

Canadian Advertising Success Stories 1999

Eggs

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a food product consumed by 2 year olds, 102 year olds, and virtually everyone in between. A product in 93% of fridges. A product familiar and ubiquitous, not to mention nutritious and versatile. And a product that had declined in per capita consumption for 17 straight years, taking \$360 million out of the hands of Canadian retailers and farmers. The product is eggs, and in 1996, the situation was dire.

Consumption had fallen for all the wrong reasons. A perception had grown, fueled by misinformed reports via the media and health-care community, that eating eggs could lead to cholesterol problems in otherwise healthy Canadians. (For 80% of Canadians, eggs do not contribute to increased blood cholesterol.) Unfortunately, facts weren't the issue. Perceptions were. And perceptions are much harder to displace.

To reverse the decline, we looked at the problem in an unprecedented way. Despite years of multi-million dollar budgets spent through the national and provincial egg marketing boards, nothing had stemmed the tide. The answer, as we will show, would be found in the grocery store aisle.

The campaign started in January 1996, with immediate results. AC Nielsen and Stats Canada reported 7% increases in 1996 per capita consumption; stunning when compared to the 17 year decline. This was followed by a 2% increase in 1997, with all major attitudes to eggs improving. Nothing but the new advertising could have caused this turnaround. All other marketing variables were unchanged, with pricing, if anything, edging up.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Anthropologists tell us that the Romans began cultivating chickens for their eggs in 404 BC. Eggs were seen as an excellent food for the warrior classes charged with the expansion of Roman civilization. As the population grew, so did chicken farming. Fast forward to the early 1900s in Canada. With immigration from the egg-consuming cultures of Europe, egg farming grew by leaps and bounds. Per capita consumption rose every year, peaking in the 1960s at about 22 dozen.

Soon after, with the onset of the fitness craze and health consciousness, eggs came under attack. Per capita consumption began a long decline, and fell to a low of 14.27 dozen a year in 1995. This was one third less than the level in the 1960s, and represented a loss to the egg industry of \$12 per Canadian (1995 retail prices), for a total of \$360 million in 1995 alone. See [figure 1](#).

During the decline, 95% of Canadians continued to eat eggs, but less often. Consumption declined for a

number of reasons:

- People were eating fewer and smaller breakfasts, and choosing easy-to-prepare cold cereal over eggs.
- More women were going into the work force, radically altering most meal occasions, especially breakfast.
- Most importantly, people began to fear dietary cholesterol.

As the baby boomers reached their 30s and 40s, they heard a proliferation of often inaccurate information trumpeting health causes and concerns. Cholesterol, fat, saturated fat, and oat bran all had their moments in the sun, and the cross-hairs. Eggs took a disproportionate amount of the criticism. Although dietary cholesterol has little or no effect on blood cholesterol for 80% of Canadians, the perception grew that cholesterol in eggs was potentially harmful.

The egg industry fought back. It was spending up to \$6 million a year at the provincial and federal levels. The strategy was to market versatility and convenience through broad scale advertising, while delivering the health and nutrition message through PR to the health care community. However, despite one of the most recognized slogans in Canada, 'Get Cracking', egg sales continued to decline.

In 1993, the industry took on the challenge of rebuilding sales. The strategy would evolve, as we discuss next, but the business objective could not have been plainer:

Stop the long-term decline in consumption.

STRATEGY AND EXECUTION

Strategy

Advertising had been extolling the convenience and versatility of eggs, but quantitative research showed that this was preaching to the converted. It was evident (from the research and the consumption decline) that this was not the lever for turning sales around. Health concerns were the major barrier. But how should they be dealt with?¹

The issue: how to convince Canadians, within the bounds of advertising credibility, that increased egg consumption would not adversely affect their health. Many questions faced us, including how to counter the editorial and so-called expert advice that was misinforming Canadians. There were many options. We could intensify PR against the media and the medical community, fueled by the latest scientific research. But the impact would be slow. This strategy could ultimately work, but only after several more years of consumption decline.

We could go directly to the public, and present the medical evidence in a compelling way through advertising. We felt this would be unsuccessful for two reasons.

- Advertising lacked the credibility to overcome the so-called expert opinions bombarding Canadians daily.
- The problem was not factual, but perceptual. Canadians felt that unrestricted egg consumption could be harmful. We had to make them feel, rather than think, that this was not the case.

A final concern was the danger that openly acknowledging cholesterol in advertising might perpetuate the

misconceptions. ('Thou doth protest too much,' said a certain medieval playwright, who was also an egg farmer.) The solution lay in the strategic thought:

DE-FUSE DON'T DISPEL ²

Rather than try to dispel the health concerns directly (unrealistic) we would de-fuse them. And we found how in the grocery store aisle.

