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The Listerine Oncle Georges Campaign

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By 1992, after more than a dozen years without advertising support in the province of Quebec, Listerine had dwindled from its position as market leader, and possessed a market share of less than ten per cent. Consumers had written the brand off as dated and bad tasting. In the face of this kind of resistance, the challenge was to relaunch the original brand plus a new, better tasting line extension: Coolmint. Compounding the problem was the increasing price competition in the category.

In 1992, J.Walter Thompson and Blouin Colombe Dubé Thompson (BCDT) developed a campaign for Listerine Original that ran for eight months prior to the launch of Coolmint. The objective was to reawaken interest in the brand and increase its relevance prior to the good tasting product news. This campaign was then extended to launch Coolmint in the spring of 1993. The strategy behind this advertising was to break through the considerable resistance Quebecers felt toward Listerine and set the course to re-establish the brand as a leading mouthwash in the province.

A well-known comic character in Quebec by the name of Oncle Georges was featured in a series of TV spots, humorously providing Quebecers with instruction on oral hygiene and Listerine. The character proved to be extremely successful in overcoming consumer resistance to Listerine and their apparent indifference to oral care issues. The campaign consisted of five commercials, an outdoor board and in-store, point-of-purchase displays.

In less than eight months, Listerine volume increased by more than 70 per cent, a level which it was able to sustain. The brand has also been able to maintain its healthy price premium over branded and private label competition. While some promotion and display activity was used periodically during the case period of two and one half years, there is clear evidence that advertising was by far and away the strongest force in this brand rebirth.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

For decades, Canadians equated the name Listerine with mouthwash but by 1980 this had changed dramatically; throughout the 1970s, Scope successfully convinced millions of people that mouthwash did not have to taste bad to work. The result was a decimated Listerine business base and a name synonymous with bad taste.

Nowhere was the brand's plight more dismal than in the province of Quebec. To begin with, consumers there tended to prefer sweeter, better tasting brands. Not surprisingly then, Scope actually started its anti-Listerine campaign in the province. By 1980, Listerine had ceased all advertising support, and Scope had grown to dominate the market. By 1992, after more than 13 years without advertising, Listerine had declined to less than ten per cent share of market - fourth in the province - sustained by pricing, bonus activities and a small, loyal and rapidly ageing user group ([Figure 1](#)).

Meanwhile, in English Canada, the brand was reviving with a new, therapeutic, anti-plaque campaign which helped maintain and partly rebuild the business. But the Quebec market could not be ignored any longer and a way had to be found to bring the brand share and business base closer to English Canadian levels.

It quickly became apparent that this would not be easy. Extensive qualitative research showed that consumers regarded Listerine as terrible tasting, dated and decidedly English. Generally speaking, these same consumers regarded any plaque claims and benefits with deep indifference. They claimed to have no oral hygiene concerns, and did not see why a mouthwash should go beyond the traditional benefits of breath freshness.

The good news was that a better tasting Listerine and a new, more modern package was in development with a possible launch by mid-1993. The bad news was that, given the aversion to the brand and the erosion in awareness and interest, simply introducing a flavoured line extension was destined to fail.

STRATEGY

The first issue to resolve was the staging of the relaunch. Warner-Lambert, J. Walter Thompson and Blouin Colombe Dubé Thompson (BCDT) believed that the brand needed to reassert itself with consumers prior to any flavour news. To succeed, we had to create awareness and the beginnings of a belief that the brand offered a unique and important therapeutic benefit. This latter point was crucial. Listerine has genuine oral hygiene benefits and without this value-added benefit, we stood little chance of swaying a very contented mint mouthwash user.

Brand positioning posed a problem. As mentioned, people were quick to deny they had any real concerns about oral hygiene. But after extensive discussions, we found that beneath the indifference, many mouthwash users realized their mouths were not without problems: sore gums, cavities, and occasional discomforts. Better oral hygiene was in fact something many people felt they should do but managed for the most part not to think about. As a result, we modified our therapeutic positioning to focus not on plaque or gums, but on a healthy mouth, underpinned by Listerine's unique and very credible germ killing reputation.

