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Quebec 120 Campaign

INTRODUCTION

It's every advertiser's fondest hope: to create a campaign that becomes newsworthy in itself and draws favourable attention to the product. In the case of Bill 120, the 'product' was the views of four independent groups of Quebec doctors on a pending piece of provincial legislation that promised to seriously curtail their freedom and that of their patients. The medical profession within Quebec had not been consulted before the drafting of this new Bill. Something was needed to alert the public to their concerns and it had to be done quickly.

To do this, the doctors' groups needed 'opinion leaders' on their side, or at least, discussing their side of the issue. NATCOM saw that only a strong advocacy campaign could counter the political domination of the news agenda within the media. It came up with strong medicine indeed. Information and facts, coupled with a blatant emotional appeal, worked to help local media focus in on the story lurking behind this legislation.

Vivid imagery on television and cogent, pointed arguments against Bill 120 in two-page spreads caught everyone's attention - the public's and the media's. This was a case of packaging an issue for popular consumption.

Perhaps equally important to the campaign's success was its timing on the eve of the Bill's passage. The sense of urgency was real this time. This was a message that had to be highly focused, provocative and work the first time. Effective advertising campaigns are often created under these trying circumstances. And this is one of them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The Quebec government was on the verge of passing Bill 120, a major project to reform health services in the province. Through this bill, Quebec's Health and Welfare Minister, Marc-Yvan Côté, wanted to transfer major medical decisions and responsibilities, handled at the time by physicians, to the hands of bureaucrats. Four federations of Quebec physicians wanted to prevent Bill 120 from becoming law on June 21, 1991. One of the federations had retained a public relations agency to undertake a low-keyed campaign to muster support both within the medical community and among the public but with mixed success. With barely one month before the Bill was expected to become law, it was decided that an advertising campaign would be necessary to sway public opinion against Bill 120.

STRATEGY

NATCOM devised a two-part advertising campaign.

First, an informative print campaign was created to help rally the 18,000 Quebec physicians against Bill 120, as well as expose Quebec's opinion leaders to the physicians' point of view in the debate.

Second, a more emotional TV and print approach was devised to alert and rapidly mobilize public opinion against Bill 120.

EXECUTION

Two different, full double-page newspaper ads showing a physician's mask on the first page, transforming itself into a muzzle on the second, ran twice in 10 French and English dailies. This ad copy emphasized the nonsense of excluding physicians from health-care reform. This ad appeared on May 16 and 18, 1991. Another full-page ad showing a young girl on an operating table ran in the same dailies on June 6 and 8. This full-page ad stated: 'After June 21, her life may lie in the hands of bureaucrats.'

Finally, a highly emotional 60-second television commercial was aired provincially on the TVA, Réseau des sports and Quatre-Saisons networks and on the English TV station, CFCF. The ad was aired almost exclusively in prime time during news shows. The commercial was booked for nine consecutive days, from June 10 to June 18.

RESULTS

The total campaign lasted 30 days. It received a great deal of media coverage in newspapers and on television newscasts and news shows. The campaign was successful in mobilizing public opinion against Bill 120, and in so doing, was successful in making Minister Marc-Yvan Côté withdraw Bill 120 and in allowing physicians to play a greater role in drafting a new health-care reform Bill.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

In virtually all of Canada, the rising cost of health care has become a major and persistent issue for the government and the general public. In 1991, Quebec's Health and Welfare Minister, Marc-Yvan Côté, intended to introduce new legislation, Bill 120, as an attempt to reform health services in Quebec.

Through Bill 120, Minister Côté wanted to transfer major medical decisions and responsibilities, which were then handled by physicians, to the hands of government bureaucrats. Minister Côté felt that physicians held too much power which resulted in uncontrolled expenses. (Minister Côté was also determined to see Bill 120 become law by June 21, 1991, a timetable which precluded any consultation or negotiation with the physicians.)

