

PULSE ^{OF} THE MARKET [©]



Malcolm E.A. Kaufman
Top Producer
McGuire Partner™

(415) 351-4637

mkaufman@mcguire.com

www.SFpulseofthemarket.com

Buyer Motivations

Part 42

Introduction

Pulse of the Market is one of the many ways that I stay in touch with clients and associates on various aspects of residential real estate on a periodical basis; usually once a month.

The following article was sent to me earlier this month, and when I re-read it within the context of a buyer transaction which will close next week, I felt that it is so powerful that I needed to share it with you in its entirety, rather than dig out pearls and relate them to a bunch of specific real estate transactions. I urge you to read it at least twice, as I did.

May 7, 2000, Sunday *New York Times* Magazine Desk

Does the Smell of Coffee Brewing Remind You of Your Mother By Jack Hitt

What is your deepest thought about, say, coffee? Not Colombian versus Sumatran, latte or espresso; forget that. What I want to know is, when you are thinking about coffee, really thinking, what do you think about? It doesn't really matter. I already know what you think, and besides, you're wrong.

I learned the right answer after visiting the Tuxedo Park mansion of Clotilde Rapaille, the French-born medical anthropologist whose method for mining our covert thoughts has compelled nearly 50 Fortune 100 C.E.O.'s to dig deeply into their treasuries. In a field crowded with tired methods for surveying the desires of the American heart and mind -- scenario planning, observational research, focus grouping, ethnographics, content analysis, motive critiquing and Markov chains -- Rapaille's technique of "archetype research" is a revival of the psychoanalytic methods popular in the 1950's and 1960's. Pioneered by the Viennese psychologist Ernest Dichter, this technique doesn't bother to ask what people want, but why. Early on, Dichter persuaded Esso to forgo traditional descriptions of its product's superiority by tapping into Americans' aggressive motives for owning cars in the first place. Dichter was behind the phrase, "Put a tiger in your tank."



While pollsters and others have long sought to track the anarchic flight of our national whimsy, Rapaille's refinement of Dichter's method has a more ambitious goal, which he compares to a psychoanalytic human genome project. He intends to describe all the lasting characteristics that generate the choices we Americans make, year after year, trend after trend. Call it inner-life profiling.

In the old days (first Clinton administration), polling was used to search for trends in opinions about anything -- lawn mowers, gay adoption, Newt Gingrich, EggBeaters. Rapaille rejects such methods as prehistoric. "That's all content," he said dismissively (which is tough, since he sounds vaguely like Inspector Clouseau). "It will all change next year. What I am doing is a kind of physics. I am trying to uncover the unwritten laws. I am discovering the cultural structure of the American mind."

Rapaille claims he can describe our deepest associations (and for a price, has) with coffee, money, the presidency, cheese, the sun, whiskey, hospital supplies, recycling, barbecue sauce, life insurance agents, NutraSweet, luggage, the abstraction of making a mistake, the forest, a door.

Who are we Americans, deep down? Rapaille believes he has an answer. "I am compiling a database of cultural codes," he said, sitting in a Queen Anne chair beneath the 20-foot ceiling of his 120-year-old home, Lindley Hall. It is now crowded with Rapaille's collection of stately busts of Caesar, Apollo, Napoleon, Moliere. Dressed in a black shirt and tight black pants, he ordered a domestic to fetch us some morning beverages. He ran his hand through a Jeffersonian blast of reddish flyaway hair. Rapaille thinks of himself as a latter-day Amerigo Vespucci, a cartographer and pilot major, bringing maps of a Mundus Novus back to his patrons -- Ford, Procter & Gamble, Seagram, AT&T, General Mills, Birds Eye -- in order to better outfit the next wave of caravels, eager to colonize this place once thought to be dark, unachievable and obscure.

Now, about the coffee.

Rapaille explained that he first discovered the route to our secret feelings about coffee 30 years ago, when he worked in Switzerland with autistic children. Why was it, Rapaille wondered, that these children, who were quite smart, had such difficulty learning language? The answer is now fairly accepted linguistic theory: the children lacked an emotional life, and emotion is understood to be the linguistic glue that keeps meaning alive in our minds. Nearly every word we know has an emotional resonance that, as we grow up, sinks into the unconscious.

With this idea, Rapaille then posited that these sublimated emotional memories occupied a place between each individual's unconscious (Freud) and the collective unconscious of the entire human race (Jung). It is a "cultural unconscious," which is closely associated with language and therefore differs from culture to culture, country to country.

