



CREATING EVANGELISTS FOR CANADIAN WHISKY

THE P³ FRAMEWORK OF
STRATEGIC
COMMUNICATION

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Overview

As has been widely acknowledged by industry insiders, whisky experts and industry observers, Canada now makes some of the best whisky in the world. In fact, now might be the “golden age” of Canadian whisky, given the large and varied selection of high quality offerings available and being released by a broad range of distilleries.

However, the reputation of Canadian whisky still lags that of some other whisky producing regions, and the grassroots support and enthusiasm for Canadian whisky is not as high as that for Scotch, Bourbon, or Irish segments of the category.

This is a second report based on my ongoing research about Canadian whisky business. The first report (available on my website, maximvoronov.net) identified a number of challenges faced by Canadian whisky distilleries. This report synthesizes the additional data collected to offer preliminary recommendations for moving forward.

Evangelists – The Key to Grassroots Support for Canadian Whisky

The enthusiasm gap is a problem for all Canadian distilleries – regardless of the size, type or age – because collective reputation impacts every brand (though the big and more established brands are certainly impacted by the perceptions of the category more than the smaller and newer ones). The following observation of a distillery production manager captures this issue nicely:

“ How do we, as Canadians, hold Canadian whisky in higher esteem than we currently do? Because I don’t think Canadians hold it in very high esteem. ”

So what is missing, and what can be done to help Canadian whisky producers close the gap?



Evangelists – The Key to Grassroots Support for Canadian Whisky

This research suggests that the key to closing the enthusiasm gap is to focus on creating evangelists for Canadian whisky. By evangelists¹, I mean *people who tirelessly and passionately advocate for a particular product or ways of doing things and seek to convert others into becoming passionate and loyal supporters.*

Evangelists are not necessarily employed in the industry. Rather, they are typically regular people who use whatever position or resources they have to advocate on behalf of the industry and its products. Not only do they purchase the products, but they speak passionately to family members, friends and even strangers to get them to buy the industry’s products. They blog. They advocate for policies that favour the industry they care about. In short, they work on behalf of the industry.

Take Apple, as just one example. Many of its customers are not content to simply purchase the latest iPhone or iPad. Rather, they work tirelessly and preach to their friends and family to spread the word, trying to enroll them in the movement. There are evangelists for a variety of products and industries out there – ranging from smart phones to apparel. In fact, there are many evangelists – even in Canada – for other whisky segments (e.g., Scotch, Bourbon), and their importance to the success of those segments cannot be underestimated.

However, there are far too few evangelists for Canadian whisky, and not all distilleries appear to be aware of their importance. As one whisky society member summarized, “There is not that many voices trumpeting the good things about [Canadian] whisky, and that’s the bad.” In this report I lay out several recommendations for creating *evangelists for Canadian whisky*. The overarching theme is that key to creating evangelists for Canadian whisky is *establishing and maintaining an authentic connection* between whisky producers and consumers and key opinion makers.

To attain such a connection, my approach emphasizes three components: *people, place* and *partnering*, what I might call, the **P³ Framework of strategic communication**.

¹ There is considerable research support for the importance of evangelism for success in various industries, and I have co-authored some of this research, e.g., Massa, F., Helms, W., Voronov, M., & Wang, L. (2017). Emotions uncorked: Inspiring evangelism for the emerging practice of cool climate winemaking in Ontario. *Academy of Management Journal*, 60(2): 1-39.



People

As one marketing professional explained, in order for a whisky brand to connect authentically with consumers and opinion makers, **“there needs to be a sense of humanity behind it.”** Another marketing professional, who has worked with both Canadian and foreign brands, emphasized that consumers want to have a sense that there are “passionate people” behind a whisky brand.

In contrast to foreign competitors that have been showcasing their master blenders, master distillers and other key employees involved in whisky production, until recently, Canadian distilleries had not done enough to show the people behind the whiskies.

The importance of showing the human side of the whisky has been reinforced by the success and the rise to international prominence of Forty Creek. John Hall has been credited by the vast majority of my interviewees as *the* person who has done the most to rejuvenate Canadian whisky. In particular, he is admired for the years of travelling and explaining how the Forty Creek whisky is made, the Canadian whisky making tradition in general, and for being a passionate face of Canadian whisky. Some opinion makers and consumers report their personal encounters with Mr. Hall ignited their passion for Canadian whisky, and in some cases, changed their previously held negative perceptions of Canadian whisky. The authentic connection that these people have developed with John Hall and Forty Creek is palpable and illustrates how valuable such a connection can be.

The shortage of the human touch among Canadian whisky brands is changing in a number of ways:

1. Showcase master blenders

First, several large brands have been showcasing their master blenders more prominently. Most notable is the high visibility of Dr. Don Livermore (Corby), who has been widely acclaimed for his passionate communication on behalf of Canadian whisky that is infused with a dose of easily accessible technical information about Canadian whisky making and explanations of Canadian whisky making tradition. In another example, Johanna Scandella (Crown Royal) has been featured more prominently recently. It appears that the Gretzky Distillery is moving in this direction, as well, by highlighting its Master Distiller, Joshua Beach.

