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# Know the Codes

Why We Act, Buy, and Love as We Do



By: Clotaire Rapaille



2404032006

For Americans, it's a gallop. For Europeans, it's a march. For Jeep, it was a breakthrough.

In the late 1990s, the Jeep Wrangler was struggling to regain its place in the American market. Once in a category all its own, it had been supplanted by scores of SUVs, most of which were bigger, more luxurious, and better suited to soccer moms. Chrysler had reached a crossroads with the Wrangler and gave serious thought to a major overhaul.

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When I began working with Chrysler on the Jeep Wrangler in the late 1990s, the company's management was understandably suspicious about my approach to learning consumer preferences. They'd done extensive market research and had asked dozens of focus groups hundreds of questions. I walked through the door with a bunch of different approaches and they said to themselves, "What is this guy going to give us that we don't already have?"

The people at Chrysler had indeed asked hundreds of questions; they just hadn't asked the right ones. They kept listening to what people said. This is always a mistake. As a result, they had theories about moving the Wrangler in multiple directions (more luxurious, more like a traditional car, without removable doors, enclosed rather than convertible, and so on) with no clear path to follow. The Wrangler—the classic consumer Jeep—verged on losing its distinctive place in the universe of automobiles, becoming, for all intents and purposes, just another SUV.

When I put groups of consumers together, I asked them different questions. I didn't ask them what they wanted in a Jeep; I asked them to tell me about their earliest memories of Jeeps. Respondents told me hundreds of stories, and the stories had a strong recurring image—of

being out on the open land, of going where no ordinary car could go, of riding free of the restraints of the road. Many people spoke of the American West or the open plains.

I returned to those wary Chrysler executives and told them that the Code for Jeep in America is HORSE. Their notion of turning the Wrangler into just another SUV was ill-advised. SUVs are not horses. Horses don't have luxury appointments. Horses don't have buttersoft leather, but rather the tough leather of a saddle. The Wrangler needed to have removable doors and an open top because drivers wanted to feel the wind around them, as though they were riding on a horse.

The executives weren't particularly moved. After all, they had vast research that told them consumers said they wanted something else. Maybe people once thought of Jeeps as horses, but they didn't want to think of them that way any longer. I asked them to test my theory by making a relatively minor adjustment to the car's design: replacing the square headlights with round ones. Why? Because horses have round eyes, not square ones.

When it turned out that it was cheaper to build the car with round headlights, the decision became easier for them to make. They tested the new design and the response was instantly positive. Wrangler sales rose and the new "face" of the Wrangler became its most prominent and marketable feature. In fact, the car's logo has incorporated its grille and round headlights ever since. There are even Jeep fan 2 clubs that distribute T-shirts to their members bearing the legend "Real Jeeps have round headlights."

Meanwhile, the company began to advertise the car as a "horse." My favorite ad shows a child in the mountains with a dog. The dog falls off a cliff and clings precariously to a tree. The kid runs into a nearby village for help. He passes sedans, minivans, and SUVs until he comes upon a Jeep Wrangler. The Wrangler scales the treacherous mountain terrain and its driver rescues the dog. The kid hugs the dog and then turns to thank the driver—but the Jeep is

already heading back down the mountain, just like an old Western hero heading off into the sunset upon his steed. The campaign was a smash.

Bolstered by its American success, Chrysler hired me to discover the Code for the Wrangler in Europe. Respondents in both France and Germany saw Wranglers as reminiscent of the Jeeps American troops drove during World War II. For the French, this was the image of freedom from the Germans. For the Germans, this was the image of freedom from their darker selves. Repeatedly, the people in these countries told me stories about how the image of a Jeep gave them a sense of hope, reminding them of the end of difficult times and the dawn of better days. I returned to Chrysler and told them that the Code for the Jeep Wrangler in both countries was LIBERATOR.

With the news of the Code, Chrysler launched new campaigns in France and Germany. Here, though, instead of positioning the car as a horse, they stressed the Jeep's proud past and the freedom gained from driving a Wrangler. These campaigns were also tremendously successful, expanding market share for the Wrangler in both countries.

By this point, Chrysler's executives no longer doubted my approach. They'd come to appreciate the power of the Culture Code.

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For Ritz-Carlton, the revelation came unexpectedly, via...toilet paper. When I began to consult for this company, I shocked them by telling them that the work they needed to do to improve customer satisfaction had to begin in the bathroom. Of course they thought I was delirious, but they heard me out.

