

# CLOTAIRE

# RAPAILLE

*PROBING CONSUMERS' INNERMOST FEELINGS ABOUT  
EVERYTHING FROM COFFEE TO POLITICS*

*By Roland Flamini*

There is a generation of older Europeans whose first experience of the United States was a World War II GI—a genial giant who dispensed chocolate and gum and gave rides in his jeep or some other military vehicle. In Clotaire Rapaille's case, it was a tank. He was about four at the time, and the place was Normandy.

He recently described the experience, complete with an imitation of an American accent. "He was a big guy with a helmet, and he had a very strange way of speaking. Maybe he was from Texas. To me, it sounded something like, 'Wa, wa, wa, wa.' I was fascinated." But the soldiers had a war to fight so they put him back on the road and drove away. "As I waved goodbye, I knew that someday, I wanted to be one of those guys."

Some four decades later, Rapaille fulfilled his childhood dream of becoming a U.S. citizen. Today he divides his time between a 19th-century stone house in Tuxedo Park, New York, and a home in Boca Raton, Florida. But most years, he still spends about three months in Normandy, "to clear my mind."

A medical anthropologist by training, Rapaille calls his childhood encounter an "imprint" or "imprinting moment." Such moments form the basis of his method of delving into the covert desires of consumers' hearts and minds for the benefit of car manufacturers, coffee makers, cheese producers, amusement park operators and other major corporations. Oh, and politicians. He was a consultant for the elder George Bush's 1992 presidential campaign. Bush lost, but that may be in part because he didn't follow Rapaille's advice.



In the changing world of market research, Rapaille's "archetype research" is definitely the flavor of the moment. Whereas other market-research methods focus on what consumers want, Rapaille's approach probes consumers' subconscious to discover what they think and feel. That's where the imprint comes in. "For each element in the world, there is an imprinting moment, a first meaningful experience," he explains. "It's the mental connection that you are going to use for the rest of your life." The imprinting moment usually goes back to childhood. "The archetype," he continues, "is the pattern that underlies this imprinting moment." In layman's terms, the archetype is what emerges from a compilation of similar imprinting moments among people of the same culture. Discover these archetypes, Rapaille asserts, and "you can read consumers like a book; you can understand their unconscious 'logic.'"

To illustrate the point, Rapaille likes to tell the story of a request some years ago from Procter & Gamble, maker of Folgers coffee, to determine how Americans really feel about the brew. The imprinting moment, he discovered, occurs when a child is about two. "Your mother is cooking breakfast. Your mother loves you. She is going to feed you. You are happy," he said in an interview with *The New York Times Magazine*. "This is the American code for coffee's aroma: home." For Americans, he says, coffee recalls childhood sensations of cozy domesticity. "I told the people at P&G, 'Don't worry about the taste. You have to own the aroma.' Folgers has been using the study for more than 10 years, and it's still working."

He went on to help design a Folgers commercial that went to the heart of his findings. It showed a young soldier coming home. It is

early morning. He goes straight to the kitchen and opens a vacuum-packed can of coffee. The aroma floats upstairs, waking his mother. Smiling, she says, "He's home."

It was in fact another coffee study—this one done about 30 years ago—that launched Rapaille's career in market research. At the time he was working with autistic children in Geneva, studying why it was that otherwise intelligent children had problems mastering speech. His conclusion: The children lacked an emotional life, and the emotional association is what enables us to retain language. Then Nestlé approached him to do a study on "what would make the Japanese abandon tea and start drinking coffee," as he puts it. At the time his knowledge of market research hovered around zero, but the challenge was intriguing.

After spending some months in Japan, he came up with the data that led to a successful product launch. Other assignments followed from leading French companies, including beauty products firm L'Oréal and automobile manufacturer Citroën. By the mid-'70s he was established in America with his own research organization, Archetype Discoveries, and an enviable list of Fortune 500 clients. Eight years ago, he became a U.S. citizen.

Taking the Frenchman out of France was easier than taking France out of the Frenchman. Whether conducting his own version of focus groups or expounding on his theories to corporate executives, he neither looks nor sounds like the typical American who is the subject of his research. He is thin, intense, with unruly wavy hair and looks younger than his 61 years. An interviewer recently said he sounded vaguely like Inspector Clouseau. And his Tuxedo Park home—built by

a French architect—prominently displays fine busts of Napoleon, Molière and Louis XIV along with those of Julius Caesar and Jefferson.