Of course, showcasing whisky makers is a particular area of strength of the micro-distilleries, and this has been key to their increasing appeal.



People

2. Rely on brand ambassadors

Second, distilleries have been relying more on other employees to showcase the people behind the whiskies.

For example, brand ambassadors have increasingly started to become more effective in communicating historical and technical aspects of Canadian whisky making. This appears to be a response to the increased consumer interest in the “how” of the whisky. Other examples of passionate people behind the whiskies that have been brought to the forefront by distilleries include quality control staff and farmers who grow the grains. This is an emerging area and can be strengthened further, given that whisky production relies on many passionate people.

Their stories are worth sharing.

3. Use founder stories

Third, several of the distilleries have started to put more effort into communicating the stories of their founders. For example, Canadian Club has sought to educate the public about Hiram Walker, and Corby has recently begun to put more effort into communicating about J.P. Wiser and about Gooderham and Worts.

These brands offer examples of how to do an effective job of tying the biographies of these founding figures to the explanation of the resulting whisky style and taste profile.

Key Takeaways

- To engender evangelism among consumers and opinion makers, it is crucial to celebrate and showcase the people behind the whiskies. Given the distinctive tradition of Canadian whisky as a blend, master blenders appear to be especially valuable to showcase.
- Given the increased popularity of locally grown food, distilleries could do even more to showcase the farmers that grow the grains.
- In communicating the story of the founder, it is important to link the person to the whisky making tradition and/or the taste profile of the particular whisky, avoiding a disconnect between the person and the resulting whisky.



Place

It is a truism that all whisky comes from somewhere. Engendering evangelism for Canadian whisky requires talking about and showing this “somewhereness” of both the specific whiskies and of Canadian whisky more generally. As one marketing professional argued eloquently:

“ Authenticity ties into a sense of *place* and value where whisky is unique and at the same time representative of a country’s signature style. ”

1. Convey a sense of place through a brand centre

The first – and the most obvious – way to convey a sense of place is through a well-managed brand centre. This provides an immersive multi-sensory connection to a whisky and the people behind it.

A brand centre can provide a material manifestation of the tradition that has resulted in a particular whisky tasting the way it does. It can bring the tradition into the present, making it relevant to the contemporary whisky drinkers and inspiring admiration for the brand and the people behind it.

This, in turn, helps to build an authentic emotional connection with a brand, which is necessary for engendering evangelism.

Among representatives of large distilleries that I have interviewed for this project, almost all agreed about the importance of brand centres or other facilities that enable visitors to experience the home and the heritage of a particular whisky. It is hard to miss the great benefit that Forty Creek has derived from its brand centre – not to mention the benefits derived by distilleries in other whisky producing countries. Investing in brand centres appears to be essential.

However, the implementation of these efforts has been challenging. Only Corby’s Hiram Walker Distillery appears to be moving actively toward opening a public brand centre. Sazerac appears to be preparing to follow suit. Canadian Club, in contrast, is unfortunately closing its brand centre, and the other large distilleries appear to be in exploration stages.

Being open to the public is routine among micro-distillers, and this has been an essential way for them to connect with consumers and opinion makers.



Place

2. Use compelling and authentic stories

Of course, brand centres are not the only means for communicating the sense of place. Compelling and authentic stories that locate a particular whisky or a distillery in a place and time are also important.

For example, while there is no consensus about the extent to which the location of aging warehouses makes a difference, it is likely to be a factor, and certainly many consumers care about it. Distilleries in Kentucky and Scotland, Taiwan and elsewhere have been emphasizing the importance of the specific climate for the speed of maturation and the resulting profile of the whiskies. Among Canadian distilleries, this is starting to emerge as an important point, as well. This is a part of Corby's Pike Creek story, and it is something that a number of micro-distilleries emphasize as well.

Such stories help to both explain a whisky's flavour profile and endow it with a sense of place. Stories that connect genuinely a whisky to a historical period or occurrences are effective, too. For example, the Gooderheim and Worts whisky connects the whisky to the brand's founding in 1832 and locates the brand squarely in Toronto.

There are significant opportunities on this front for others, as well.

Key Takeaways

- **People care about provenance of things they purchase, and they are more likely to be passionate about things that come from a place and reflect that place.**

This, of course, has been the cornerstone of Scotch messaging, but most other whisky producing regions are now doing that, too. Among Canadian distilleries, micro-distilleries have undoubtedly led the way with respect to communicating a sense of place. Almost all have boutiques that consumers can visit, and many emphasize the grain-to-glass story of their whiskies. Large distilleries are starting to make an effort to locate their brands in a time and place, though these efforts appear to be in early stages.



Partnering

Engendering evangelism for Canadian whisky is ultimately about creating grassroots enthusiasm for Canadian whisky – fostering a social movement of a sort. This means more concerted collective efforts are likely to be beneficial. These involve partnering among whisky brands as well as with various whisky education groups and local food and culture societies. It is important to acknowledge that some informal collective efforts of this nature do exist, and it would be beneficial to formalize them and to grow and leverage them more.