Believing in the anthropological method, we intercepted egg buyers in the grocery store, and asked them to free-associate on the subject of eggs. While predictable responses were plentiful (versatile, convenient, etc.) not one person said 'natural.' Yet, when asked 'Are eggs a natural food?' the answer was consistently 'Yes.'³

Following up with qualitative research, we uncovered the overwhelming belief that 'Nature doesn't make food that is bad for you.' We could use the notion that eggs are 'nature's food' as the proxy for 'good for you.' This would inject credibility into the advertising, to overcome years of negative reinforcement from other sources.

This insight was the basis for the success of the campaign.

EXECUTION

Given the history, we knew that giving people permission to feel better about eating eggs—driven by the 'natural' insight—would be a 3–5 year project. But as we explored how to deliver the message creatively, we had to think further. There were two other issues confronting the industry.

First, eating habits would continue to work against egg consumption. Sit-down breakfasts were becoming less and less frequent, and the stove was playing less of a role in breakfast. Second, thanks to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, imported eggs will eventually be available in Canada (likely at a lower cost), so the marketing objective will shift—from increasing consumption to positioning Canadian eggs vs. US eggs.

We needed an advertising property that could act as an 'envelope', not only for our immediate message, but for a message that would evolve over time.

We chose real-life egg farmers: credible, honest people who would be the link between nature and the store—and a metaphor for 'natural.' At a time when people were stressed out, the romanticized perception of simple, honest farm life would communicate the natural health of eggs.

With household penetration at nearly universal levels, we chose to target primary grocery shoppers with families, leaving out empty-nesters and older consumers. Families were the best volume opportunity, particularly because of the stressed-out lives of dual-income couples with kids.

The 'Producer Portrait' campaign began in January 1996, when consumption was at its lowest point in recent history. The goal was to frequently refresh the campaign. To date, we have done this with 7 different stories in English, and 5 in French. During the time of this national campaign, the provincial egg boards have run sporadic bursts of advertising, but there have been no major strategy changes at that level.

RESULTS

In 1996, (the campaign's Year 1) the per capita decline finally turned around. We have the luxury of the most thorough quantitative measurement in Canada—Statistics Canada—who reported that egg consumption grew by more than six eggs per person in 1996, the first increase of any kind in 17 years. Consumption grew by another 2 eggs in 1997, the latest year for which Statistics Canada have data. This brings egg consumption back to levels not seen since 1990. And based on the Canadian Egg Marketing Agency's own tracking, egg consumption has continued up through 1998.

Moreover, per capita consumption of other commodities tainted by concerns about fat and cholesterol, such as red meat and milk, declined during 1996 and 1997, while egg consumption made its remarkable turn-around.⁴ See [figure 2](#).

This has been achieved while the retail price of eggs increased (roughly in line with inflation) making the consumption gains that much more surprising and valuable to the industry. Estimates suggest the turn-around in consumption across 1996–97 was worth \$70 million at 1995 retail prices.

Isolating advertising as the variable

We attribute the increase in consumption to advertising for several reasons:

- Other marketing variables could not have caused the growth, as packaging and distribution did not change. While in-store promotion budgets did increase over this period, we know from historical performance that this alone could not turn consumption around.
- Typically, a retail price increase would have suppressed an increase in consumption. This was not the case here.
- Changes in provincial egg board marketing activities were negligible, and the consumption increases were national, transcending any single province.
- Quantitative research in September 1996, eight months into the campaign, showed that shifts in awareness and attitudes are correlated to the advertising campaign:
 - Past three month advertising awareness had jumped by 10 points, reflecting the increased investment behind the new campaign.
 - Egg TV advertising recall jumped by 14 percentage points from the pre-advertising wave of research (70% to 84%). Since TV has been the main historical medium for national egg campaigns, this increase, in such a consistently used medium, is highly indicative of the campaign's effect.)
 - Recall of the advertising message, 'Eggs are nutritious,' jumped by 18 percentage points to 51% amongst those recalling the advertising. This result is consistent with qualitative evaluation of the commercials by Decima Research, which found them to have excellent credibility, main-message communication, and clutter-cutting ability.
 - There was significant improvement in consumer agreement with such statements as 'Eggs are good food' and 'It's OK to eat eggs'—the areas that pre-campaign research showed were holding consumption back.
 - The core message is getting through. A majority say that the main message of the advertising is that 'Eggs are healthy and good for you.'

In short, the advertising has a research-proven and sales-proven effect.