If you ask most people why they buy the toilet paper they do, they will say, "Because it is soft and because it is on sale." They have no idea that the Code for toilet paper might be anything but strictly utilitarian. They are wrong. As with Jeep, my work with consumers to crack the

Code for toilet paper revealed something powerful and unexpected about Americans' first imprint of a familiar product.

As with Jeep, my work with consumers to **crack the Code** for **toilet paper** revealed something powerful and unexpected about **Americans' first imprint** of a **familiar product**.

For American parents, toilet training is taken very seriously. For some, toilet training is considered so essential that they start the process not long after their child's first birthday. And, regardless of when they start, parents support a small industry of books, videos, and even psychologists who focus on the task. (A current controversy in the field involves the idea of the "diaper-free" baby, who may be toilet trained as early as eight months old!) Toilet training has significant social consequences: it affects everything from playdates to car trips to acceptance in preschool. There is also, of course, the stirring sense of liberation that comes when mothers and fathers realize they no longer need to change diapers.

For the American child himself, however, the completion of toilet training triggers a different response. Once he can use the toilet by himself—or, more specifically, use the toilet and toilet paper by himself—a remarkable thing happens. The child can now close the bathroom door, maybe even lock it, and reject his parents. And, amazingly, he will be praised for doing so. His parents are proud of him for not needing them anymore. They smile and applaud him. Sometimes they even buy him presents.

This imprint is fully associated with the use of toilet paper rather than the use of the toilet itself. In the early years, using the toilet still requires a parent to come in—or to sit there with the child until she is finished—to wipe up afterward. It is only after the child is adept at using toilet paper that she can be free behind the bathroom door. Free, and without guilt, since she has the full endorsement of the authority figures in her life.

This imprint is so strong in the American culture that the Culture Code for toilet paper is INDEPENDENCE.

For Ritz–Carlton, this meant a huge opportunity to cater to their guests in the one room of the house (or suite) that signifies complete privacy and independence. Why not have a phone in the bathroom? A notepad and pen to take notes? Why stop there—why not make the bathroom comfortable, spacious, and independent of the hotel suite? Merely functional, a bathroom is forgettable. A bathroom that is a fully equipped and independent retreat from the world, however, is right on Code. Indeed, if you look to the new homes being built in prosperous neighborhoods today, you will see the same effect. Bathrooms are growing ever larger, with formerly luxury appointments now standard—sunken bathtubs, double sinks, televisions, phone jacks, and always, always, a door to lock out the world.

The reason? The Codes.

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The Culture Code is the unconscious meaning we apply to any given thing—a car, a type of food, a relationship, even a country—via the culture in which we are raised. The American experience with Jeeps is very different from the French and German experience because our cultures evolved differently (we have strong cultural memories of the open frontier; the French and Germans have strong cultural memories of occupation and war). Therefore, the Codes—the meanings we give to the Jeep at an unconscious level—are different as well. The reasons for this are numerous (and I will describe them in the next chapter), but it all comes

down to the worlds in which we grew up. It is obvious to everyone that cultures are different from one another. What most people don't realize, however, is that these differences actually lead to our processing the same information in different ways.

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My journey toward the discovery of cultural codes began in the early 1970s. I was a psychoanalyst in Paris at the time, and my clinical work brought me to the research of the great scientist Henri Laborit, who drew a clear connection between learning and emotion, showing that without the latter the former was impossible. The stronger the emotion, the more clearly an experience is learned. Think of a child told by his parents to avoid a hot pan on a stove. This concept is abstract to the child until he reaches out, touches the pan, and it burns him. In this intensely emotional moment of pain, the child learns what “hot” and “burn” mean and is very unlikely ever to forget it.

The combination of the experience and its accompanying emotion creates something known widely as an imprint, a term first applied by Konrad Lorenz. Once an imprint occurs, it strongly conditions our thought processes and shapes our future actions. Each imprint helps make us more of who we are. The combination of imprints defines us.

One of my most memorable personal imprints came when I was a young boy. I grew up in France, and when I was about four years old, my family received an invitation to a wedding. I'd never been to one before and I had no idea what to expect. What I encountered was remarkable. French weddings are unlike weddings in any other culture I know. The event went on for two days, nearly all of which was spent around a large communal table. People stood at the table to offer toasts. They climbed on the table to sing songs. They slept under the table and (as I later learned) even seduced one another under the table. Food was always available. People drank le trou Normand, a glass of Calvados that allowed them to make room for more food. Others simply went to the bathroom to vomit so they could eat more. It was an amazing thing for a child to see, and it left a permanent imprint on me. Forevermore, I would associate weddings with gustatory excess. In fact, the first time I went to a wedding in America, I was taken aback by how sedate it was in comparison. Recently, my wife (who also grew up in France) and I held the kind of multiday feast that meant "wedding" to both of us.

