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Are Canadians moved by big oil's ad campaigns?

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Industry spending millions on ads to convince Canadians of the benefits of the oil sands

The images have become ubiquitous in the Canadian TV advertising landscape – earnest engineers working to unlock oil sands bitumen from Northern Alberta's boreal forest, and manufacturers parlaying the Fort McMurray boom into jobs in Ontario and Quebec.

The oil industry has developed TV, print and online ads to extol the national economic and social benefits of the oil sands, and to battle critics who have emphasized the risk of spills, and say an overreliance on the energy industry as an economic driver means outsized greenhouse gas emissions and environmental degradation.

The question is, are Canadians moved by the pictures and words paid for by big Canadian oil?

Greg Lyle, managing director of Innovative Research Group Inc. – a Toronto-based public affairs and corporate communications firm that counts a number of energy companies among its clients – believes there's some potential to move "the mushy middle" of Canadian public opinion.

"When they're given new information – which are the arguments the industry puts forward – they're prepared to be swayed. That doesn't mean they will be."

A new poll by Mr. Lyle's firm shows almost three in 10 British Columbians "strongly oppose" both oil pipelines and port facilities for oil tankers. That compares with about one in five strongly opposed in both Ontario and Quebec.

But the same survey – which Mr. Lyle said wasn't commissioned by a client and used respondents from his regular national panel – shows overall opinions shift slightly to the positive after people are given oil "proponent messages" about the safety record of pipelines, the resulting cash flowing to governments to fund social programs, and the need to diversify Canada's oil exports. For instance, the net support (total support minus total opposition) for oil pipelines in unconvinced B.C. improved by 12 percentage points when the same question was asked after a series of proponent messages.

The oil industry already seems to believe these messages can help to win over public opinion.

The Canadian Energy Pipeline Association is now spending \$2.5-million annually on an array of advertising, including a visually compelling paper clouds TV ad that suggests pipelines are as important as highways or railways in maintaining national connections over vast distances.

Enbridge Inc. has spent \$5-million since the beginning of 2012 on ads for its Northern Gateway pipeline project, which is going through a Joint Review Panel process and has been fiercely opposed by some First Nations and coastal residents. Cenovus Energy Inc., one of Canada's largest oil sands companies, has been running ads since its inception (it was created in 2009 when Encana Corp. was split into two companies) to explain the company and the oil sands industry.

The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers declined to give an exact figure but also says it has spent millions on TV, print, and online advertisements each year since 2010.

"Early in the oil sands debate in Canada, the industry felt that it was important to reach a broader audience," said Janet Annesley, communications vice-president for CAPP.

CAPP is focused on major centres outside Alberta. "What was obvious to us early on was the major population centres in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal were forming opinions based on the [non-governmental organization] campaigns," Ms. Annesley said.

Combined with approximately \$16.5-million the federal government will spend on its "responsible resource development" ads this year and there's a lot of pro-industry messages being beamed into Canadian homes.

Through the messaging din, critics of the industry are also battling to be heard.

Greenpeace Canada is taking aim at the taxpayer money being spent on the responsible resource development ads, and is asking Canadians to chip in to help buy TV time for a series of vignettes featuring actor Peter Keleghan playing the federal environment minister. In one scene, he's pitching the advertising strategy and tells the prime minister, "you put enough actors in lab coats and throw enough money at it, people believe anything."

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