"When a man and woman have a child, they always have a human being," he said. "And when an American man and woman have a child they always have a little American. But there are no genes for 'American.'" So culture is completely acquired.

"There is always a first time we imprint something, and when we do we create mental highways. We make use of these highways all the time and they become unconscious. I realized in Switzerland that it was different from one culture to another.

"There is a little window of time when you are young in which to imprint the idea of 'coffee,'" Rapaille said, "and so coffee in Italy is not the same as coffee in Germany." He laughed quietly to himself; this line gets big yuks in Milan. "And very different in America." In Europe, the aroma of coffee can be smelled on nearly every block; in America, the aroma of coffee is almost uniformly experienced indoors.

"It occurs usually around age 2 in America, when your mother is cooking breakfast," Rapaille said. "Your mother loves you. She is going to feed you. You are happy," Rapaille said. "This is the American code for coffee's aroma: 'home.'" So when you smell coffee, Rapaille said, your mind summons up childhood sensations of cozy domesticity. He later found further evidence to corroborate his finding: an American real estate agent told him that a common trick before entering a house with a client was to brew a pot of coffee because "then it becomes a home." Rapaille said that 10 years ago he presented a more detailed account of this work to the makers of Folger's.

"I told the people at Procter & Gamble, 'Don't care about the taste,'" Rapaille said. "You have to own the aroma. The commercial we designed has a young man in an army uniform arriving home in the early morning. He goes directly to the kitchen and kksstt, opens the package. As the aroma goes upstairs, we see the mother open her eyes, smile and what does she say? She says, 'He's home!'"

Rapaille sipped his fresh-brewed coffee. "Folger's has been using that study for more than 10 years, and it's still working," he said. "So that is what I do. I break the code."

Discovering these codes requires a process not all that different from dream analysis. For instance, Rapaille was asked by a French company to find out how the American mind thought about "cheese" as compared with the French mind. Most researchers would conduct focus groups; they would ask questions and record responses. That would be a mistake, for the responses, Rapaille believes, would reflect back simply what people think they should say: taste, quality, price.

Such straightforward questions -- about cheese or anything else -- are aimed at the cortex, the seat of the intellect. Rapaille directs his queries to what he calls the "reptilian" part of the brain, the home of smells, violence, sex, primal emotion.

"See, I don't believe what people say," he explained, taking me to a room on the second floor. We sat before a Hitachi screen roughly the size of a Volkswagen and watched various tapes of his sessions. Typically, he begins a project by taking a group of about 20 people through a series of word-association games. Rapaille writes the words on a board and then asks the group to identify themes that unite the words. Finally, he has them tell childlike stories based on the concepts appearing on the board. Essentially, he wants to generate lots of little stories. The final session concludes with Rapaille asking his subjects to lie on the floor, some under blankets, some with pillows. In the background, he plays droning massage music for 20 minutes, until the active brain waves of the alert mind calm down to that tranquil moment just before sleep. Having spent the whole day activating their minds with every possible association with "cheese," they are ready to call up the golden nugget Rapaille seeks: the ur-cheese memory.

"I am taking you on a train trip," he says on one of his tapes. On the screen, his playful French accent carries members of the group back to their teenage years and then to childhood. No one speaks or moves. Finally, he asks them to go back to their earliest memory of cheese. It doesn't have to be the first time they tasted cheese, but the first time they consciously experienced it -- got near it, held it, smelled it, touched it. Then, gingerly, he brings them out of the near-slumber and, as with a dream, asks them to write down the story of what they remembered about cheese. He examines all the collected stories, and when he sees repetition in the narrative, he knows he has found the archetypal association.

"In France," he said, switching off the television, "the code for cheese is 'alive.' It is young, mature, old cheese. You smell it to tell the age. When you go to America, cheese is 'dead.' The first impression in America is that smell doesn't matter. Cheese is put in the refrigerator. In France, never. You would not put a cat in the refrigerator because it is alive. But in America, in the refrigerator, in the morgue; you put cheese in plastic like a body bag. It is legally dead, and scientifically dead, by being pasteurized.

"The French company selling the cheese had a French commercial showing a woman smelling the cheese, opening it, poking it, touching the Camembert. You could see fingerprints on it. A love affair. Americans saw this commercial in a test and thought it was disgusting. Americans want safety. They want their cheese dead."