FOOTNOTES

1. Problem versus Opportunity. The previous advertising had bypassed the cholesterol issue, and had focused on the positives of eggs. This is an example of 'don't focus on the problem.' The new advertising comes at the issue entirely differently. It is an example of 'focus on the problem, but turn it into an opportunity.' Note the parallel to [Sunlight's Crossover Note 4](#).

2. Head-On or Lateral. Some issues should be dealt with head-on, but some should be dealt with laterally. Shell is a case in point. At various times, oil companies have had a bad public image. Some years ago, Shell decided to take action. Rather than take a head-on approach, they launched the 'Shell Helps' program. This ran for several years, delivering a stream of tips and ideas to motorists via various media and little booklets. Of course, head-on can also be right. Weyerhaeuser were under extreme negative press as a rapacious forest-stripping behemoth. In fact (for good business reasons quite apart from any environmental considerations) Weyerhaeuser planted more trees than they cut down. So they were able to re-position themselves as 'the tree growing company.'

3. Changing the Goalposts. Some insights are triggered not by what people say, but by what they don't say. For example, the conventional wisdom in the Canadian dogfood market—at one time—was to sell on taste and nutrition. In research, consumers played back taste and nutrition, and this perpetuated the conventional wisdom. Then, the Scali/Purina team saw the significance of something that consumers had not bothered to mention when they were asked about dogfood—that a dog is 'part of the family'. This realization was transformed into the long-running 'helping dogs lead longer lives' campaign which was spectacularly effective for Purina. (A similar insight had also led to the famous 'prolongs active life' campaign for PAL in the UK.)

4. Cause and Effect. Note to casewriters. This is an example of heading off a question that would occur to the judges—was there an overall shift in consumer attitudes helping eggs? The red meat and milk data show that there was not.



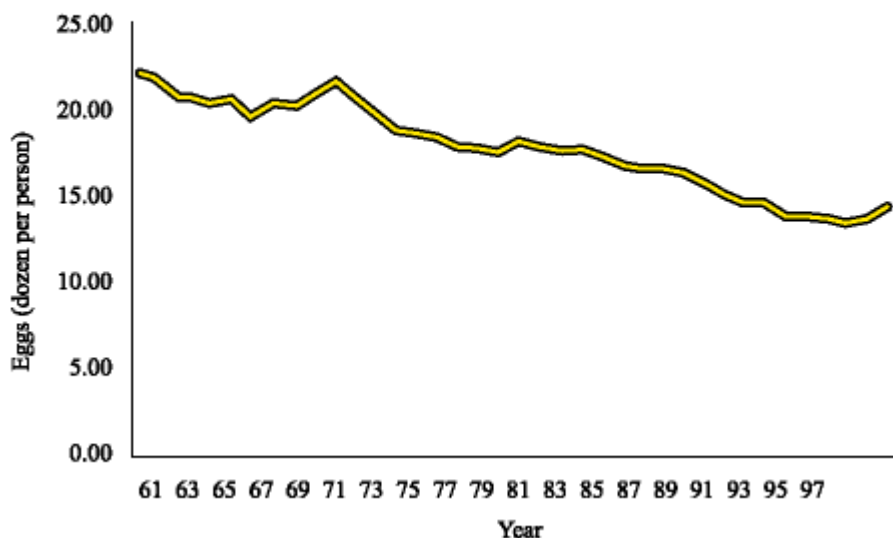
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NOTES & EXHIBITS

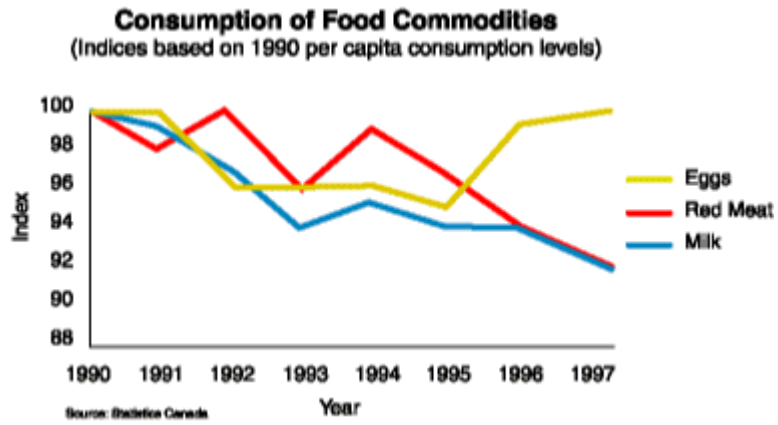
FIGURE 1:

**Annual Egg Consumption
(per person, in dozens)**



Source: Statistics Canada

FIGURE 2:



Source: Statistics Canada