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Assessing the Effectiveness of VAC Communications Products

Executive Summary

Prepared for Veterans Affairs Canada

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Executive summary

A. Background and objectives

The Government of Canada continues to improve the services available to Canada's Veterans and their families. With its renewed commitment to better serving Veterans and their families, Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) is reviewing how it communicates with them about the services it offers. Since VAC last tested communications products (2012), the Government of Canada adopted a “digital first” approach to communications. As such, the Department identified a need to assess the effectiveness of its digital communications approaches.

During web usability research conducted in 2017 and 2018, VAC learned of improvements to make to its website. For example, Veterans noted that they experienced difficulties finding information on the site about certain benefits and eligibility criteria. Like many organizational websites, VAC's had been built from an institutional perspective; content was structured and prioritized by VAC according to the organizational context. Their user testing made it clear that a shift was needed toward content presentation based on user needs, thus taking a user-first approach. The web team determined that this could be addressed through structural, design and content changes. Thus, VAC began a web renewal project based on what it learned from its web usability testing.

To evaluate the impact of some of these changes, Phase I of this public opinion research would gather and assess perceptions of revisions to the website by performing two surveys, one before and one after the launch of the new site. One survey would be of the old site, which was still online in early 2018, and then, once the newly revised site was launched in March, we would survey perceptions of the same elements. Specifically, respondents would look at four or five of the most viewed pages that describe services for Veterans and study the impact of the site revisions. VAC wanted to know whether, after the revisions to the website, they have:

- A credible-looking site that is trusted by users.
- A site that appeals to users and draws them back for more information when needed.
- A design and structure that make the site easy to navigate, especially for VAC services, so users know what their next-step options are.
- Content that is useful and relevant to users, and that flows logically, with no information gaps.
- Language and presentation in French and English that facilitate the users' understanding of information.

The research aims to validate VAC's revision process and suggest any refinements needed.

The project will result in guidance for developing communications products on VAC services destined for various channels that resonate well with the target audiences. This research will help VAC improve communications approaches and products; and develop future products with clear, precise and consistent messaging about VAC's service and benefits and how to access them.

B. Methodology

This research study consisted of three separate, but complementary, phases:

- Phase 1: A two-part quantitative study testing sections of the VAC website.
- Phase 2: Two qualitative research studies:
 - Focus group testing of specific communications products.
 - A deep dive to test sections of the VAC website in individual one-on-one interviews.

Below are brief descriptions of the methodologies used for each phase. More detailed information is provided in Appendices A and B of the study report.

Phase 1: Quantitative research phase

EnviroNics Research conducted two online surveys, each designed to complete interviews with at least 500 adult members of the Veterans community (Veterans and family members). The Wave 1 survey (assessing the original website) field period was from January 14-27, 2019 and the Wave 2 survey (assessing the revised website) was undertaken from March 7-14, 2019. The two samples were discrete: Wave 1 participants were not invited to take part in Wave 2. Quotas were set to ensure that half of the sample were Veterans and half were family members of Veterans, and quotas were also set by region. Data were weighted by region based on 2016 Census proportions, but were not weighed by age or gender, as the Veteran community is more likely to be older and male than is the general population.

Because respondents are recruited from a panel, this is a non-probability survey and no formal estimates of sampling error can be calculated. Although opt-in panels are not random probability samples, online surveys can be used for general population surveys provided they are well-designed and employ a large, well-maintained panel, as was the case here.

The survey obtained the following regional distribution:

Region	Actual share of population (Census 2016)	Unweighted Sample Wave 1	Unweighted Sample Wave 2
Atlantic Canada	7%	40	50
Quebec	23%	98	98
Ontario	38%	185	181
Prairies/NWT/Nunavut	19%	35	38
B.C. /Yukon	13%	83	80
CANADA	100%	518	522

More information about the methodology for these surveys is included in Appendix A.

Phase 2: Qualitative research phase

1) Focus group testing

Environics Research conducted a series of 12 focus groups with members of the Veteran community and family members/caregivers. Environics recruited participants via a combination of industry-standard methods to ensure participation in all the sessions in all five cities, as well as for the two online sessions. Respondents were offered a \$100 incentive as a thank-you for their time. The in-person group locations were chosen in consultation with VAC, to represent geographic breadth and to include locations with reasonably high concentrations of Veterans. Environics invited 10 participants to each in-person session. Two sessions were conducted online using an easy-to-use conferencing platform called Zoom; these groups were conducted with members of the Veteran community across Canada to explore reactions to storyboard concepts on mental health. Seven people were invited to each online session.