As a result, in May 1991, for the first time in 25 years, the four federations of Quebec physicians (general practitioners, specialists, residents and medical students) put aside their differences to join forces against Bill 120. Understandably, the 18,000 Quebec physicians wanted to prevent this bill from becoming law on June 21 and wished to be included in the drafting of a new health reform project.

The public mood within Quebec was ambivalent. While the government's haste in moving this Bill through the legislature generated mistrust, the province's doctors didn't enjoy much higher regard on the part of the public. They were regarded as a wealthy and powerful group and not the subject for a great deal of public sympathy.

When NATCOM was introduced to the project in early May, the public relations firm, Bazin Dumas Dupré Sormany, was in the process of organizing a series of information sessions across the province for the representatives of the four federations. The objective of the sessions was to officially gain the support of the province's 18,000 physicians for the demands formulated by the representatives of the four federations. These sessions and the relatively unfocused objections they helped raise were not enough to generate much media attention. Indeed, media coverage at this point was generally mixed with both favourable and unfavourable coverage. It was at this point in early May when NATCOM was invited to develop an advertising campaign to promote the viewpoint of Quebec physicians.

OBJECTIVES

THE CAMPAIGN HAD MULTIPLE OBJECTIVES:

It had to create a sense of urgency. This was made easier because of the short time available before the final vote on Bill 120. It had to focus the doctors' objections to the Bill. First, by isolating the objections that all four federations had in common. Second, by making the issue tangible and understandable to the general public.

Finally, it had to be powerful enough to swing public opinion from ambivalence to strong support for the doctor's position.

STRATEGY AND EXECUTION

A two-part advertising strategy was quickly drafted.

First, an informative, factual print campaign would support the series of rallying sessions held across the province for the 18,000 physicians. This, in turn, would help expose Quebec's opinion leaders (journalists, professionals, etc.) to the physicians' point of view in the debate.

A few weeks later, a more emotional approach would be used to alert and rapidly mobilize public opinion against Bill 120.

PHASE ONE

The first part of the campaign consisted of two different double-page ads which ran in 10 French and English dailies in Quebec. One version, showing a male physician ran on May 16. Another version, showing a female physician, ran on May 18. The copy was identical in both versions. The core message was that it was nonsense to exclude physicians from healthcare reform. The visual showed the physician's mask transforming itself into a muzzle. The ad also touched on some of the benefits which would be lost under the proposed reform. These included the lack of ability to choose one's own physician or medical establishment and the declining confidentiality of personal medical files.

PHASE TWO

The second part of the campaign consisted of a print ad and a television commercial. The full-page print ad ran twice in the same 10 French and English dailies on June 6 and 8. It showed a young girl on the operating table with tubes coming out of her body. The ad stated: 'After June 21, her life may lie in the hands of bureaucrats.'

The television commercial, which aired on June 10, showed this same young girl and presented with graphic realism what might happen to the health-care system if Bill 120 became law. Creatively, the commercial juxtaposed the frenzy of an operating room (where everything is done to save lives) to the calm of a bureaucrat's office (where everything is done to save... costs). The commercial demonstrated, with emotion, how too much power in the hands of bureaucrats could affect the quality of health-care services.

MEDIA STRATEGY AND EXECUTION

Air time was booked province-wide on nine consecutive nights, from June 10 to June 18 on TVA, Réseau des sports and Quatre-Saisons networks and on the English TV station, CFCF. (As anticipated, Radio-Canada and Radio-Quebec refused to air the commercial due to its controversial nature.) Selected air time was all prime time and concentrated mostly in news shows and bulletins. This was designed to achieve maximum exposure and also to position the ads against any possible news references that might appear in the various newscasts and feature news shows. Thus, if the issue of health care or Bill 120 formed part of the media's agenda that evening, it was likely that the ad would run in an adjacent time slot to give the physicians' side of the story.

The television portion of the campaign was created, developed and produced under extreme deadline pressure. The physicians only agreed to use television 10 days before the desired air date.