Another cultural contrast can be found in Euro Disney. When it opened, Europeans hated it. The park lost \$1 million a day. Rapaille explained its immediate failure and subsequent success to a shift in understanding the deeper meaning of "freedom" in both places. "Freedom exists on an axis," he said. "There is a second element to it, and in America the other side of freedom is prohibition. They are in tension all the time. Prohibition of alcohol. Today, political correctness." Disney World's Magic Kingdom celebrates the cultural concept of liberty while imposing harsh limits on the place itself. No pets are allowed in the restaurants. No smoking. No drinking. The female staff may not wear miniskirts. In Europe, these limitations prompted disgust.

"Compare that to the French, where they have freedom but no prohibition," he said. "You can't stop the French from doing anything. A dress code? No earrings, no alcohol, no dogs? The result was that no one came. Why? Because in Paris, the other side of freedom is 'privilege.' The French Revolution was not about abolishing privilege but about killing people with privilege so the revolutionaries could have it themselves." Among the major changes Euro Disney made to stem its disastrous losses were special areas for smoking, dogs and drinking. "So you see islands of privilege," Rapaille said. Now the place operates at a profit and is one of Paris's most popular spots.

Rapaille can go on, hiking across the landscape of our associations, uprooting one hidden realm of meaning after another. For Americans, he told me, "trees" are "human beings." We hug them. They are raised in nurseries. They age into "old growth." With this information, he persuaded the Timber Association of California (timber reminded people of the logger's cry, Timber!, which made them think of "killing") to change its name to the California Forestry Association. The group's public imagery ceased to feature fresh-cut logs ("dead bodies") and avoided defenses of clear-cutting ("holocaust"). An ad that showed a man carrying a "baby tree" by the "hair" and planting it by stomping it with his boots was replaced with a woman cradling the burlap diaper of a sapling, planting it with her hands, watering it and promising to return.

Once you understand the Rapaille method, you start noticing just how often in our mediated day some emotional depth charge is set to go off -- whether it's a television commercial, a Clinton speech or a Hollywood film. For years, there was a certain telephone commercial that had me by the throat. I am talking about that damp little melodrama involving a middle-aged black woman sitting in a chair as she receives her first phone call from her son, newly arrived to his dorm in college.

I simply had to watch it. If it came on in a room, I would turn away from what I was doing or whomever I was talking to in order to experience this tiny emotional whippet. Now I see that it wasn't merely the surface sentimentality of the mother-son bond that was plucking my heartstrings. A Rapaille reading would interpret this vignette as an immigrant morality story tailored for the American psyche -- where blackness stood for our country's ongoing sense of striving to better yourself; college was the signifier for having made it. This wasn't sentiment; it was patriotism.

Popular divination is nothing new, of course. But for the longest time, it was considered a kind of mystical art. In the last century, William McKinley's ability to sense shifts in the public mood caused a political foe to note that the president had his ear so close to the ground it was full of grasshoppers.

These days, gut instinct has been replaced by hard science. In the back of the new soft-cover edition of Dick Morris's book, "Behind the Oval Office," he includes nearly 300 pages of polling data, proposed ads and policy suggestions prepared for Clinton in 1995 and 1996. It's apparent that scarcely an adjective fell from the president's lips without being tested for its emotional voltage.

Considering what Clinton survived in recent history, it's hard to argue with polling's efficacy. Although Rapaille, in his own way, will. Even though he admits that Clinton's success can be laid to his talent for staying five minutes behind our collective caprice, Rapaille believes that deeper cultural forces kept Clinton's popularity improbably high. Fortunately for the president, Rapaille said, Americans aren't all that enamored of perfection.

Back in the Bush era, when Americans feared that the Japanese might take over, Rapaille was summoned by a corporate sponsor to find out how the United States could adapt Asian high-efficiency management concepts, like "do it right the first time." "If only we could be more like the Japanese, is what everyone was saying," Rapaille explained as he walked me into the drawing room past a Louis XIV bust illuminated by its own small lamp. Outside, through grand French doors, I could see Lake Tuxedo shimmering on a warm spring day. We sat at a small table and took lunch beneath a wall-size ancient tapestry depicting Solomon's dark brow, contemplative in judgment.

"But what we found was that Americans unconsciously didn't want to do it right the first time," he continued. "Now, the question was, why?" To find the answer, Rapaille and his team set up an experiment with a group of American executives schooled in a management style known as "zero defects." Rapaille told the group to find a way to scale a wall without touching it. If members touched the wall, they would be "dead." He also gave the group instructions for achieving the goal. The Americans ignored the instructions and started screwing up.