Born to Norman parents in Paris, Rapaille graduated with a degree in psychology from the Sorbonne. He is usually described as a Jungian, but he says that's not quite accurate. "Freud analyzes the individual's subconscious; Jung probes the collective unconscious; I psychoanalyze cultures," he says. "The archetype is completely preordained by the culture and is common to everyone in a given culture. It's still amazing to me how the French are always French and Americans are always American. Some cultures are psychotic, others are neurotic." He gives

Having a foot in two cultures widens his perceptions, Rapaille feels, although the imprints of basic experiences were already in place when he left France. The Jesuits say if a child comes to them before the age of seven, he or she is theirs for life. "Maybe," he says. "Actually it's the first 10 years or so that are the most important." For example, Rapaille maintains that like every French person, his imprint for cheese is "alive." In France, cheese is sniffed for age, poked for ripeness. "Here, they put cheese in the refrigerator. It's like putting it in the morgue. Cheese is 'dead' in America."

Recent Rapaille investigations have focused on topics as diverse as



## *"FREUD ANALYZES THE INDIVIDUAL'S SUBCONSCIOUS; JUNG PROBES THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS; I PSYCHOANALYZE CULTURES."*

definitions: "A psychotic thinks he is Napoleon and is absolutely convinced that he is right. A neurotic person would like to be Napoleon but knows he can't be. Psychotic people are very happy. The Japanese culture is psychotic. An example of a neurotic culture? The United States."

As Rapaille sees it, Americans are restless, never happy with themselves or with other Americans. "There is more critical feeling toward American culture in America than anywhere else in the world. The key archetype of the American culture is adolescent. Real adolescents have problems in this country because they need grown-ups to guide them and provide discipline, but there aren't any grown-ups. Americans are constantly reinventing themselves. The good thing is that American culture is in constant motion. An adolescent culture means that we have big dreams, big hopes: 'I don't know what I'm going to do but let's do it.' And I love that. That's why this culture appeals to adolescents all over the world."

There's a downside, of course, and Rapaille is too smart not to admit it. "The problem is that there is no effort to plan ahead—and there is no past either. Americans don't care about the past. They want a new future every day. In the U.S., change is always good. In England and in France—in Europe generally—change is unwelcome. France is not an adolescent culture, it's the opposite. The French never want to do anything. They have ideas but ideas are not enough. If you ask them what they've done with their ideas, they respond, 'You mean I was supposed to do something with them?'"

Informed by these perceptions, Rapaille has scored some spectacular successes in the United States, including the research on the stylish and popular Chrysler PT Cruiser. The project involved several sessions of what other marketing pros might call "focus groups" but in Rapaille-speak are known as "imprinting groups." Each group typically consisted of between 20 and 30 "everyday" Americans. Rapaille's team of "archetypologists" led them through a series of relaxation exercises and visualizations aimed at triggering their innermost feelings—in this case, about cars. "We don't believe what people say," Rapaille explains. "We get them to answer in writing. Then we look for patterns, structure, other clues." From these written responses a common thread emerges—or at least that's the idea. The procedure is repeated with other groups until an archetype can be discerned. In the Chrysler case, a prototype design was shown to one group. The improvements introduced by the design team following the interviews turned out to be some of the PT Cruiser's most talked-about features.

genetically modified foods and teenage smoking. By year-end he expects to have completed a study on anti-Americanism throughout the world, financed by a group of leading U.S. corporations. After conducting surveys in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, he concludes that anti-Americanism has rarely, if ever, been so widespread, although the reasons differ widely from one region to another, and even from one country to another.

In Asia, it appears that anti-Americanism is strongest in South Korea, despite the fact that a strong U.S. military force is deployed along the 39th parallel to protect the country from North Korea. "There is a lot of resentment in South Korea, at least partly because of the behavior of some of the U.S. troops," he explains. In Europe, he found that French anti-U.S. sentiment came largely from intellectuals (or "intellectual terrorists," as he likes to call them) whose historical sympathies for the Third World, nonaligned nations and the small against the very large have pitted them against an "imperialist" America.

In Britain, however, the momentum comes from the traditional Left allied with new protest movements against globalization, environmental policies and so on—all of which cast the U.S. in the role of the bad guy. As for anti-Americanism among Arabs, Rapaille says Washington is wasting money trying to influence their views. "It's pointless to tell Arabs life is good in America," he comments. "They know that. Arabs simply resent U.S. policy in the Middle East. Better to concentrate on influencing the French, the Germans and the rest of the Europeans. A relationship with Europe is more important to America."

As the economy becomes more global, Rapaille has seen the scope of his market surveys widen. "We used to do surveys for one product in one country—now the typical survey involves five or six countries," he says. Another trend is studies on people's perceptions of companies themselves. "Corporate surveys are the new thing."

Rapaille also hopes to do more work with banks—a sector that has proved especially frustrating. "Banks are conservative, cautious and very slow to act," he says. "Not long ago, I worked on a survey for two Canadian banks that were considering a merger. I warned the bigger bank that the smaller establishment had a different culture, and that not respecting that difference would create a lot of unhappiness." The bigger bank ignored his advice—"and all the key people in the small bank left." The big bank had understood the problem but acted too slowly. "Mind you," he adds, "They're slow in Canada anyway." ◇