The sessions were distributed as follows:

Location	Dates	Time and composition
Online	December 10 and 11, 2018	December 10 – English; December 11 – French
Toronto	February 11, 2019	5:30 pm – Group #1 English; 7:30 pm – Group #2 English
St. John's	February 12	5:30 pm – Group #1 English; 7:30 pm – Group #2 English
Montreal	February 18	5:30 pm – Group #1 French; 7:30 pm – Group #2 French
Victoria	February 19	5:30 pm – Group #1 English; 7:30 pm – Group #2 English
Ottawa/Gatineau	February 20	5:30 pm – Group #1 English; 7:30 pm – Group #2 French

Statement of limitations: Qualitative research provides insight into the range of opinions held within a population, rather than the weights of the opinions held, as would be measured in a quantitative study. The results of this type of research should be viewed as indicative rather than projectable to the population.

More information about the methodology for the focus groups is included in Appendix B.

2) In-depth interviews

Environics conducted a “deeper dive” into the website sections, through individual in-depth interviews. The interviewers followed participants as they navigated through specific redesigned services pages and sections, providing their impressions and comments. Environics conducted 20 one-on-one online interviews between March 8 and 20, 2019, with 15 Veterans and five family members from all over Canada (14 in English and 6 in French). These interviews averaged 30 minutes to complete. Each participant was paid \$100 for their assistance with this phase of the project. The interviews were conducted using Zoom, which enabled audio discussions and screen sharing.

Statement of limitations: Qualitative research provides insight into the range of opinions held within a population, rather than the weights of the opinions held, as would be measured in a quantitative study. The results of this type of research should be viewed as indicative rather than projectable to the population.

More information about the methodology for the in-depth interviews is included in Appendix B.

C. Contract value

The contract value was \$198,606.49 (HST included).

D. Report

This report begins with an executive summary outlining key findings and conclusions, followed by a detailed analysis of the survey data and a detailed analysis of the qualitative findings. Provided under separate cover are two sets of detailed “banner tables” presenting the results of the surveys for all questions by population segments as defined by region and demographics. These tables are referenced by survey question in the detailed analysis.

In this report, quantitative results are expressed as percentages unless otherwise noted. Results may not add to 100% due to rounding or multiple responses. Net results cited in the text may not exactly match individual results shown in the tables due to rounding.

E. Use of findings of the research

This research supports the Government’s and the Department’s commitments to continue to improve services and access to them, by ensuring the opinions of Veterans are considered. It also supports the continuing Government priority of accountability and performance measurement. The information obtained allows VAC to: demonstrate that it is assessing the communications needs of the Veteran community; determine the impact and effectiveness of its communications efforts, and provide direction to areas that require attention; adapt marketing efforts to better meet the needs of target groups; ensure that Veterans and their families are well-informed of the supports and services of VAC; and shape future marketing efforts to be better focused, more informative and better suited to specific target groups.

F. Key findings

A. Quantitative research

The two waves of online surveys employed two unique samples; no panellist invited to complete Wave 1 was invited to Wave 2. The distribution of the samples in both waves compare very closely in terms of type (CAF, Reservist/Ranger or RCMP Veterans or family members), demographics, and familiarity with and use of VAC’s services and web site. This high level of comparability means the differences in web page opinions are reflecting what respondents experienced, rather than being due to variations in their level of previous experience with, or ideas about, the VAC web site.

Familiarity with Veterans.gc.ca

- In both waves, under half of members of the Veterans community describe themselves as even “somewhat familiar” with the Department’s services and benefits. Around half in both waves of research knew before the survey, that VAC provides services to people besides CAF Veterans.
- Four in ten have visited veterans.gc.ca before, and three in ten of these visit the site at least once a month. Those who visit are mainly looking for information. It is important to note that, unlike other forms of website testing, this survey captured the views of many people who are infrequent or non-users of the VAC website.

Overall site ratings

- After viewing three pages of the web site, nine in ten or more in each wave “agree to some extent”? that the veterans.gc.ca web site is credible, has useful resources, that they would be comfortable using it, and that they are confident it will provide accurate information. Those viewing the redesigned pages in Wave 2 are notably more likely than those viewing Wave 1 to “agree strongly” with three statements: that the site has useful resources, that they would be comfortable using it, and that they are very confident the site will provide accurate information.
- When asked how they would rate veterans.gc.ca compared to other websites they might use to research or access government services, just under six in ten seeing the Wave 1 pages say it is at least a little better, compared to two-thirds of those viewing the redesigned Wave 2 pages. Reasons why the VAC site is better include it being easy to navigate, information being easily found without having to search the whole site (mentioned in Wave 2), that it has a good layout/design (more mentions in Wave 2), that it is not as confusing as other government sites, or that it is straightforward and easy to follow (more mentions in Wave 1 than Wave 2).