1. Use consistent messaging

First, as far as partnerships among distilleries, it is important to focus the collective efforts not only on dealing with regulatory and taxation issues (as is typically done now), but also on dealing with communication and messaging challenges. While it is certainly essential for Canadian whisky brands to communicate distinctiveness from one another, it is also important to have more consistent messaging about the nature of Canadian whisky tradition, its history and character.

Given the widespread confusion about Canadian whisky in the marketplace, it would be highly desirable for Canadian brands to communicate more consistently, in order to expedite consumer education.

One example of such collective efforts might involve either using existing trade groups or founding new trade groups tasked with educating consumers and the public at large about Canadian whisky. Another example might involve ad hoc collective public events targeting opinion makers and the media.

2. Partner with and support whisky education societies

Second, it is important to partner with and support whisky education societies. They are natural allies, because their members are highly engaged whisky consumers, though not all may be interested in Canadian whisky.

It is also valuable to make effort to connect with wine education groups (e.g., Ontario Wine Society, BC Wine Appreciation Society) and local food groups. While not all members of such groups are interested in whisky or spirits, they are highly involved with and tend to seek out local agricultural products of various kinds.

All of these groups are potentially valuable partners because their members are curious and highly engaged. Their high level of involvement with whisky or local wine and food makes them particularly likely to evangelize on behalf of product categories (whether whisky, food or wine) that they care about.



Partnering

3. Partner with universities

Third, universities may be potential allies as well. Not only are university students an increasingly important consumer demographic for spirits, but they tend to be more societally engaged and to be inclined to supporting local industries.

Organizing events, such as symposia, that discuss Canadian whisky's history, and the industry's contributions to economic and cultural life of Canada would be a valuable direction to pursue.

4. Elevate the overall Canadian category

Finally, it should also be noted that although the industry is competitive, it is not helpful to attempt to differentiate a whisky brand by trying to position it *against* the overall Canadian whisky segment, as some micro-distillers have attempted to do.

The fact is that in consumers' minds, Canadian whisky brands (regardless of the size) are part of the "Canadian" category. Thus, attempting to elevate overall category is more beneficial than trying to stand outside it – which is not likely to succeed.

Key Takeaways

- **To engender evangelism for Canadian whisky, Canadian whisky brands would benefit from partnering and working collectively – both with each other and with other relevant organizations.**

While individual brands are limited in terms of resources and opportunities, collective efforts and partnerships are likely to amplify the message and to deliver a much greater "bang for the buck" than a go-it-alone approach. The partnerships with relevant organizations, it should be noted, are particularly valuable given the widespread interest among Canadians in local industries and local products.

At the same time, it is important to be mindful of important constraints faced by some organizations. For example, major media might decline to write about a whisky release that has already been covered extensively on social media. So it is valuable to be strategic about when to communicate certain information, so as to maximize the communication channels without inadvertently "burning any bridges."



Conclusion

The enthusiasm gap for Canadian whisky is to a great extent attributable to the communication gap among Canadian whisky brands. Until recently, Canadian distilleries simply did not speak in a compelling manner on their own behalf. This gap has enabled competitor whisky segments to normalize some of their practices and define them as universal (e.g., the use of mash bills, the privileged status of malted barley).

Implicitly, this has left Canadian whisky tradition, which is different and distinct, at a disadvantage. While there are excellent Canadian whiskies on the market (both domestically and increasingly internationally), the enthusiasm gap lingers.

Engendering evangelism for Canadian whisky is essential for closing the gap. In this report I laid out three key elements of a possible evangelism strategy: people, place and partnering (P³). These should be seen as general building blocks that require specification by individual whisky brands to fit the specific brand character.

It has to be emphasized, however, that the overarching basis of engendering evangelism is the formation and sustaining of an authentic connection between producers and consumers. This means that distilleries need to be cautious to avoid misleading or deceptive communication.

Given the abundant research tools available to consumers, the highly engaged consumers (the ones most likely to become evangelists) are likely to spot misinformation.

Thus, communicating openly and honestly to maintain trust is essential.



Appendices

Methods

The data collection has been expanded significantly, and I am continuing to collect data. The aim of sampling interviewees was to obtain a broad cross-section that would enable me to get as close to 360° overview of the industry as possible.

Interviews so far	
Distillery representatives (covering most national distilleries and a significant number of micro distilleries)	28
Writers and whisky educators	8
Retailers (decision makers responsible for purchasing whisky)	6
Restaurateurs and bartenders (restaurant/bars reputed for having seriously curated whisky lists and high reputation bartenders)	7
Whisky connoisseurs/society members/educators	6
Others (government, consultants, foreign distillers)	7

Other sources

Hundreds of articles and blog entries, intended to further assess the perceptions and market performance of Canadian whisky domestically and internationally; sales trends in Canada and abroad; archival data from and about Canadian distilleries.