

# Controversial 'robocall' firm behind mass text messages across Canada

A controversial Ontario marketing firm is behind a wave of mysterious texts soliciting views from British Columbians and Ontarians on environmental policies in the lead-up to October's federal election.

B.C. residents began receiving texts last week from someone introducing themselves as "Sue from BC Strong," asking if the recipient agrees that "we must build pipelines to export Canadian oil."

The message is similar to texts sent to Ontarians last month from another "Sue" affiliated with "Ontario Strong," asking their thoughts on the carbon tax.

Postmedia traced the texts to iMarketing Solutions Inc., a Toronto firm founded by the directors of Responsive Marketing Group, the company at the centre of the 2011 Robocall scandal wherein company employees directed Ontario voters to the wrong voting sites.

Victoria resident Patrick McFadden, who works at the tech firm Iris Dynamics in Victoria, obtained the phone number's associated IP address using software at his company, and then used a reverse-DNS search to trace it back to iMarketing. He also found the number's home phone directory, which reroutes to iMarketing.

Postmedia has copied McFadden's steps and confirmed BC Strong and Ontario Strong are connected to iMarketing.

McFadden says he was frustrated by the lack of information about who sent him the message or how they obtained his number.

"If it was an actual legitimate registered federal party, I'd be okay with having them call me," said McFadden. "My biggest issue with this group is that they didn't identify who they were."

"I was having a bit of a tin-foil hat moment."

McFadden says he has complained to Elections Canada about the texts and hopes for more transparency in political messaging as the election approaches.

“If (iMarketing) are affiliated with a federal political party, someone better step forward and say they’re working with us,” said McFadden.

iMarketing Solutions, whose website describes it as “North America’s preeminent integrated marketing services company,” currently maintains registered offices in Toronto and New Mexico.

It is owned by the same parent group as Responsive Marketing, which had a track record of providing telemarketing and promotion services for conservative parties. The companies’ websites and offered services are identical, as are their addresses in Toronto. Responsive Marketing COO Andrew Langhorne is listed as iMarketing’s President and CEO.

In an email to Postmedia, Conservative party spokesperson Cory Hann said the party continues to use Responsive Management Group as a vendor, but that it has no affiliation with the Strong groups.

iMarketing Solutions and Responsive Marketing did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

The company’s legal counsel, Rajiv Arya, wrote in a statement to Postmedia that the company “has no comment.”

They did not respond to questions asking who their client is or how much they were paid.

When Postmedia contacted iMarketing on July 3, the Ontario Strong website was an empty shell without any identifying information.

On July 4, Ontario Strong suddenly rebranded as part of a network of similar sites in Alberta, Newfoundland and Quebec, calling themselves “Canada Strong and Proud.”

They are not affiliated with the Proud Facebook pages, which are separate third-party advertisers.

Experts say it is a case study in the opaqueness around political messaging in Canada.

The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission normally requires third-party political parties to register their activities, but that only applies during the official election period.

This year, the government introduced a pre-writ period starting June 30 where political agencies spending more than \$500 will be required to disclose spending on ads.

However, no laws forbid or require funding disclosure for advertisements run before that period.

In June, Canadians saw a wave of televised attack ads from all sides of the political aisle, notably during NBA games between the Toronto Raptors and the Golden State Warriors.

But unlike those ads, run by political agencies with clear ties to federal parties, these texts are almost completely anonymous.

“We don’t know where it’s coming from or who it’s coming from, and that should be everyone’s first concern,” said Sara Neuert, the executive director of the B.C. Freedom of Information and Privacy Association.

The text sent to B.C. residents makes no reference to iMarketing. The phone number, registered to a 236 area code used in the Interior of B.C., did not respond to calls.

Online, there was no readily available information on the group.

An operations director with the Dogwood Initiative, an environmental advocacy group headquartered in Victoria, purchased the web address “bcstrong.ca” in 2017.

But communications director Christina Smethurst said the domain was purchased as part of their “BC Strong against Kinder Morgan” campaign.

The Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of B.C. had not received any complaints about the texts when contacted Wednesday.

Anna Esselment, an associate professor of political science at the University of Waterloo, said texts such as this are becoming an increasingly common way of reaching Canadian voters.

“This all works toward the main goals of identifying supporters, targeting them with key messages that resonate with them throughout a campaign, and mobilizing them to vote on election day,” she wrote in a statement to Postmedia.

In Canada, political parties are exempt from clauses in anti-spam legislation, although these protections don’t apply to third-party companies.

Colin Bennett, a professor of political science at the University of Victoria specializing on the social impact of new communication technologies, also received the text.

He said it is a sign of how political parties and attached firms use new technologies to skirt campaign restrictions.

“The technology has overtaken the rules we have in place,” said Bennett.

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