THE CREATIVE CHALLENGE

During the course of this research, we also realized that we had a formidable challenge. While we felt we had uncovered the most relevant approach to a therapeutic platform for Listerine, we had also glimpsed widespread denial. Add to this the existing attitudes to Listerine, and our strategic challenge came into focus; advertising must find a way to overcome the set notions about mouthwash, oral hygiene and Listerine. How do we broach these issues so people would listen and believe?

THE CREATIVE IDEA

We needed an advertising idea that could deliver the message with credibility, give us the permission to discuss a personal issue that people preferred to ignore, and do it with great surprise and impact. We asked ourselves who could possibly do all these things. The answer was a clown. But, no ordinary clown; Uncle Georges is the character creation of Daniel Lemire, one of Quebec's hottest comics at the time.

He is a clown for adults, a voice of wicked insight about the way Quebecers - from politicians to ordinary people - conduct their lives. He is clever, sarcastic, deadly honest, hilarious and much loved. He is seen, despite his silk costume and cone cap, as a speaker of the truth.

In extensive focus groups we confirmed his popularity, his character and most importantly, his impact on the Listerine story. People would listen to Uncle Georges about their need for better oral hygiene and the effectiveness of Listerine. We had found our 'spokesperson'.

EXECUTION

Stage one: The original Listerine relaunch

The launch campaign consisted of three 30-second television commercials written in collaboration with Daniel Lemire. These and all subsequent TV spots, depended on puns and the use of double entendre for their edge and humour. This was critical for more than just entertainment; the more they were true to character, the more credible we knew we would be.

Advertising broke in late August 1992 and ran for ten weeks, spread through the fall at 125 Gross Rating Points (GRPs) per week. The campaign ran for an additional six weeks between January and March, concluding eight weeks prior to the launch of Coolmint Listerine. There was some feature pricing and display, but no major promotion during this period. Because of contract agreements, no displays using Uncle Georges were used. However, the retail trade did improve the brand's in-store shelf presence because of Uncle Georges's popularity and several very successful relaunch appearances by Daniel Lemire with key trade customers.

Stage two: The Coolmint launch

We believed that the first six months of relaunch had gone a long way to reawakening awareness and interest in the brand in the province. Tracking did not start until late 1993, but the original brand had grown over 35 per cent and the 'soft signals' on the advertising were great. For example, the campaign won the Coq d'or 'People's Choice' Award where consumers voted it the most popular advertising in 1992, after only four months on air. We felt the stage was set to launch Coolmint.

The Coolmint campaign consisted of two, 30-second television commercials and transit shelter advertising. The copy strategy focused on the flavour news and the germ killing advantage the brand had over other mint mouthwashes. During the rest of 1993, the brand ran 14 weeks of TV at a total of 1320 GRPs, and 12 weeks of transit shelters in major markets at approximately 25 daily GRPs. The launch was accompanied by a widespread sampling programme and a consumer promotion during the summer, consisting of a price discount (not out of line with typical category competitive activity). Trade support was strong again, owing to selective appearances by Mr. Lemire and the campaign's apparent effectiveness.

RESULTS

Stage one

The results for the first stage were immediate. In the first bi-monthly period following the initial flight of advertising (November/December), the brand grew 34 per cent versus the previous year and gained over four share points. In the second bi-monthly, the brand grew 53 per cent ([Figure 2](#)).

Stage two

The effect of the Coolmint launch campaign was to accelerate the brand's growth. In the first three bi-monthlies after the appearance of the new campaign, brand volume grew 81 per cent, 73 per cent and 82 per cent, respectively, while market share grew over four percentage points. Over the next 12 months, Listerine's volume grew and held at levels 70 per cent higher than in the two years prior to launch ([Figure 2](#)). Support during this period in 1994 consisted of 18 weeks of TV, and a total of 1800 GRPs.

Pricing and Dollar Share

This exceptional growth was accomplished during a period of intense price competition without resorting to radical discounting. Listerine's average price per litre for 18 months ending September 1994 was \$6.47, compared to under \$3.00 for private label, and less than \$5.00 for Scope (source: A.C. Nielsen).

