

## BOOK EXCERPT

# CRACKING THE CODE

*Clotaire Rapaille has used his learnings about consumer behavior to advise some of the world's biggest marketers. In *The Culture Code*, he suggests that the traits that make us uniquely American (or British, French or Spanish) are shaped by a silent system of cues that influence most aspects of how we behave—and why we choose the products we buy. It's insight that brands are using to understand how to better position their products and their marketing.*

*In this excerpt, Rapaille recounts the ways that brands such as Betty Crocker and GMAC used their understanding of the code to better position their marketing.*



In the American house, the kitchen is the central room where American families gather. Contemporary kitchens include televisions, desks, islands with stools for seating, and other amenities that promote congregating. The kitchen is the heart of the American home because an essential ritual takes place there—the preparation of the evening meal. This is a ritual filled with repetition and reconnection that leads to replenishment. Making dinner is on Code for home.

Having grown up in France, I found it a little surprising when I first visited Americans in their homes. I would often enter the house through a side door or even the garage and walk directly into the kitchen. There I would be told to “help myself” while the meal was prepared in front of me. This was very alien. In France, houses are designed differently and visitors are entertained in another

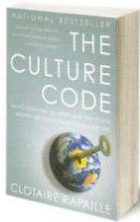


A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGIST POSITS THAT KNOWING HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH AMERICAN CONSUMERS BEGINS WITH **UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL BASES FOR OUR BEHAVIOR**

way entirely. The biggest rooms in a French house are the “stage” areas: the foyer, the living room or salon, and the dining room. Guests will have drinks and coffee in the salon and dinner in the dining room and they will never see the kitchen. This is true even among close friends.

Knowledge of the Code explains a great deal about why “going home” means so much to us, even after our families have moved to a house where we never lived. If home is about return, reconnection, renewal, reunion and other words with the prefix re-, then the physical location means nothing. What is important is that the feelings and family exist wherever you define “home.” Keeping our mementoes, photo albums, and symbols of home life is on Code because these things allow us to return to a sense of home whenever we need it. Throwing out memories to remove clutter is off Code. Having Thanksgiving dinner in your grandmother’s crowded dining room is decidedly on Code while going to a roomy but unfamiliar restaurant for the holiday is not.

For businesses, awareness of the Code offers clear-cut ways to market household products. The Betty Crocker people came to me years ago to discover the Code for the icon of Betty Crocker herself. They believed that the icon



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had outlived its time and that if they understood the unconscious messages Americans received from the icon they could reinvigorate their brand with new symbols. Instead, they learned that the image of Betty Crocker has a very strong positive imprint on the American unconscious. The American Code for Betty Crocker is THE SOUL OF THE KITCHEN. She represents tasty aromas and hot food. She has a very strong place in the American perception of home.

Betty Crocker changed their plans completely. Instead of jettisoning the icon of Betty Crocker, they relaunched it. They gave the “new” Betty Crocker a face that appealed to all races. They gave her a distinctive handwriting and a voice to speak on radio (where she offers homemaking advice).

Selling any household item with the notion that it can become part of a family ritual (anything from popcorn to coffee to laundry detergent) is a valuable way to ignite our affection for home. Cell phone companies offering free calls to family members are on Code because they promote reconnection. An airline or travel agency that offered special packages for family reunions would be right on the mark.

When I worked with GMAC Home Insurance, we learned that at the unconscious level Americans believe that home is where their “stuff” is. We discovered, for instance, that people will pack a box of personal goods during a move, put it in the basement, and then move that same box—never opened—from new home to new home. The content of the box is unimportant (and often unknown). What is important is that the box contains “stuff” and “stuff” has great value in making Americans feel at home. Because of this work, GMAC Home Insurance is exploring a program of preserving family photos—

very important “stuff” —for policyholders. They would keep digital files of these valuable photos and replace them if they are destroyed in a fire. This resonates in a very on-Code way.



### WHAT'S COOKING? ANYTHING?

Like the need for shelter, the biological scheme for dinner is fundamental: All human beings need nourishment and sustenance. But what is the continuum between the biological requirement to eat and the particular cultural scheme in America? Like the notion of home, the concept of dinner is a very powerful one in our culture.

Dinners have a strong ceremonial place in America. That biggest dinner of the year—Thanksgiving dinner—even commemorates the launch of our culture with the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1621. We commemorate holidays and birthdays with large family dinners and the celebration dinner is one of the most common ways to mark an accomplishment like a promotion or a good report card.

Each of these dinners is a major event that can evoke lasting memories. What imprint comes from the everyday dinner, though—the weeknight meal one shares with family (at least occasionally) after a long day of work or school? Kraft, wanting to learn how to make its products synonymous with American meals, was interested in the answer to this question, and commissioned discovery sessions to learn what dinner means in America.



We heard what people think about the average dinner. It was something to prepare quickly. The family rarely sat down to eat together because everyone had such a busy schedule. When they did sit down together, there was often a TV playing. The meal consisted of a takeout pizza or a pre-prepared entrée. Conversation consisted of a fast debriefing on the day and then silence. It was over in fifteen minutes or less.

Certainly, none of this was sur-

prising. Americans, who equate health with movement, have very active lives. We work long hours. We have soccer practices and tennis lessons and book clubs and poker nights to attend. We have three hours of homework or a pile of papers we took home from the office. We have shows to watch and instant messages to write. Where are we supposed to find the time to prepare a nice meal or to linger over it with the clan? I got the sense during these first hour conversations that Americans believed that the family dinner was a quaint element of our past, like sewing circles or ice cream socials.



While Americans might not have family sit-down dinners together very often any longer, these meals have a cherished place in our hearts.

