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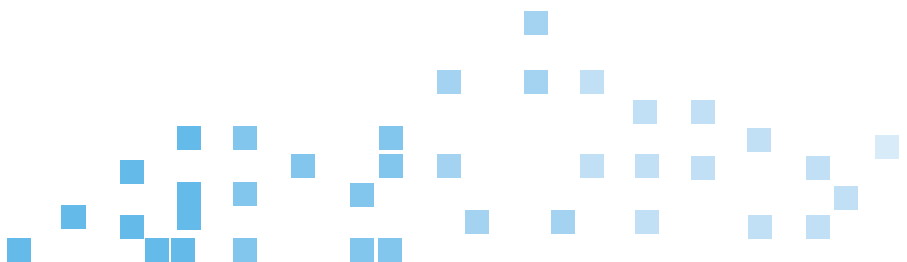
# CRACKING THE QUEBEC CODE IN 45 MINUTES

The 7 keys  
to succeed  
in Quebec

 LES ÉDITIONS DE  
L'HOMME

CHAPTER 1

# BREAKING THE QUEBEC CODE



Companies with a marketing strategy specific to Quebec have greater success than those that mechanically apply the strategies that have worked for them in the rest of Canada or in other countries.

Some have succeeded in cracking the Quebec Code by adapting their offerings to the needs and expectations of Quebec's clientele; others have failed to grasp the Quebec reality.

## **Adapt or perish**

"There are two basic truths in marketing. First, consumers buy the same products in every society. Second, consumers do not buy the same products in every society," says Alan Middleton, former executive director and professor of marketing at the Schulich School of Business at York University in Toronto. Middleton was also vice-president of the leading global marketing agency J. Walter Thompson. He is a world-renowned brand specialist who has worked and taught in several countries.

What are we to do with a self-contradictory statement like Middleton's? "Research," he answers. "If you're selling laundry detergent, cultural differences aren't that important, since the whole world washes their clothes in the same way. Demographic data are definitely more important for that kind of product."

"Cultural differences, however, are extremely important in the food industry, the beverage industry, the savings and financial vehicles industry, to take just a few examples," he says. "To find out whether Quebec is a different market for your business, you need to go find the answers yourself and do the necessary research." That's what Middleton tells the many marketing specialists who seek his consulting services.

Companies must adapt to the specificities of each market. Consumers purchase the same products, but they don't necessarily use them in the same way or for the same reasons.

Jean-Marc Léger remembers an encounter with the president and senior management of a major Canadian food retailer experiencing the same difficulties penetrating the Quebec market after acquiring a prestigious banner—even though the banner was homegrown. "They didn't understand the Quebec difference," Léger

says. “They even argued that their concept was perfect, but that Quebecers just couldn’t execute it properly. They were way off base.”

“We had to explain—using numbers—the Quebec difference,” he says. Quebecers like to cook their own food, prefer specialty shops to department stores, are fond of their Jean Coutu pharmacy chain, and use more fliers and savings coupons. They are more spontaneous shoppers and like to spend money on special treats. Food isn’t a commodity in Quebec; it’s a part of the lifestyle.

After several different attempts, the directors decided to re-launch the Quebec brand, and they succeeded. They did better than the directors of Target, who failed to adapt to the Quebec/Canada difference and were obliged to close their 133 stores just two years after opening them. Money talks.

Of course, it isn’t a universal law that you need to understand the Quebec difference in order to succeed. Apple, for example, does very well in Quebec with a unique formula that has been widely successful. But then again, Apple is Apple. Not every brand can be the strongest in the world.

Marc Poulin is former president and CEO of Sobeys and its parent company, Empire Company Limited. Sobeys is the second-largest chain of supermarkets in Canada, behind Loblaws, with more than 1,500 stores and over \$27 billion in revenue in 2020. Poulin has also cracked the Quebec Code and adapted to the reality of Quebec. “There’s more openness to discovery in Quebec, and our clients purchase a wider variety of products,” he says.

Sobeys has always focused on decentralization so it can meet the needs of different Canadian markets. “It’s hard for someone from Nova Scotia [where the company is headquartered] or Ontario to understand the differences between the country’s regions,” says Poulin. “To be honest, most people don’t even try.”

Quebecers tend to think that they’re the only ones who are different. In fact, each market has its particularities, and Canada comprises a multitude of different markets.

The Quebec division of Sobeys bears all the characteristics of a head office, with its own president and vice-presidents of marketing, human resources, finance and sales. Its strong results have made it one of Sobeys’ most successful divisions, which is probably

why, in 2019, four of the company's six most senior executives in Canada (including Poulin) were from Quebec.

Sobeys uses various brand names to help it adapt to different markets. The 285 Quebec stores operate under the names IGA and IGA Extra, while the Ontario banners are called Sobeys, Foodland and Price Chopper.