The ability to sustain this price premium is a key achievement of the advertising, and a testament to the growing strength and distinctiveness of the brand. Dollar share for Listerine is now nearly double the pre-launch level (22 versus 12), and fully seven share points higher than the brand's volume share ([Figures 3](#) and [4](#)).

THE IMPACT OF ADVERTISING

There is strong evidence that the advertising was the driver that created the business momentum prior to Coolmint's appearance, and drove and sustained volume afterwards. The dramatic increase in share and volume before Coolmint between October 1992 and March 1993 coincided with the campaign, and was accompanied by no other significant variable.

Tracking was done through a usage and attitude study (U&A) prior to advertising in 1992 and not again until January 1994 when a different methodology was begun (Tandemar continuous tracking). On those measures that can be compared pre- and post-advertising, shifts in the brand are undeniably significant and point very clearly to the campaign as the key factor in the overall success of the brand. Unaided awareness jumped nearly 30 points while past four week usage rose to 26 per cent from ten per cent. Recall of the advertising surpassed Scope - a brand that had dominated advertising and the category for the past ten years. Finally, consumer acceptance of the campaign was outstanding and serves to confirm the qualitative response that was so strong in testing prior to production. Fully 89 per cent of respondents claimed the advertising was 'very enjoyable' versus a norm of 40, while 74 per cent felt the campaign was 'very unique and different' (even after 18 months!), compared to a norm of 46 (Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8).

CONCLUSION

Listerine's Oncle Georges campaign successfully put Listerine back in the minds and the bathrooms of Quebecers. Prior to advertising this was a brand people disliked or dismissed with passion. Trade activity, a new flavour or bottle, even great efforts by the sales force would not have changed this state of mind. It was advertising that pushed Listerine's growth in the Quebec market.

