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Canada's Pulse

Modify that policy to win

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In less than a generation Canadians have gone from foes to fans of marijuana.

In 2001, 47 percent of people across the country told a Léger Marketing poll they favoured a law to allow marijuana to be sold and used legally. On the other side, 47 percent were opposed (6 percent had no opinion).

Today two thirds (66 percent), in a Forum Research survey, believe marijuana should be legalized including 40 percent who say “legalize and tax it” and 26 percent who say “decriminalize” possession of small amounts.

Against legalization in the December Forum poll are 20 percent who say leave the law as it is and 11 percent who would increase penalties for possession (2 percent are unsure).

One explanation for the shift in opinion is demographics. Older, anti-marijuana Canadians are passing away; taking their place are younger people with a more casual approach to marijuana (and more direct experience).

In the U.S., too, the anti-pot share of the population is shrinking, though not as dramatically as in Canada.

- 84 percent in the US in a 1969 Gallup poll said the use of marijuana should not “be made legal” while only 12 percent said it should be legal (4 percent were unsure).
- Last year 50% of Americans said marijuana should be legal, 46 percent not legal (3 percent were unsure).

Another reason for the opinion change is that many people have become disillusioned with the U.S.-led “war on drugs,” a war only its generals see a hope of winning. In a 2010 Angus Reid poll, 67% of Americans called “the efforts of the U.S. government to reduce the illegal drug trade” a failure.

Something more important than drug-war fatigue has occurred. Pot reformers have repositioned marijuana. They have modified the drug’s reputation so it’s no longer only marijuana but also “medical marijuana.” The “medical” adjective has had a profound impact on how the public thinks.

The mastermind of positioning is the U.S. advertising consultant Al Ries, who wrote a book in 1981, *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind* (with Jack Trout). Ries argued that with so many ads competing for our attention you need to simplify your message to have any chance that it will register with shoppers and voters.

Reis’s message is that anyone trying to sell anything – marketers, politicians or union organizers – needs to focus on the customer, not on the product. Most advertising still tries to make the dogs eat the dog food. Instead we should first find out what the customer wants.

“Positioning,” Ries and Trout wrote, “is not what you do to a product. Positioning is what you do in the mind of the prospect.”

For instance, in a marketplace crowded with beers, one U.S. brewer – Miller – introduced Lite Beer and created a profitable new market by modifying the customer’s perception of beer.

“Health food” is another example of carving a profitable new market out of a hyper-competitive shopping world. Positioning, with one word, changed our minds about food.

Marijuana has undergone repositioning, too. “Medical marijuana” makes anti-drug people see weed a new way, not as a problem but as a solution. Additionally “medical marijuana” motivates people to think of the government in a different role, not as a sheriff but as a doctor. It changes the way people think of marijuana users, not as stoners but as patients.

Even among marijuana-resistant Americans, “medical” marijuana is 32 points more acceptable than traditional marijuana. In a 2011 Harris poll, 74 percent of Americans surveyed said they would support legalizing marijuana for medical treatment compared with 42 percent who support legalization for “recreational use.”

Repositioning worked for beer and marijuana, but how about the values and causes in the hearts of Canada’s Left? With the energized Right targeting the whole progressive agenda, repositioning is urgent.

It’s been done before. Former federal NDP leader Ed Broadbent and anti-poverty campaigners resuscitated the poverty issue in 1989 by repositioning it in the voters’ mind as “child poverty.”

“Child poverty” is a new positioning, a different way to think about poverty. You might blame low-income adults for their own misery – if you’re an ardent conservative – but you can’t blame children for being poor.

The Academy Award for positioning goes to “right to work” laws. This anti-union legislation makes it unlawful to negotiate a union contract that requires every worker a union represents to pay dues. By opting-out of dues, anti-union employees sabotage the union their co-workers pay for.

Unions have tried to blunt right-to-work's emotional impact by calling it "right to work for less," a mistake because the attacking slogan repeats their opponents' motto. It's like kicking the puck into your own net.

Repositioning "right to work" would call it "freeloader rights," "deadbeat employee legislation" or "slacker privilege law."

The Right modified regulations as "job-killing regulations" and demonized taxes as "job-killing taxes" showing that you can reposition just about any policy with an adjective.

- Unions should call back-to-work legislation an attack on "employee rights" (not "union rights").
- In high-profile negotiations, to make people think more positively about employees, modify their job with the credentials they require – "high-skilled health workers," "crash-trained flight attendants," "credentialed employees."
- "Unions" are not as agreeable to the public as "employee-rights unions."
- "Labour law" sounds bloodless; call them "employee-rights laws" guaranteeing "employee freedoms."

When an adjective isn't enough, use a synonym that sounds good in the public's ear. Instead of "regulations," which the Right maligns as burdens – call them "fair rules."

The Left is often uncomfortable with the idea of profits, but profit is a universally understood word for success. Instead of attacking "excessive" profits, say "undeserved profits."

Take advantage of overlooked opportunities to reposition. Picket signs squander valuable space announcing the sign-holder is "On Strike." Does anybody assume people with picket signs are at work? Position a strike in the public's mind as a "dangerous-job strike" or "unhealthy-work strike" or "pension walkout." Think of picket signs as outdoor advertising.

Repositioning requires thinking like the voter whose support you want or the donor whose contribution you need. It's not about you – it's about your audience. What do they want or need to hear? Medical marijuana, like light beer, is a lot more palatable.

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