Communicating Clearly in Complexity

November 2019
Lessons from CUSMA

• Many benefits of focused Maple Charm Offensive
  - Multi-party, multi-government – and horizontal
  - 25 negotiating ‘tables’ + sectorial tables + Minister’s Advisory Council + Formal Canada Gazette + Labour
  - Communications benefits were largely domestic and took the early edge off
  - Canadian exposure to US tax and investment climate also driven home; drove strategy throughout

• The curve ball of US switching to consecutive bilateral negotiations reinforced the vagaries of negotiating with the US under the Trump administration

• The complexity and unpredictability of these negotiations allowed victory to be declared in a different way than CETA
HURRAY! IT’S NOT TERRIBLE!!!
The Macro Narrative on CUSMA

You’re Welcome Canada
• Public acceptance of the net benefits of trade as part of economic resilience remains high
• CUSMA proved trade diversification essential for Canada
• Government began mid-mandate to emphasize deeper trade relationships, for particular sectors and SMEs was an extension of and key to domestic economic strategy
• New new trade or rules-based negotiations is largely for trade policy insiders
• Highly complex from a communications POV. Likely requires a re-frame of benefits and objectives in trade agendas, including collaboration between political and officials
• Managing communications and consultation processes are often the key to policy and political success

• Narrative has become the driver of political persuasion tactics
  - The battle for narrative control characterizes most controversial issues
  - In much the same way that control of the “ballot question” often dictates vote choice – as we are seeing in the current federal election

• Control of narrative or “framing” allows governments to position an initiative in a way that promotes public acceptance, if not approval

• Once a frame is “set”, it becomes hard to change for either side in a debate
  - Further discussion is often ignored as routine “noise” of government

• Sometimes not communicating avoids the wrong frame settling in
  - Deprives debate of concrete substance and hence real “oxygen”
The Narrative Framework

• Many stages that require ‘narrative’ management
  - The decision to seek an agreement and the launch of negotiations
  - The ongoing domestic consultations with “Insider” stakeholders
  - The final stages of negotiations with the potential treaty partner(s)
  - The announcement of an agreement in principle
  - Drafting of the final text
  - Final approval and ratification (including political process)
  - Implementation

• Each involves careful consultations and communications planning
  - With differing “key messaging” or main narrative constructs
  - Different information requirements and stakeholder outreach
CETA – Week One

Headlines

Framing of CETA from the outset was positive

“We have a deal with Europe. Let’s not blow it”
- The Globe and Mail

“Harper’s huge EU free trade deal justifies lawmakers’ hyperbole”
- John Ivison, National Post

“European free trade deal is a big win for Stephen Harper”
- Vancouver Sun

“CETA benefits Western Canada”
- The Star Phoenix

“EU trade deal could bring higher drug costs”
- Toronto Star

“Feds consider compensation for dairy farmers hurt by EU deal”
- CTV
Spheres of Interest

• There are multiple domestic spheres of interest and influence to be considered in the trade negotiation context
  - With varying degrees of access to consultation, input and information

• The insiders (consult and influence):
  - Government policy makers and decision makers
  - Provinces
  - Sectoral voices
  - Industry associations and increasingly, individual companies
  - Labour, Indigenous, civil society (environment, women +++)

• Outside stakeholders (inform and communicate):
  - Adhoc coalitions/alliances for interests
  - Permanently oppositional voices
  - Media
  - “Involved Canadians”
  - The general population
Crossing the Threshold

• Where policy crosses into the public sphere, government no longer has control of the narrative
• Politics are relevant (especially with election dynamics)
• Macro story lines define public space
  - Broader context matters
  - Define your narrative before it defines you
  - Pace of interest and need for response changes
  - Better if pre-positioned to understand underlying issues or trade-offs
• Third parties become more influential, particularly with social media, requires coordination within government
• Scope of the issue and other external factors will define the duration of the communications window
Additional Observations

• Communications and consultation are core to strategy, not an after-thought
• CETA offered textbook lessons for a regional deal, pitched throughout and at announcement. Won in the first week.
• USMCA/NAFTA was defined in protectionist terms and largely won in the same way
• Managing the range of stakeholders and new factors being driven into trade agreements (progressive agenda, environment/trade) means more complexity early
• More than ever, trade negotiators and communicators need to collaborate early in the process to understand
• Time to update and re-frame the overall benefits of trade in new context of CETA, CUSMA and China in 2020