



Cracking the code

David Murphy gets the low-down
on the 'culture code' from the
man who invented the concept,
Clotaire Rapaille.

In his book, *The Culture Code*, the renowned cultural anthropologist and marketing expert Clotaire Rapaille reveals the techniques he has used to improve profitability and practices for dozens of Fortune 100 companies. By any stretch of the imagination, his methods are unconventional. But they work, enabling Rapaille to uncover deep consumer insights that he claims conventional market research techniques cannot unearth.

First imprint

Rapaille's technique relies on enabling consumers to go back to their childhoods and recall their first imprint of a brand or product category. He says the idea came from working with children 30 years ago, when he discovered that the first time a child gets the meaning of a word imprinted in his mind, it creates a reference system in the brain that he will use for the rest of his life.

Rapaille works with groups of around 20 people at a time in what looks, at first glance, very much like a focus group. But, he insists, "It is not a focus group. We don't just let people talk and believe what they say. We guide them through a three-hour process in order to go back to their first imprint of what they are trying to understand. We lie them down on the floor and guide them back to when they were kids."

Ah, so not a focus group, but more of a hypnotherapy session?

"No" says Rapaille. "We don't need hypnosis, because people are ready to go there. They remember their first experiences and emotions, and this is what we want, because there is no imprint without emotion." These 'imprints' then form the basis of the 'code' for the brand or the category in question. The code may differ from one country to another, but once in possession of the code, the brand owner can use this to market the brand in a way which will resonate with consumers in each country."

"The code is the aim of the system, the explanation of why people do what they do," says Rapaille. "Once we understand the code in a given culture, we can activate the reference system and people will feel good about it."

Dead or alive?

To illustrate how this works in practice, Rapaille cites the example of cheese. He says, "When we asked people in France to go back to their first imprint of cheese, people wrote tons of stories. Now when we looked at the stories, we realised that for French people, the code for cheese is 'alive'. When you understand that, the concept of a young, old or mature cheese makes sense. So you take the word 'cheese' in the stories and replace with 'baby', 'animal', anything that is alive, and the stories work.

"In America, they see the cheese as dead, which is why they wrap it in plastic (the body bag) and put it in the fridge (the morgue)." If you're thinking that Rapaille is a somewhat unconventional thinker, you could be forgiven. He admits that when he started propounding his theories more than 20 years ago, he had to work hard to secure his first briefs.

"It was not easy," says Rapaille. "When I went to see Procter & Gamble and explained my theory, they said, 'This is weird, we have never done anything like this.'" But they decided to give Rapaille the chance to prove himself, and since that first piece of work, he has delivered 35 codes for the company.

One of these was for Folger's Coffee, which is now one of the most successful coffee brands in the US. Procter & Gamble wanted to know what US consumers' first imprint of coffee was. Thanks to Rapaille, they discovered that it was not the taste, since few young children drink coffee, but rather, the aroma. "Everyone was positioning coffee on taste, but we discovered that the first imprint is the aroma, and it's a very positive imprint," says Rapaille. "Mom making breakfast, the child happy and safe at home. We wanted to own the idea of aroma, so from that moment on, the positioning for the brand was: 'aroma, aroma, aroma.'"

Rapaille says that a code can be discovered in as little as four to six weeks, but concedes that sometimes there is no code to discover. French consumers, for example, have no reference system for the huge pick-up trucks that American consumers are so fond of. Sometimes it's a question of finding the right word. In one project for Shell, Rapaille tried to take consumers back to their first imprint of oil, without success. "But when we started talking about petrol, everyone remembered the smell, and it brought back memories of going on vacation with their father," he says. "Sometimes we don't have the right word, but when we find it, we get somewhere."

Global codes

According to Rapaille, some codes are more global than others. Technology is one example. "If you look at something like a mobile phone, that can go global very quickly," he says. "Kids in Africa want a cell phone just like those in Finland or Scotland. The same goes for a colour TV. Who wouldn't want one?"

For other product categories, however, the codes need to be defined on a country-by-country basis. This applies to food, and, says Rapaille, it is especially true of beauty products.

Rapaille says his techniques can be applied to political and social research, citing one project where he discovered that a high rate of teenage pregnancy in parts of the US was not linked, as previous wisdom suggested, to sex, but rather, to crime. The more likely a teenage girl was to be murdered in a given area, the higher the rate of teenage pregnancies. "It had nothing to do with sex, it was more about wanting their genes to survive," says Rapaille.

He believes that traditional market research can learn from his techniques. He says, "Traditional market research checks what it knows already. What I do is a discovery. If you take the teenage pregnancy example, all traditional market research would do is check the relationship between pregnancy and sex. What I do is breakthrough thinking, discovering a completely new angle and direction. Market research needs to do more of this." ■