One notion that came up repeatedly [when subjects continued talking about family dinners] was the gathering. “Everyone got to sit around and talk to each other.” “Everyone had a specific place around the table.” “The five of us sat around the cafeteria table and it was the best meal I’d had in a long time.” “When we sat down, it was like someone had cut a huge gaping hole into our kitchen table.” “Everyone would sit around, and there would be huge plates of food in the middle of the table.” The image that showed up in a huge percentage of the stories was the idea of coming together around a table. There is a sense of community generated by this act, the sense that you are surrounded by people who support you and are there for you. You can go out into the world, but when you return for dinner and you sit around the table, you are truly home.

The American Culture Code for dinner is ESSENTIAL CIRCLE.

This notion of a circle expresses itself in multiple ways in the American culture. A common American dining experience is to serve food “family style” where large plates of food are put into the center of the table (creating a circle of sorts, even if the table is rectangular), after which diners pass the plates around the circle to one another so everyone can share. In

addition, dinner completes the circle of the day. You wake up in the morning, you leave the house, you go out to do battle in the world, and then, at dinnertime, you return to the family and close the circle with your loved ones.

Dinner has a very different structure in other cultures. A Japanese family rarely eats dinner together. Commonly, the men work all day and then after work they go out to drink with their friends. When they get home, their wives might serve them a little soup before they go to bed, but this is long after she has fed her children. The notion of the family meal is a relatively foreign concept in Japan. Even when a married couple goes out to dinner with friends, the men and women eat separately.

In China, dinner is all about the food. Food is cooked in multiple rooms in the house (the kitchen, the fireplace, outside, even the bathroom) and it has a hugely prominent place in any Chinese home. Food is hanging, drying and curing everywhere. When the Chinese eat dinner, they rarely speak with one another. Instead, they focus entirely on the food. This is true even with business dinners. One could be in the midst of a spirited conversation about an important deal; when the food comes, all conversation ceases and everyone feasts.

Dinner in England is a much more formal experience than it is in America. The English have very clear rules of behavior at the table, including how one sits while eating, how one uses one's cutlery, and even how one chews. Something one would never see among English diners in a restaurant is the common American practice of offering a taste of the food on one's plate. While Americans see this as collegial, the English see this as vulgar and unsanitary.



### IT'S DINNERTIME AND EVERYONE'S INVITED

Gathering together at dinner, completing the essential circle, is absolutely on Code. The desire for this was stated emphatically in the discovery sessions. Yet if you ask any head of

household about dinnertime in her family, you're likely to hear about one or both parents grabbing something on the way home from a late night at the office, one kid pouring a bowl of cereal for herself, and another heating something in the microwave on his way out the door. This is reality, right? We're very busy Americans.

Equally interesting is what is not implied by the Code. Focus group participants mentioned food itself infrequently. In addition, they put no premium on gourmet quality or long preparation times. Even the woman who referred to her mother as a "great cook" said things "tasted fantastic" even if her mother "just threw something together." The very strong message of the Code is that the circle is the important part of dinner. Food is secondary. That takeout pizza is perfectly fine as long as everyone is eating it together (interestingly, DiGiorno, a Kraft brand, promotes its pizza as being as good as takeout, not as good as homemade). Pizza is, in fact, an ideal, perfect on-Code dinner because it is circular and everyone shares it.

Once they received the Code, Kraft launched a marketing campaign using the catchphrase, "gather around." They even animated the Kraft logo to morph into a family sitting around a dinner table. They positioned themselves as facilitators of the on-Code American dinner experience.

Another thing not implied by the Code is a sense of time. Few participants talked about lingering over dinner with family. Again, the important thing was the circle. The on-Code dinner is a time when everyone can gather around the table and reconnect. A fast meal with the entire family together and the television off is on Code.

An on-Code dinner doesn't need to take place around one's own dinner table. Restaurants that promote bringing the family together are very much on Code. McDonald's did a great job with this when they introduced the Happy Meal. By offering kids something specifically for them, they made it easy for families to eat together, even if the meal itself is something less than elegant. All family restaurants are on Code because they promote gathering the family together for dinner, offer

something for everyone, and create a casual environment that promotes fun and conversation.

Restaurants that promote community tap into the Code in powerful ways. The Melting Pot, a chain of fondue restaurants with nearly 100 locations in the U.S., does an especially good job of this. They seat patrons in booths that simulate a household dining table and all of the food is served in the middle of the table. Fondue is an especially on Code meal because diners are always reaching into the center of the circle to get food. This sense of sharing is even more potent than passing plates around the table.

Products that promote single servings are off Code for dinner, though they are of course not off Code for our busy lifestyles. Kraft takes a two-fold marketing approach with their macaroni and cheese. It sells its Easy Mac brand of single serving packages as an after school snack that kids can make for themselves while it sells its classic Macaroni and Cheese as a dinner that the entire family can enjoy. Stouffer's does an interesting job of keeping the single serving concept on Code. In its recent advertising for Lean Cuisine, it shows a woman bragging to her female friends about the sumptuous low-calorie meal she had the night before. Essentially, by spreading the word about Lean Cuisine, she's inviting these women into her "circle." Even if these friends don't eat dinner together, they form a community when they eat these frozen dinners.



### HOME IS IN OUR HEARTS

We need shelter and we need to eat. As Americans, we elevate these basic requirements to something involving family and ritual. When we think about home, one of the first images to come to mind usually involves a big family meal. When we go home to visit our parents, we go home for dinner. Just as the ritual of making dinner is on Code for home, creating a strong home environment is on Code for dinner, even if, in these busy times, dinner itself comes out of a box. **EM**