While corporate stores dominate in the rest of the country, many Quebec stores are owned by independent retailers. "These owners are closer to their community, and that makes it easier to adapt our offerings," says Poulin.

A decentralized model, the presence of independent retailers and a distinct language for Quebec operations have helped promote "a sensitivity to the differences," says Poulin. Each IGA supermarket stocks a range of 45,000 products. Poulin estimates that 60% of the selection is similar in all the distributor's Canadian stores, but 40% of products sold in Quebec aren't found elsewhere. "Don't bother looking for Chinese fondue in Ontario," he says, "but it's a big seller in Quebec."

This also applies to the much broader selection of soft cheeses in Quebec (Canadians from other provinces prefer firm cheeses) and French-style cuts in its meat departments. Also, "Quebec cares more about bread and pastries than the rest of the country," he says.

"Generally, you'll find less variety in Quebec supermarkets. There are fewer flavours of Jell-O on the shelves," he says. "On the other hand, there is a larger selection of perishable goods: fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy products and so on."

Quebec shoppers buy more 35% whipping cream, small cakes, cookies with nuts and four-litre jugs of water. They also purchase more low-fat products, weight-loss products, women's cosmetics and lottery tickets.

According to the president of Sobeys, the Quebec market is more open to new experiences and discoveries. "That's a dimension that's less present in English Canada. There are foodies in English Canada, but they are proportionally fewer of them."

Chef Ricardo Larrivéé has carefully studied the culinary differences that exist across the regions of Canada. He found that residents of British Columbia tend to prefer Asian cuisine and

organic foods and consume less meat. Albertans spend more on food, and enjoy red meat, and men are more involved in food shopping. Ontarians prefer Caribbean flavours, bring their lunch to work and text more during meals. Residents of the Atlantic provinces eat earlier in the day, feel less comfortable in the kitchen and prefer food that is less expensive and easier to make.

Above all, Canadians want comfort food, meals that are simple and hearty, but also tasty. People in British Columbia opt for spaghetti, people in the Prairies prefer stews and soups, those in the Atlantic provinces choose pizza and Quebecers are partial to lasagna.

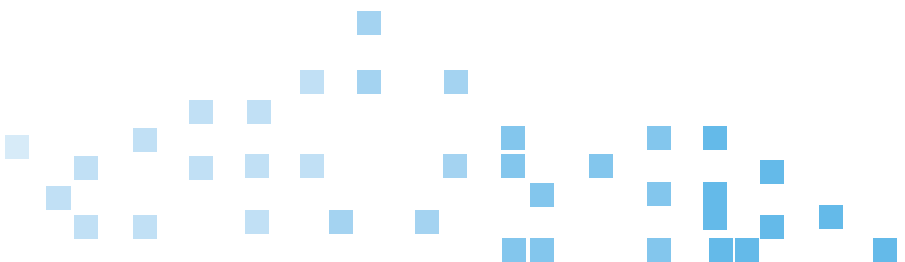
Marc Poulin has found that Quebecers spend more per household on food, even though their available income after taxes is lower than the national average. “When you take into account economic and financial factors, there is a significant difference between the Quebec market and other Canadian markets,” he says.

Finally, the Quebec market is fairly homogenous. “There are many more differences between the Toronto and London markets, for example, than there are between Montreal and Quebec City,” he says.

CHAPTER 2

# THE SOURCE CODE

Discovering the seven  
identity traits



To crack the Quebec Code and really understand Quebecers, we decided to take the innovative approach of using semiometry, a quantitative method for analyzing words and their associated emotions. This technique allowed us to identify key words and assess the sensibility that lies behind an individual's attitudes and behaviours. Many of the 400 words tested have a different emotional charge for French Quebecers and English Canadians, and they revealed to us the value systems of the individuals surveyed.

**Which of the following 15 words do you find most positive?**  
*Tenderness, morals, duty, God, foreign, resourcefulness, sensual, certainty, marriage, soldier, emotion, caution, tolerance, saving and warm.*

Before reading the next paragraph, select the five words that seem most positive and jot them down.

If you chose *tenderness, warm, duty, resourcefulness, emotion, tolerance* or *sensual*, you have an essentially French personality. However, if you had a more positive reaction to the words *saving, morals, marriage, God, soldier* or *foreign*, you have more of an anglophone personality. The words *certainty* and *caution* are rated equally by everyone. We are not suggesting that English Canadians react negatively to *tenderness* or *warm*, for instance, but that they tend to mark them less positively than francophones.

We expected that other words, like *desire, pride, dream, carnal, seduction* and *joie de vivre*, would be highly valued by French Quebecers—meaning that these words are perceived more favourable by French Quebecers than by English Canadians.

We also expected that words like *God, law, individualistic, sacrifice* or *forgiveness* would be highly valued in English Canada.

The study confirmed both of these expectations.

But our semiological analysis delivered a few surprises. For instance, the words *wealth, money, win, detachment, distrust*,



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