Every imprint influences us on an unconscious level. When the work of Laborit crystallized this for me, I began to incorporate what I had learned from him into my clinical work in Paris, most of which was being done with autistic children (in fact, Laborit led me to the theory that autistic children do not learn effectively because they lack the emotion to do so). The subject of imprinting also formed the foundation of the lectures I gave during this time. After one particular lecture at Geneva University, the father of a student approached me.

"Dr. Rapaille, I might have a client for you," he said.

Always intrigued at the possibilities offered by another case, I nodded with interest. "An autistic child?"

"No," he said, smiling. "Nestlé."



At the time, focused on clinical and scholarly work, I barely understood what the word “marketing” meant. I therefore couldn’t possibly imagine what use I would be to a corporation.

This offer [with Nestlé] was **a chance**  
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“Nestlé? What can I do for them?”

“We are trying to sell instant coffee in Japan, but we aren’t having as much success as we would like. Your work on imprints might be very helpful to us.”

We continued to talk and the man made me an extremely attractive offer. Not only were the financial terms considerable, but there was something promising about a project like this. Unlike my work with autistic children, where progress was painfully slow, this offer was a chance to quickly test theories I had developed about imprinting and the unconscious mind. This offer [with Nestlé] was a chance to quickly test theories I had developed about imprinting and the unconscious mind. It was an opportunity too good to pass up. I took a sabbatical and went off on my new assignment.

My first meeting with Nestlé executives and their Japanese advertising agency was very instructive. Their strategy, which today seems absurdly wrong but wasn’t as obviously so in the 1970s, was to try to convince Japanese consumers to switch from tea to coffee. Having spent some time in Japan, I knew that tea meant a great deal to this culture, but I had no sense of what emotions they attached to coffee. I decided to gather several groups of people together

to discover how they imprinted the beverage. I believed there was a message there that could open a door for Nestlé.

I structured a three-hour session with each of the groups. In the first hour, I took on the persona of a visitor from another planet, someone who had never seen coffee before and had no idea how one “used” it. I asked for help understanding the product, believing their descriptions would give me insight into what they thought of it.

In the next hour, I had them sit on the floor like elementary school children and use scissors and a pile of magazines to make a collage of words about coffee. The goal here was to get them to tell me stories with these words that would offer me further clues.

In the third hour, I had participants lie on the floor with pillows. There was some hesitation among members of every group, but I convinced them I wasn’t entirely out of my mind. I put on soothing music and asked the participants to relax. What I was doing was calming their active brainwaves, getting them to that tranquil point just before sleep. When they reached this state, I took them on a journey back from their adulthood, past their teenage years, to a time when they were very young. Once they arrived, I asked them to think again about coffee and to recall their earliest memory of it, the first time they consciously experienced it, and their most significant memory of it (if that memory was a different one).

I designed this process to bring participants back to their first imprint of coffee and the emotion attached to it. In most cases, though, the journey led nowhere. What this signified for Nestlé was very clear.

While the Japanese had an extremely strong emotional connection to tea (something I learned without asking in the first hour of the sessions), they had, at the most, a very superficial imprint of coffee. Most, in fact, had no imprint of coffee at all.

Under these circumstances, Nestlé’s strategy of getting these consumers to switch from tea to coffee could only fail. Coffee could not compete with tea in the Japanese culture if it had such weak emotional resonance. Instead, if Nestlé was going to have any success in this market at all, they needed to start at the beginning. They needed to give the product meaning in this culture. They needed to create an imprint for coffee for the Japanese.

If I could somehow “decode” elements of culture to discover the emotions and meanings attached to them I would learn a great deal about human behavior.

Armed with this information, Nestlé devised a new strategy. Rather than selling instant coffee to a country dedicated to tea, they created desserts for children infused with the flavor of coffee but without the caffeine. The younger generation embraced these desserts. Their first imprint of coffee was a very positive one, one they would carry throughout their lives. Through this, Nestlé gained a meaningful foothold in the Japanese market. While no marketer will likely ever be able to convince the Japanese to abandon tea, coffee sales—nearly nonexistent in 1970—now approach half a billion pounds per year in Japan. Understanding the process of imprinting—and how it related directly to Nestlé’s marketing efforts—unlocked a door to the Japanese culture for them and turned around a floundering business venture.

