to see friends, only to end up back in his living room instead (repeated from Wave 2); and,
- 2B “Open house,” featuring a group of young people gathering indoors, followed by scenes showing other people seemingly also at the party (repeated from Wave 2).

In a departure from the first two waves of this research, the concepts were paired into two groups.

Among the first pairing (“Know where to go” and “Young and restless”), there was more enthusiasm for **“Know where to go.”** The main reason for this was that it had a more direct message and showed the website URL at the end for people who were interested to go and get the answer to the question that the ad would leave viewers hanging with, giving it a clearer call to action than “Young and restless.” On its own merits, however, “Know where to go” received mixed reviews. While some appreciated the message of looking out for family members or the more vulnerable, others said that it was too accusatory of young people and would appeal too narrowly to only those who liked going to the gym. Moreover, the gym setting was a point of debate in a number of groups, mainly in regions where gyms were either closed or that mandated mask wearing in gyms. Some would visit the [Canada.ca/coronavirus](https://www.canada.ca/coronavirus) website as a result of seeing this ad, mostly curious about understanding “activity risk levels.”

**“Young and restless”** mostly fell flat, with both the proposed soap opera execution as well as the use of humour being the main reason why many participants were turned off by it. As was seen with the previous concept, the focus on the gym setting was once again not seen as the best or most effective choice. One of its strengths was that it did pique participants’ curiosity a bit more or made them question themselves a bit more than “Know where to go”, which in turn would compel some to visit the website.

Among the second pairing, there was no clear-cut winner, with both concepts having quite the strong appeal in most groups. **“Where we started”** was once again identified as having a strong and relatable message of “being sick of it” and wanting to go out. The idea of going in circles and not moving forward was again seen as something many grappled with and wanted to avoid in the future. In this wave, the timeliness of it was mentioned as one of its strengths, as vaccines were being rolled out across the country. Some felt that it unfairly targeted young people too much.

The concept of **“Open House,”** while also receiving relatively positive feedback for the same reasons as in the previous wave (relatability, emotional connection, broad appeal, strong message), was not clearly understood by all participants this time around. There were some who took the idea of many people at the party literally rather than as a metaphor. The idea of putting others at risk due to the behaviours of a few was again seen as a strong point for this concept.

Overall, the top choice from the second pairing was often chosen as the winning concept of the four tested in this wave of research. Both “Where we started” and “Open house” were praised for their wide appeal and relatability, clear messages, better choice of execution, focus on consequences, timeliness and clear calls to action.

#### **Qualitative Research Disclaimer**

Qualitative research seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively projectable measures. The purpose is not to generate “statistics” but to hear the full range of opinions on a topic, understand the language participants use, gauge degrees of passion and engagement and to leverage the power of the group to inspire ideas. Participants are encouraged to voice their opinions, irrespective of whether or not that view is shared by others.

Due to the sample size, the special recruitment methods used, and the study objectives themselves, it is clearly understood that the work under discussion is exploratory in nature. The findings are not, nor were they intended to be, projectable to a larger population.

Specifically, it is inappropriate to suggest or to infer that few (or many) real world users would behave in one way simply because few (or many) participants behaved in this way during the sessions. This kind of projection is strictly the prerogative of quantitative research.

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