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NOTES & EXHIBITS

FIGURE 1: % SHARE (LITRES) OF TOTAL QUEBEC MARKET - FOOD AND DRUG COMBINED

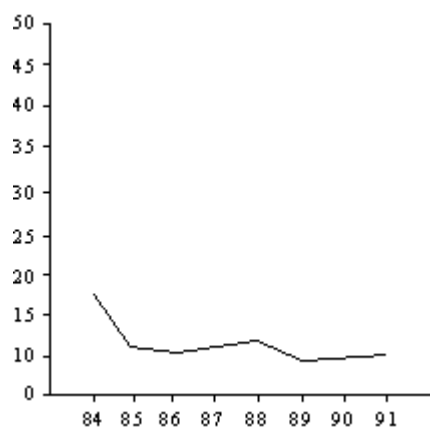
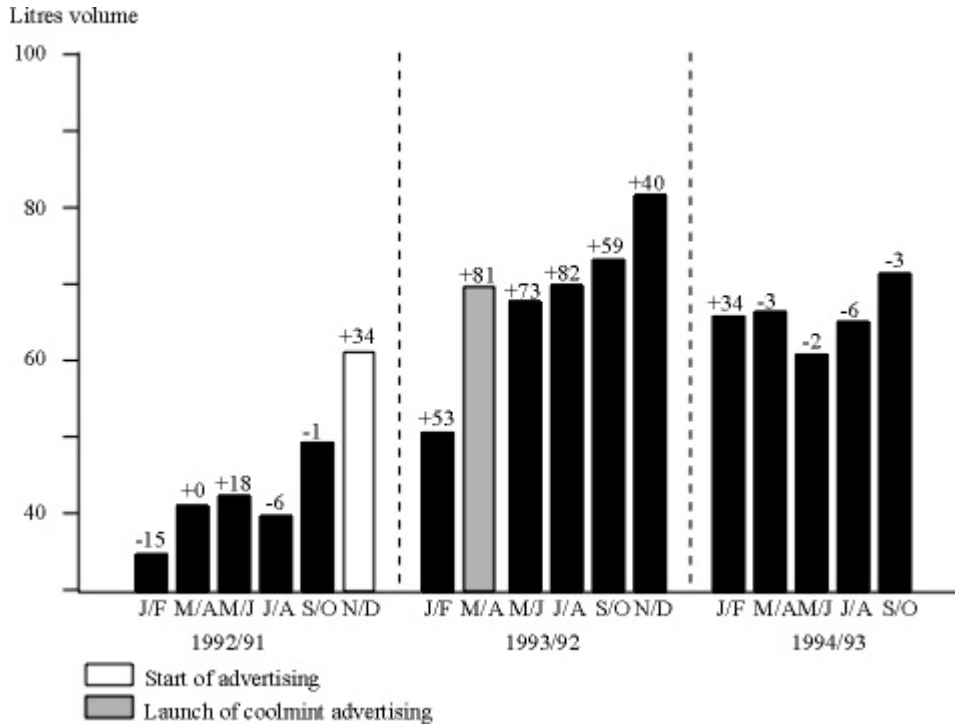
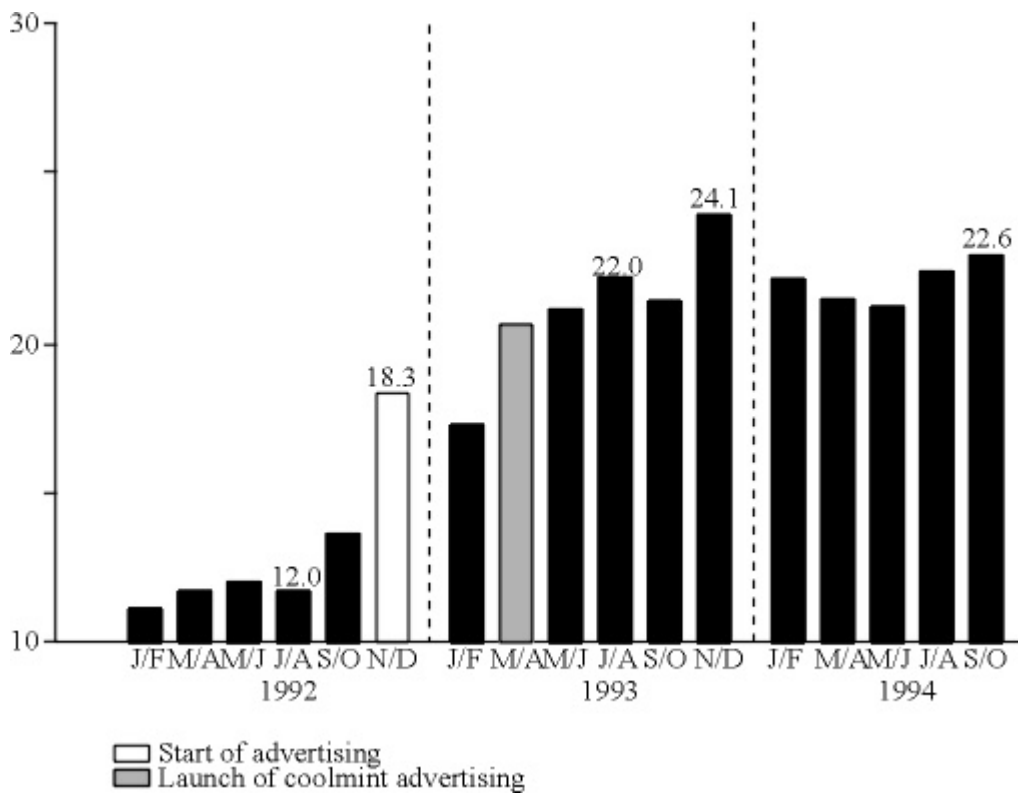


