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W. K. Buckley Limited

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

W. K. Buckley is a 77 year-old family-owned Canadian company that manufactures cough remedies the same way the founder William Buckley did. It competes against half a dozen multi-national pharmaceutical companies in the cough/cold category. In 1987, the flagship brand, Buckley's Mixture, had a two percent share of English Canada. It was viewed as an out-of-date, non-clinical, essentially non-medicinal remedy. Worse, it was still being produced to its original formulation – a throwback to the days when medicine tasted terrible.

One insight about consumers made all the difference. Despite all the advances of science, people still believe that a bad-tasting medicine is more effective than a good-tasting medicine.

So for the past ten years, Buckley's has been communicating the simple proposition: *'It Tastes Awful. And It Works.'*

In recent focus groups, respondents were asked to place all the major cough remedies on a contextual map. Only Buckley's had a sharply defined positioning. Consumers also thought it was the highest spender, even though it was spending at less than 30% of its major competitors, Robitussin and Benylin.

Sales results have been astounding. In ten years, the brand has gone from relative obscurity to a 12.3 English Canada share. And, according to A.C. Nielsen, Buckley's 200 ml bottle has been the biggest selling cough syrup in Canada for five years running.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Buckley's Mixture had been sold continuously throughout the company's history, but by 1987 had dropped to a two percent English Canada share. The cough/cold market had changed dramatically. New active ingredients, multiple symptom formulas, and different formulations had fragmented the market.

By 1989, the competitive set was dominated by multinational pharmaceutical companies and private labels. Most competitors had multiple skus and multiple formulations. The category leader, Benylin, had a market share of 19.5%. The top brands – Benylin, Novahistex, Robitussin and Vick's spent a combined \$2.3 million in measured media according to A.C. Nielsen. Buckley's weighed in with \$187 thousand.¹

The situation was no better in-store. Shelf space is determined by trade allowances. The more a brand pays for facings, the closer to eye level it gets. Buckley's pays no shelf allowances – and is often relegated to the bottom shelf in the drug store.

Brand image was hardly encouraging. Buckley's still had its original formula, with oil of pine needle, menthol, camphor, Canada balsam and ammonium carbonate. Research showed that Buckley's was seen as out-of-date, non-clinical and essentially non-medicinal. In addition, pharmacists would not recommend Buckley's, preferring name brands with a scientific formulation, or private label with a larger profit margin.

The strategic insight

The consumer insight was that Canadians believe a bad-tasting medicine is more effective than a good-tasting

one. From this came the positioning that capitalizes on Buckley's unique characteristic – its awful taste.²

The entire English Canada strategy was to revolve around the tagline, 'Buckley's. It Tastes Awful. And It Works.' The idea was to create an absolute positioning – something a competitor could never be more of, or better at. And by focusing on bad taste, the campaign created a position that Buckley's could own for ever.³

Tonality was also critical. We capitalized on the folksy heritage of the company, with a straightforward, no-nonsense delivery. Self-effacing humour was also important for impact and credibility. (see [Figure 1](#))

Execution

Creative focuses on Frank Buckley, the company president and founder's son. Having the president deliver the message significantly increases credibility. Frank Buckley also epitomizes folksy heritage and no-nonsense – which sharply differentiates the brand.

Radio

Radio has been the backbone of the campaign, running for ten years now.

The media strategy was to focus on a medium with less clutter. In 1989, A.C. Nielsen showed that 74% of category spending was on television, and we would have been drowned out. By being the largest radio advertiser Buckley's made itself appear bigger than its media budget dictated.⁴

Creatively, we have always followed the same format: introduce Frank Buckley; speak to the brand heritage, its efficacy and its taste; end with the same tagline since 1987: 'Buckley's. It Tastes Awful. And It Works.' The humour is self-effacing⁵, and the message is delivered with honesty and integrity. Long-term, we used :60s, though we now use a combination of :30s and :60s.

Outdoor

This extends the reach of the campaign. It was added in select Ontario markets in 1994, and in Alberta in 1995. The layouts are clean and simple. We use Frank Buckley's photograph to add credibility. The headline is strong and concise (see example), always incorporating the taste. And the tagline is always the same: 'Buckley's. It Tastes Awful. And It Works.'

Television

We've used television long-term in Atlantic Canada because of high TV media efficiencies. Television is best described as radio with visuals. Frank Buckley makes a tongue-in-cheek statement about the taste, and the spot ends, as always, with: 'Buckley's. It Tastes Awful. And It Works.'

Television was added to Man/Sask in 1995, and now runs nationally as the primary medium. Television started as :30s, but quickly moved to :15s.

Keeping the campaign fresh

Although the format of the executions has remained very similar, we have kept the campaign fresh by always finding new, witty, and self-effacing ways for Frank Buckley to set up the end line.⁶

RESULTS

Since 1987, English Canada share has steadily increased, from relative obscurity to 12.3%:

TABLE 1

1987 1988 1989 1990 1991 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996

2.0 n/a* 6.0 7.0 8.6 10.4 10.3 11.0 11.9 12.3

Source: A.C. Nielsen (*archival data not available for 1988).

Volume has increased 230%, and Buckley's 200 ml bottle has been the #1 selling cough syrup in Canada since 1992, according to A.C. Nielsen.

This has happened in spite of competition's heavier media spending. In 1989, the first year for which we have A.C. Nielsen data, the top brands – Benylin, Novahistex, Robitussin and Vick's – spent a combined \$2.3 million against Buckley's \$187 thousand. In 1996 the pattern was the same: category spending was \$9.5 million, with Benylin and Robitussin each at \$1.9 million. Buckley's was at \$522 thousand.

We do not have extensive quantitative research, but we do have recent qualitative research attesting to how the singleminded campaign has broken through. We asked respondents to map the category, and only Buckley's had an identifiable positioning. Furthermore, Buckley's was cited as spending the most on advertising, when Benylin and Robitussin both outspend us 3:1.

ISOLATING ADVERTISING AS THE VARIABLE

We have had no significant changes in any of the other variables that affect the marketing mix. If anything, the company policy on shelf allowances works against the brand in-store. Therefore, although our argument is not heavily data-driven, we believe it is clear that advertising must have caused Buckley's sustained and exceptional growth.

CONCLUSION

This campaign is a model of insight, differentiation, simplicity, consistency.

But it's worth reflecting on the fact that the campaign ever came to life in the first place. How many times have you been in a creative presentation and heard (or even said): 'Yes, it's very interesting, but I have a concern about the negative sell.' That comment could have killed this campaign.

ENDNOTES

1. David and Goliath. See also Richmond Savings and BMG.
2. For another case about 'awful taste', see Listerine in CASSIES II: winner of the Grand Prix.
3. Using negative sell. See also Richmond Savings and BMG.
4. Breaking conventions. (Buckley's did this in a number of ways: using radio to dominate a medium; using negative sell, and using humour.)
5. Humour in a 'serious' category.
6. Evolving a long-running campaign.

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NOTES & EXHIBITS

FIGURE 1: W.K. BUCKLEY RADIO

'RETIREMENT'

Hi. Frank Buckley for Buckley's Mixture.

Y'know, I've been selling Buckley's Mixture for over fifty years now

From one end of this great country to the other, and halfway around the world.

So understandably a lot of people ask me when I'm going to retire. And this is what I tell them:

The day I hang it up, is the day that somebody comes up with a better cough remedy.

Buckley's Mixture.

It tastes awful. And it works.

Thank you