"Of course, they immediately died," Rapaille said. "They were so upset. But I told them, 'Look here, in the instructions; what does it say?' And they would complain that they hadn't read the instructions. I would say, 'Too bad, there you have it, you are dead.' But they were so upset, they stayed up all night and designed a new way to solve the problem."

So, Rapaille concluded, Americans might say they want to 'do it right the first time,' but they don't really mean it. Americans like mistakes and actually delight in making them because it means that they can keep on improving. "Zero defects in America," Rapaille said. "This is perfection, and perfection is death. There is nothing else. What Americans want is more breakthroughs. That's why computers are so powerful. Six months later, you can throw yours out because there is a newer one, a better one. Americans love that. The worst thing is when we say, 'It's perfect, the end.' Americans hate that. That's the German attitude. Germans created the standard for beer 300 years ago. It's done. Perfect. So all you do is try to get as close as possible to that perfection. Well, that's completely un-American."

He sipped a glass of red wine and merrily segued into the greatest Rapaillesian character in recent memory.

"Bill Clinton fascinates me," he said. "Americans loved him. Why? Because Clinton made mistakes. It means he was learning something and getting better." Rapaille said that in the late 80's, Lee Atwater, then working for George Bush pre, hired him to do an archetype study of the presidency. Though financing ran out before Rapaille could complete his work, he was able to gather useful material in the word-association sessions.

Participants compared the chief executive to a "movie character"; they said he could "make people see things." From this, Rapaille was able to identify the core emotional nubbin. Fatherhood? Celebration? Nationalism? No, no. The presidency is: "cheap entertainment."

"What does he make, \$200,000 a year?" Rapaille asked. "That's a lot cheaper than Oprah." This code is a problem for the two probable presidential nominees. "Gore is boring," Rapaille said. "This is a real problem. Bush is not very intelligent. But then, who cares? Americans have never been impressed by intellectuals." So Bush's mediocre mind is not nearly the handicap that Gore's leaden personality is. Rapaille gives Bush the edge, but neither one of them interests him much. He openly pines for Bill Clinton the icon (not the politician). Mistakes weren't Clinton's only asset. America's code, according to Rapaille, is built around "hope." That's why Clinton's slogan in 1992 "was simply brilliant," Rapaille said. "I still believe in a place called "hope." He's almost a genius." Clinton had instinctively hit the grand slam of presidential codes.

Mistakes. Cheap Entertainment. Hope. No wonder he's still in office.

Rapaille plans one day to distill the essential elements of the American character in a book. "I have a manuscript called 'Decoding the American Mind,'" he said, which will take his findings and analysis beyond his corporate patrons to the source -- American readers. Although the vast majority of Americans continue to define the national character via real estate metaphors -- frontier, panorama, province -- Rapaille believes that we will ultimately accept his Freudian interpretation of our inner life. For him, it is not a static landscape but something fluid and roiling. "The inner life of America is not a place -- Canada is a place," he explained. "Maybe the best place in the world. But if you are Canadian and you have a dream, you leave. Why? Because America is not a place. It is a dream."

The Real Estate Connection:

In light of such things, I couldn't help revisiting the transaction I referenced at the outset. Why did Susan, who is relocating from Los Angeles, buy a two-level condominium in Cow Hollow when all signs pointed otherwise, even to her? She was leaning towards buying a 2,000 square foot unit in a multi-unit building – all on one level – with lots of space and ample room for her grand piano. Susan originally advised me that "space" was important, desiring an open look (not the less spacious floor-plan she bought). But her choice revealed that it was less important than the green TREES that she is able to see from her new living and dining room. The expert Clotaire Rapaille comments above that "For Americans, 'trees' are 'human beings.'" "We hug them." I think that for Susan trees do represent LIFE, as well as the associated stability, tranquility, and rooting into a new home that would naturally be important to someone leaving a home of over 20 years. Then again, I am not an expert like Rapaille, but I can appreciate his insights and find that the comments in the above article, stimulate my thinking as to buyer motivations in my business. There is a phrase in the real estate business that "buyers are liars," referring to how often they tell agents what they want only to end up buying something very different. I suspect, however, that the "truth", as Rapaille indicates, lies beneath the surface for all of us, in emotional and cultural undercurrents that have become invisible. To me, understanding and benefiting from the competitive landscape requires looking beyond the obvious. I found Rapaille's work to be both validating and enlightening. I hope it does the same for you in your business and personal endeavors.

Malcolm E. A. Kaufman
Top Producer – *McGuire Partner*™
(415) 351 - 4637
mkaufman@mcguire.com
[SFpulseofthemarket.com](http://www.SFpulseofthemarket.com)

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