FIGURE 2: LISTERINE LITRES VOLUME VERSUS PREVIOUS YEAR



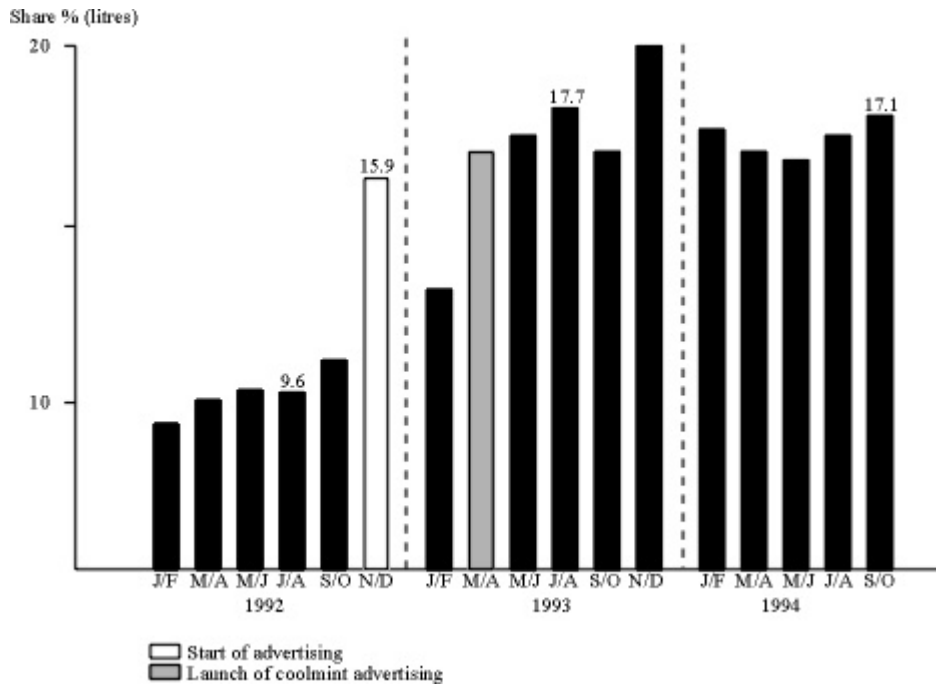
Source: AC Nielsen

FIGURE 3: LISTERINE - DOLLAR SHARE



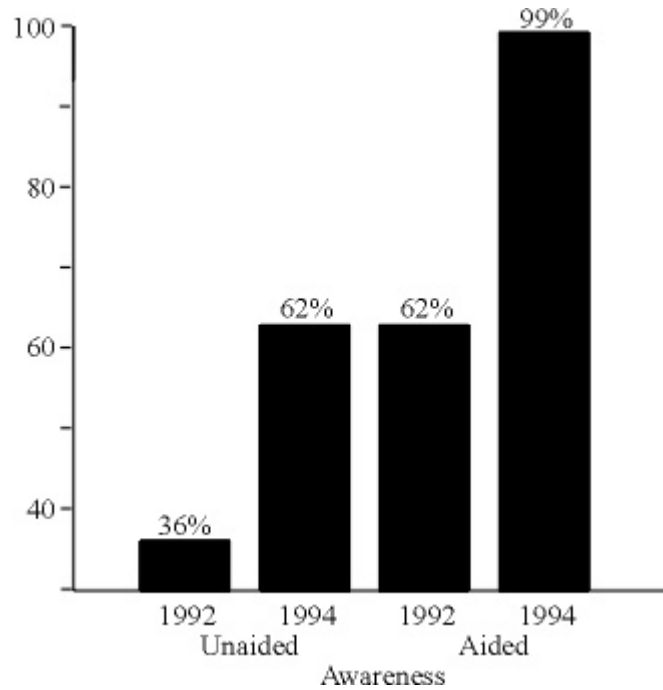
Source: AC Nielsen

FIGURE 4: LISTERINE - VOLUME SHARE (LITRES)



