

Marketing as Public Relations: Comparing Seagram and Imperial Tobacco, 1935-1995

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This paper compares the marketing strategies of Seagram (1935-1950) and Imperial Tobacco (1965-1995) in Canada. Both firms employed marketing as a form of public relations to change public opinion about product categories, not just brands, while simultaneously grappling with a variety of state restrictions on advertising and promotion. The paper's general aim is to elucidate how an analysis of liquor marketing in the post-prohibition era can shed light on business and regulatory issues involving recent tobacco marketing.

The paper examines Seagram from 1935 to 1950 when the Montreal company was becoming North America's leading distiller, owing in part to extensive marketing efforts to counter whisky's negative image linked to temperance and prohibitionist sentiment. For many during these years, whisky invoked scenes of bootlegging, backyard stills, public drunkenness, debilitating personal addiction, and the tawdry saloon. Accordingly, Seagram launched a series of marketing and advertising initiatives to transform the popular meanings of liquor, moving it away from the socially distasteful and the parochially homespun towards new meanings grouped around two concepts: "regal modernism" and "social responsibility." Rye whisky, aided by aristocratic-sounding brands like Crown Royal, Seven Crown, and King's Plate, had by the early 1950s become an urbane, "modern" product, a "badge good" connoting upscale social standing and cosmopolitanism. Advertising helped achieved this redefinition, but extensive regulation here required using other promotional vehicles, among them event sponsorship, company "hospitality guides," and bottle and label design.

Running parallel with this was Seagram's "Moderation" campaign. Launched in 1935 and continuing into the 1990s, it ranks as one of North America's longest running social awareness campaigns. The ads initially spoke against immoderate drinking and excess spending on whisky - "We Don't Want Your Bread Money" as one ad declared in 1935. Drinking while driving, hunting, and before one's children, among other scenarios, were portrayed as immoral and socially irresponsible. The early moderation ads stressed individual control over drinking, but their scope soon widened to espouse the merits of moderate personality types and, during the war, moderate consumption in order to control

inflation. Soon after the war, the ads praised the virtues of "moderate" political beliefs, a none-too-muted reference to the recent advances of democratic socialism. What began as a moral imperative regarding alcohol use had by the 1950s occupied the wider ideological terrain involving the psyche, social relations, and the polity. Overtime, the ads became closely associated with Seagram's public image, in the process recasting the product category itself into a more favourable light. This public relations campaign helped solidify popular support for the continued, if heavily regulated, sale of spirits.

The paper's second half explores Imperial Tobacco marketing, set against the backdrop of mounting social and political opposition to smoking from 1965 to 1995. Unlike Seagram, Imperial Tobacco's marketing and public relations failed to bring about greater social acceptance for its principle product, cigarettes. The overall rate of smoking dropped by half during this period, in part owing to a bevy of state measures and controls involving cigarette advertising, packaging, retail sales, taxation, and health warnings. As well, by the early 1990s a number of organizations had formed to combat tobacco use and marketing, mostly for health reasons. While "sin" products like liquor and cigarettes share some regulatory features (e.g. consumption taxes, advertising/sales restrictions), their different histories have meant diverging levels of social acceptance and use. Haunted by the spectre of prohibition, Seagram embraced forms of self-regulation and accepted, for the most part, government restrictions on liquor marketing. It successfully aligned its products with the values of moderation, social responsibility, and middle-class respectability, a marketing strategy owing mainly to alcohol's tenuous place in the public imagination during the 1930s and 1940s. In contrast, Imperial Tobacco, without a prohibitionist past to serve as a cautionary influence, only grudgingly and pre-emptively adopted forms of self-regulation in the 1970s and 1980s, while fighting state regulations on tobacco marketing. Such brazenness is demonstrated by the firm's extensive market research on juvenile non-smokers while it publicly proclaimed a marketing policy that targeted only adult smokers.