It did something much more important for me, however. The realization that there was no significant imprint for coffee in Japan underscored for me that early imprinting has a tremendous impact on why people do what they do. In addition, the fact that the Japanese did not have a strong imprint for coffee while the Swiss (Nestlé is a Swiss company) obviously

did made it clear that imprints vary from culture to culture. If I could get to the source of these imprints—if I could somehow “decode” elements of culture to discover the emotions and meanings attached to them—I would learn a great deal about human behavior and how it varies across the planet. This set me on the course of my life’s work. I went off in search of the Codes hidden within the unconscious of every culture.

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When a man and a woman have a child, they have a little human being rather than a bird, a fish, or an alligator. Their genetic code dictates this. When an American man and an American woman have a child, they have a little American. The reason for this is not genetic; it is because a different code—the Culture Code—is at work.

For example, “the sun” in French is le soleil, a masculine noun, and, for the French, a word closely associated with the Sun King, Louis XIV. The French, who imprint this reference at a young age, perceive the sun as male and, by extension, see males as brilliant and shining. Women, on the other hand, are associated with the moon, la lune, a feminine word. The moon, of course, does not shine by herself; she reflects the light of the sun. We can learn much about the relationship between French men and French women through this observation and the understanding of how French children receive the imprint of these terms.

For Germans, however, these words have nearly opposite meanings. The sun, die Sonne, is feminine, and Germans believe that women are the ones who bring warmth to the world, make things grow, and raise children. German men are the night, the dark, the moon side. Der Mond, “the moon,” is a masculine term. Again, this speaks volumes about the relationships the genders have to each other in this culture and the roles they play in this society.

The simple acquisition of words like “sun” and “moon” can trigger completely opposite imprints among the French and Germans. Therefore, each culture has a different interpretation—a different Code—for these words. All of the different codes for all of the different

imprints, when put together, create a reference system that people living in these cultures use without being aware of it. These reference systems guide different cultures in very different ways.

An imprint and its Code are like a lock and its combination. If you have all of the right numbers in the right sequence, you can open the lock. Doing so over a vast array of imprints has

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profound implications. It brings us to the answer to one of our most fundamental questions: why do we act the way we do? Understanding the Culture Code provides us with a remarkable new tool—a new set of glasses, if you will, with which to view ourselves and our behaviors. It changes the way we see everything around us. What’s more, it confirms what we have always suspected is true—that, despite our common humanity, people around the world really are different. The Culture Code offers a way to understand how.

I have more than three decades of experience decoding imprints for major corporations around the world. I call this decoding process a “discovery”—I have performed more than three hundred—and I have seen these discoveries put to work to my clients’ advantage. More than half of today’s Fortune 100 companies have me on retainer, and corporate response to my findings has validated the accuracy of my work, assuring me that the glasses I have fashioned, the glasses of the Culture Code, offer a new and especially vivid vision of the world *around* us. Over the last thirty years, I have devised and patented a proven, tested method for making discoveries. In my book, *The Culture Code*, I share this method, and some of what I have learned about major world cultures by using it.

My primary intent is to liberate those who read my book. There is remarkable freedom gained in understanding why you act the way you do. This freedom will affect every part of your life, from the relationships you have, to your feelings about your possessions and the things you do, to the attitudes you have about America's place in the world.

The topics I discuss in my book include many of the most significant forces driving our lives: sex, money, relationships, food, fat, health, and even America itself. You will see how participants in the discovery sessions led me to the Codes and how the revelation of the Codes led me to a new understanding of behavior in this country, how it contrasts with behavior in other cultures, and what these differences mean for all of us.

Once you know the Codes, nothing will ever look the same again.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Clotaire Rapaille is the chairman of Archetype Discoveries Worldwide. He is the personal adviser to ten high-ranking CEOs and is kept on retainer by fifty Fortune 100 companies. Dr. Rapaille's unique approach to marketing combines a psychiatrist's depth of analysis with a businessman's attention to practical concerns. His technique for market research has grown out of his work in the areas of psychiatry, psychology, and cultural anthropology. He has been profiled in many national media outlets, including *60 Minutes II* and on the front page of the *New York Times* Sunday Styles section.

This manifesto is excerpted from Dr. Rapaille's book, *The Culture Code: Why People Around the World are Different, And the Hidden Clues to Understanding Us All*. <http://archetypediscoveriesworldwide.com/>

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