

Crossing the Cultural Divide: Canada

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Canada is the enigma to the North, not because of its people – English-speaking or French – but because it continues to retain its autonomy.

The U.S. fought two wars with England and, both times, invaded Canada. Yet there were no lasting repercussions, no hatred and no real fear (despite the transcontinental border). Canada was still an English colony, and it was as if the people who lived there decided the incursions hadn't actually had anything to do with them, that it was just something between the U.S. and England.

Ever since the U.S. declared independence, Canada has been stuck between "America" and Europe. Miraculously, the country – confederated in 1867 – has managed to follow a sort of Swiss neutrality from 1776 until today.

Country Of Ambivalence

Oxford's Herbert Nicholas, writing in "The English World," notes "Canadians declined to be 'liberated' [in the War of 1812] and gave a good account of themselves at [the battles of] Niagara and Detroit." Nicholas is writing about Ontario, known as Upper Canada back in 1814. But the most flagrant example of what evolved into the "laid-back" Canadian psyche concerns Québec.

The English took Quebec in 1763 but had the good sense to leave the former French colony its legal system, its schools, its churches and newspapers. When the Americans invited French Canada to join the Revolution, the latter weren't interested. The feeling seems to have been that things weren't so bad under London.

This ambivalence is present today. Quebecers repeatedly elect the separatist Parti Québécois, then vote against separation. Two referenda have been held since 1980 and the P.Q. is gearing up for a third. Last time around, they even claimed citizens of an independent Quebec would be able to keep their Canadian passports (a ploy which made the rest of Canada shake its collective head).

Quebecers love to complain about being treated as "second-class citizens" by Canada's English-speaking majority. At the same time, they go out of their way to show they have nothing against anglos personally (and will often apologize for not speaking better English).

English Canada claims to be exasperated by the continued whining from a province which sets its own policies on everything from health and education to immigration

(and doesn't even recognize English as an official language). At the same time, every time there's a referendum, anglos exhort their compatriots not to leave.

Nix To "America"

Similarly, Canada's anglos and francos both make fun of Americans – for being too loud, too pushy, too proud of themselves – but are incredibly attracted by the U.S. English Canada's best actors and musicians live in Hollywood and American television is omnipresent north of the border. Even more surprising is the fact that some 500,000 Quebecers spend their winters in Florida.

[Note to readers: Canadians bristle at the word "America" as a synonym for the U.S. As do Latin Americans. With reason: we are all "Americans," as seen from Europe or any other continent. Always remember to say "the U.S." or, simply, "the States."]

Immigration since the '60s, and a significantly higher birth-rate among immigrants, has already changed the face of urban Canada. In Montreal, "allophones" – those whose first language is neither French nor English – now outnumber anglophones. (In primary and secondary schools, allophone children outnumber even francophones.) The storied "French-English conflict" will become less and less pertinent with each decade.

Slowly but surely, history is being left behind. Toronto's population now resembles that of Boston or New York in its ethnic make-up; Vancouver's Asian demographic is comparable to San Francisco's. And the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is quietly erasing the border.

Canadians, however, are in no danger of becoming Americans. They will face cultural and economic invasion the same way they dealt with those involving the American army. They'll glance down for a second, hem and haw a bit, and finally say "Well, it all looks very exciting down there but that lifestyle's too fast for me..."

By continuing the Canadian stereotype of humbly and politely avoiding confrontation, Canada will hang on to its autonomy once again.

Canadian Business Culture

Canadians are more sensitive to collective concerns than is the American homo economicus; Americans make Canadians feel European. Fairly extensive government involvement in day-to-day life (free medical care for all, higher education at a reasonable cost, etc.) is normal and, in fact, desirable. Also, a Canadian worker is twice as likely to belong to a union as an American one.

American companies who want to do business in Canada shouldn't expect to implement the same communications and marketing programs they use at home. Media strategy must take note of major regional differences (British Columbia, the Prairies, Ontario, Québec and the Maritimes/Newfoundland are the five main markets). And the ever-present French-English schism means that labels and

documentation should be bilingual in general, definitely so in Quebec, Ontario and New Brunswick.

Business In Quebec

If you're planning to do business in Quebec, meetings may have to be primarily conducted through an interpreter (depending on the size and character of the company involved). As in any cross-linguistic negotiation, it's usually best to bring your own translator if at all possible.

But Quebec can be worth the bother. Francophones have developed a unique culture which incorporates both anglo and Latin values. A Québécois partner can be a better way into France, and Europe in general. Just as some Ontario companies still retain something like ties to the U.K.

Ironically, because of their dual identity, francophones are the ideal cultural link between the anglo America and Latin America. (NAFTA members Chile and Mexico have a combined population of over 115 million.) French-Canadians can play a role as employees of American companies looking South.

Canadian professionals are, on the whole, very well-educated and extremely familiar with U.S. culture. NAFTA has made recruiting them relatively uncomplicated. And there's tremendous interest for work in the States; Canada's official jobless rate has hovered between 7% and 14% for over a decade. (As the Canadian government enjoys fudging the numbers, real unemployment is about double the official figure!)

Setting up a production facility in Canada has also become far more interesting since the implementation of NAFTA. A glance at U.S. census bureau statistics shows exports to Canada in 1994 were \$43 billion, increasing to \$57 billion in 2000. Canadian exports to the U.S. went from \$48 to \$123 billion in the same period. Thus, Canada enjoyed a whopping \$65 billion surplus last year.

Late in 1999, the KPMG consulting group published a study on international business costs after taxes. Due largely to the depreciated Canadian dollar – which has gone from U.S. \$1.05 to \$.63 in less than 25 years – Canada had, on average, a 7.8% advantage over the U.S. That translates into a million dollars in savings for a 100-person firm with approximately U.S. \$13 million in expenses (fixed costs, labor costs, medical insurance, etc.)