Thus, there was a week and a half within which to conceive a dramatic commercial, present it to the representatives of the four federations of physicians, produce it in French and English, get it approved by the television networks and send it off to the stations in time for the desired air date. Media buying was also a problem. Getting prime time slots for the commercial required the television networks to persuade their clients to give up their space so we could air our 60-second commercial. This involved considerable negotiations because the plan called for booking approximately 350 GRPs provincially.

RESULTS

PHASE ONE

The first ad which appeared in dailies on May 16 and 18 (the physician whose mask becomes a muzzle) was successful in giving a common cause to the 18,000 physicians and in presenting the issue to Quebec opinion leaders. Articles referring to the debate began appearing on a daily basis in the media. Two television networks used the ad to illustrate the debate in their news bulletins.

PHASE TWO

The second print ad (the little girl on the operating table), which appeared on June 6 and 8, made quite an impact. It was treated as a news story and made the front pages of both *La Presse* and *Le Devoir* (see Exhibits 1 and 2). It was also used by Simon Durivage of the influential television show 'Le Point' in his opening statement for an interview with Health and Welfare Minister Marc-Yvan Côté. Mr. Durivage showed the ad on camera stating that 'the proposed reform must have something wrong with it to make 18,000 physicians so mad.'

Before the television ad's official debut, a copy was obtained by the news media. This gave the commercial advanced coverage. When the ad did air, it was treated as a news item and was shown (free-of-charge) on the news bulletins of all television networks. Even Radio-Canada, which had refused our media dollars, aired it on many of its news shows.

Again, the campaign made the front pages of newspapers. Television and radio stations questioned their viewers and listeners about their reactions to the television ad. Montreal's leading French television station, *Télé-Métropole*, asked viewers what they thought of the commercial.

In total, 2432 people called in. Sixty-three per cent of callers approved of the ad. Thirty-seven per cent disapproved. At about the same time, a CROP/*La Presse* poll indicated that three times as many respondents supported the physicians as the government in the debate (41 per cent against 14 per cent). Clearly, the original ambivalence of the public had now shifted to support for the doctors' cause.

Physicians had gained the population's support and the government knew it.

On June 12, only three days after the first airing of the controversial television commercial, Minister Marc-Yvan Côté agreed to drop Bill 120 and include the physicians in the drafting of some aspects of the healthcare reform. Wishing to play a greater role in health-care reform, physicians requested a meeting with Premier Robert Bourassa. On June 14, only five days after the first airing of the television commercial, Premier Robert Bourassa met with the physicians and agreed to include them in more aspects of the health-care reform on one condition: that the television commercial be pulled off the air immediately.

In the course of 30 days, from the first print ad that appeared on May 16 to the last airing of the television commercial on June 14, the campaign was successful in enabling the physicians of Quebec to play the role they wished in the major reform of the health-care system. The ads worked alone as a source of information and influence. But they played an equally important role in leveraging media attention and understanding of the issue. Coverage of the issue was a direct result of the campaign's advocacy stance. The campaign put the issue on the public agenda.

Press clippings show how quickly public opinion and pressure helped change the government's mind from a definite 'no' to giving in on the major points of the physicians.

EXHIBITS

NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS

1. La Presse, June 8, 1991 'Côté attacks physicians' indecent tactics'
2. Le Devoir, June 8, 1991 'An ad that shocks'
3. La Presse, June 15, 1991 'For physicians, but against a strike. A Crop/La Presse poll'
4. La Presse, May 30, 1991 'Côté says no to physicians. Bill 120 will be adopted on June 21st'
5. La Presse, June 13, 1991 'Quebec retreats from the physicians'
6. La Presse, August 17, 1991 'Physicians make gains'

Unsolicited letters of appreciation

7. The Federation of Residents
8. The Federation of General Practitioners

CLIENT

Le Regroupement des fédérations de médecins de Québec

Dr. Georges Bileau Spokesperson

AGENCY

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