Web page testing

- Respondents in both waves were asked to carefully review a version of the home page (without working links) and then two of four additional pages, randomly selected to reduce burden. Using these pages instead of images of the pages facilitated the review and allowed for the use of accessibility features. The pages selected were being updated within the field period of the surveys, so pre and post-change reactions could be assessed.
- Two-thirds or more agree at least somewhat with positive statements about each web page, in both waves. This is an expected result, given the amount of research and effort that went into the Government of Canada standardized web page design (viewed in Wave 1) and also the amount of research around the new VAC site design shown in Wave 2. Although many results are statistically similar, it is noted that the trend is for the Wave 2 results to be at least marginally higher/better than those of Wave 1.
- The home pages shown in Wave 1 and Wave 2 generally received statistically similar levels of agreement for equivalent positive and negative statements, except for the “wording being clear” having strong agreement higher in Wave 2. As well, the Veterans Independent Page (VIP) got similar results between the two waves.
- Considerably more variation in response is observed for the other three pages. Most notably, the Wave 2 viewers of the health-related travel information page had statistically higher levels of overall and strong agreement for the positive statements, and statistically lower levels of overall agreement with the negative statements, than expressed by Wave 1 viewers. Viewers of the Wave 2 health-related travel site are also twice as likely as those viewing the Wave 1 version to indicate the design of the page makes it very easy to find information.
- Strong majorities of viewers of each of the Wave 2 pages agreed to some extent with the statement that the page looks like an authentic Government of Canada web site, with half or more agreeing strongly.

This confirms the redesigned pages will not confuse viewers about the site's legitimacy because of the departure from the common look and feel of federal government web pages.

B. Qualitative research

Media and social media consumption. Veterans are active media consumers – many follow the news on a regular basis, and through a variety of sources and formats. While radio consumption is rather rare, television, Internet and newspapers are fairly common. Many Veterans are also on social media but, by and large, Facebook is the only platform used. Veterans have joined Veterans-specific groups to stay in touch with others with whom they had served, to share resources and to seek out support from, and provide support to, other Veterans.

Other than general media sources and Facebook, very few other resources are used to remain updated on Veterans-related affairs. The VAC website is not typically used as a general resource by Veterans and awareness of VAC's social media presence was quite low. Hearing about VAC's Facebook page was, however, an interesting discovery for many.

Top-of-mind issues for Veterans. Participants believe Veterans face a number of challenges, many of which are related to the fact that there is no effective "hand-off" at the time of discharge and no follow-up post-discharge. Many describe challenges related to transition to civilian life, mental health, accessing benefits, and the lack of recognition from the general public and the federal government.

Other than perhaps support for mental and physical health, participants did not seem to be informed about any other service or support provided by VAC to address the main issues raised. Those most likely to be aware of VAC services were also most likely to be "clients" who had taken the initiative to contact VAC themselves rather than having been contacted by VAC. Participants felt awareness of VAC and its services could be improved through a three-pronged strategy: a better hand-off process just prior to discharge (and follow-up post-discharge); direct outreach by VAC to Veterans; and a greater presence by VAC in spaces, both virtual and physical, that Veterans regularly use (e.g., the Legion, social media).

Evaluation of social media posts. Six existing social media postings from VAC that could be noticed by someone following VAC on Facebook or other social media platforms were presented to participants. Participants were fairly critical of the six social media posts presented, mostly for not effectively conveying relevance and standing out from other social media clutter. While a few posts had some redeeming qualities (such as an engaging image or a relevant key word in the post headline), they were broadly criticized for not having any explicit references to Veterans in the imagery or graphics, and not always having short-form content or a headline to hook them. If the left-hand visuals were more effective at engaging them as Veterans, they would click through, since the programs seemed relevant (to themselves or someone they know).

Evaluation of infographics. Two infographic concepts were presented to participants. Participants seemed to like the infographics presented. The evaluation of the infographics underscored the importance of design (including use of colour, the balance between text and graphics, the layout of the information, etc.) and how a good design, combined with effective interactive features, can lead to a successful product. Feedback on the two infographics stressed how participants were prepared to forego detail in exchange for headline-type information insofar as there are opportunities to click on specific elements to access more detailed information.

Evaluation of fact sheets. Three different fact sheets currently available on the VAC website were evaluated, although any given group only saw one fact sheet. This exercise revealed that fact sheets are not for everyone. Those who struggle reading long-form copy could not read the entire fact sheet provided to them; however, most participants were comfortable with the language used, the quantity of information provided and the

general layout. This approach would seem to work for situations where the client is keen on finding out more information about a product or service.

Website evaluation (NOTE: The findings for this section are derived from a series of 20 one-on-one tele-web interviews). The revised VAC website is seen by both new and experienced VAC website users as user-friendly, attractive and well laid out. Those familiar with the older version of the website also believe the current version is vastly improved, especially in terms of layout and how the information is organized. From a functionality perspective, viewers feel the home page, as well as the main dropdown menu from the home page, offers the right balance of topics and navigation flexibility to satisfy a broad range of users. Participants also stressed that the amount of text is well-distributed throughout the website – there is just enough to determine where to go and how to determine if they are headed in the right direction. Suggestions for improvements were few and far in between. A few common ideas included having a bit more colour on the home page (especially in the Canadian flag), having the contact information for the VAC Assistance Service higher on the home page, and greater alignment between the dropdown menu on the homepage and the eight main themes presented on the home page itself.

G. Political neutrality statement and contact information

I hereby certify as senior officer of Environics that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

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