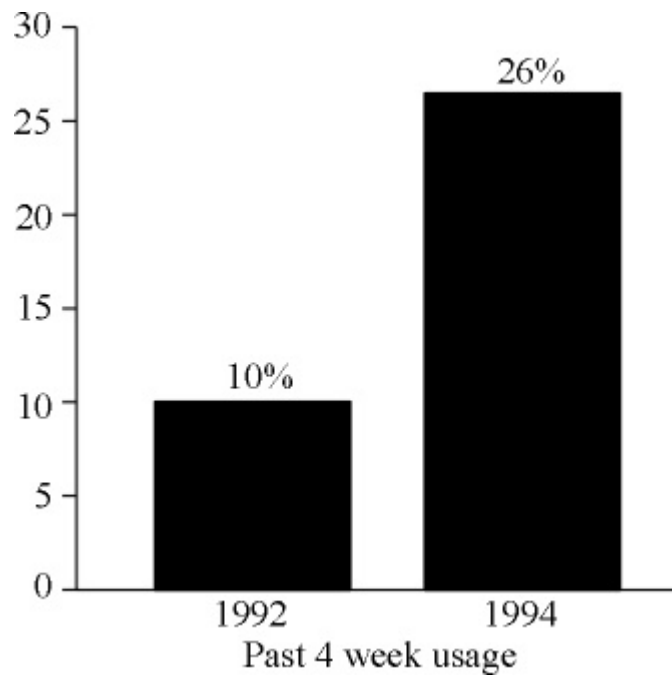
Source: AC Nielsen

FIGURE 5: LISTERINE AWARENESS



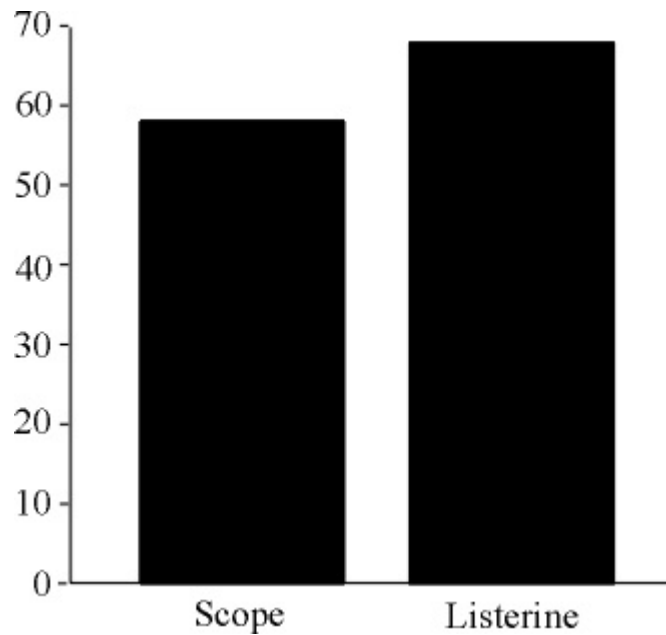
Source: 92 - U&A/94 Jan - Continuous Tracking

FIGURE 6: LISTERINE TRIAL



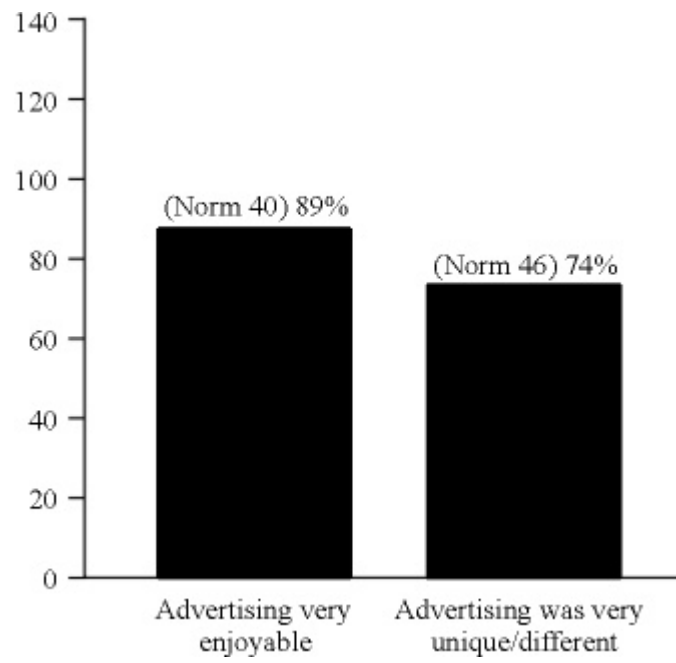
Source: 92 - U&A/94 Jan - Continuous Tracking

FIGURE 7: LISTERINE ADVERTISING RECALL VERSUS SCOPE



Source: 94 Jan - Continuous Tracking

FIGURE 8: LISTERINE - LIKEABILITY OF CAMPAIGN VERSUS NORMS



Source: 94 Jan - Continuous Tracking
