

The 36 Keys of the Québécois

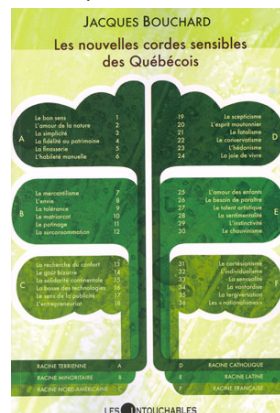
Jacques Bouchard's socio-cultural profile of consumers in Quebec: thirty years later

by Eric Blais

More than thirty years ago, Jacques Bouchard – the “father” of made-in-Quebec advertising – developed a socio-cultural profile of consumers in Quebec called *Les trente-six cordes sensibles des Québécois* (*The 36 keys of the Quebecois*). What began as a speech to Toronto executives in October 1962 about the problem with “Toronto French” advertising became a best-selling book published in 1978 later translated in English (*Differences: How French Canadians live, love and think today*, Les Éditions Heritage Inc., 1980).

Although some observers of Quebec society called Bouchard “a weekend ethnographer” at the time, his approach was a blend of ethnography through participative observation and quantitative data collected by Professor Bruce Mallen.

The model is based on six “vital roots” with six responsive keys each. For example, the rural root (ever wondered why it’s called Habitant soup?) includes the following six responsive keys: common sense, love of nature, simplicity, loyalty to heritage, shrewdness and manual skills.



There is no doubt that Quebec has undergone massive change in the past thirty years. But have Quebecers' fundamental attitudes changed? The

following offers a fresh look at the 36 keys of the Quebecois in 2004 and, importantly for marketers, how they compare to the attitudes of English Canadians.

The Rural Root

Maurice Duplessis – Quebec’s Premier in the 50s – used to say that “they’ll always be at least one farmer in every French-Canadian family.” Although that isn’t the case, many in Quebec wish they lived closer to their rural roots. 77% of Quebecers say they feel the need to be closer to nature compared to only 58% of Canadians in the rest of Canada.ⁱ

1. **Common sense** - Quebecers keep their options open and sit firmly on the fence. 49.4% said yes in the 1995 referendum while 50.6% said no. It’s never black or white. For example, Quebecers are more likely than English Canadians to describe themselves as daring. Paradoxically, they’re also more likely to say they’re risk averse.
2. **Love of nature** – Quebec has the highest percentage of hunters and fishermen in the world relative to its population. “Cottage Country” might be big in Ontario but ask Canadians if they prefer country life over city life and 67% of Quebecers say yes compared to 46% of Ontarians.ⁱⁱ
3. **Simplicity** – Historically Quebecers had to be satisfied with little and led simple lives. Not so anymore. Over a quarter claim to live a fairly hectic lifestyle. Only 16% say so in English

The 36 keys of the Québécois

Canada.ⁱⁱ The simplicity message will still resonate with Quebeckers. Many wish a return to a simpler life. 82% of Quebeckers feel the need to take measures to simplify their lives compared to 70% in English Canada.ⁱⁱ

4. **Loyalty to heritage** – 66% of Quebeckers feel the need to demonstrate and sustain their traditions and symbols compared to 47% of English Canadians.ⁱ They're also keen to understand their roots. Give Quebeckers access to the internet and they become genealogists.
5. **Shrewdness** – Bouchard claimed that Quebec men love to be cunning and women love to bargain. They certainly use coupons more so than English Canadians but they don't appear to think of themselves as either bargain hunters (34% in French Canada vs. 43% in English Canada) or as being smart shoppers (29% in French Canada vs. 35% in English Canada). They do however feel a greater need to evaluate the quality and value of the products they buy (75% in French Canada vs. 57% in English Canada)ⁱ Good news for consumer reports.
6. **Manual skill** – Quebeckers had to be self-sufficient to survive. Fixing almost everything with a piece of haywire. Today, they don't appear too keen to fix things around the house. 22% say that they only do DIY projects if they absolutely have to compared to 15% of English Canadians.ⁱⁱ They're also less likely than English Canadians to own power tools.ⁱⁱ

The Minority Root

Quebeckers are a minority three times over; as Canadians in North America, as

Quebeckers in Canada and as francophones in the French speaking world.

7. **An inferiority complex** – The constant need for revalorization seems a thing of the past. Quebeckers are successful in their own right on the world stage and they know it. The best antidote to feeling like an eternal loser? Québec Inc., le Cirque du Soleil and Céline.
8. **The nest egg** – Quebeckers were savers “keeping cash in an old woolen sock”. That's changed. The personal saving rate is lower in Quebec than in the rest of Canada. For many, living in the moment means not worrying about the future. This explains in part why there is a greater proportion of the population in Quebec with less than \$50K in their RRSPs than anywhere else in Canada.ⁱⁱⁱ
9. **Envy** – Bouchard referred to the “almost-made-its” who are envious of those who have succeeded. Quebeckers can be critical of each other but there's no evidence that they're particularly jealous of one another.
10. **Narrow-mindedness** – Duplessis also said that “French Canadians have little room in their heads for other people's ideas”. The Premier would struggle to explain why 89% of Quebeckers agree that homosexuals are the same as everyone else while only 73% think so in Ontario.^{iv} Or why they're more likely to support euthanasia than other Canadians.^v Quebeckers are generally more tolerant and open-minded on a variety of issues than English Canadians.
11. **The matriarchy** – Bouchard claimed that matriarchy is characteristic of

The 36 keys of the Québécois

minority groups. He painted a portrait of Quebec women as running the household, holding the purse strings and calling the shots on all family-related matters. They still do but many are doing so in a radically different family structure. Asked if they agree that “even though men have changed a lot, women are still the main nurturer”, only 53% of French Canadians agree vs. 80% of English Canadians.ⁱ

12. **Love of gossip** – There might be less chit chat over the fence or at the office but Quebeckers always have something to tell. They call radio stations and they chat online. They're also obsessed with the lives of their stars, big and small. No wonder the most watched TV program in Quebec is called “*Tout le monde en parle*” – a talk-show appropriately called “everybody is talking about it” where guests get to sip wine while they chat.

The North-American Root

Jean-Marc Léger, the pollster, offers this explanation: Quebeckers have French roots, live in an English society and enjoy an American way of life.

13. **Superconsumerism** – Shopping is not a chore but a source of pleasure. 56% of Quebeckers describe shopping as an experience that is relaxing and enjoyable while only 45% feel this way in English Canada.ⁱ
14. **Comfort** – No plastic covers on couches in Quebec. 70% of Quebeckers describe their homes as “always having that lived in look” compared to only 45% of English Canadians.ⁱⁱ It's also true in the backyard. 16% of homes in Quebec have a swimming pool compared to 6% in the rest of Canada.ⁱⁱ

15. **Eccentric taste** – The immensely popular TV show *La Petite Vie* was a celebration of kitsch taste. And you still see plenty of planters made out of old tires painted white when you cruise around parts of the province.

16. **North-American solidarity** – One could argue that Quebeckers feel closer to Americans than to the rest of Canada. 34% of Quebeckers support the idea of annexing to the U.S. versus 15% of Ontarians. 30% would live and work in the U.S. if given the opportunity compared to 24% of Ontarians.^{vi}

17. **A sense of advertising** – Quebeckers might like advertising but they're no more likely to believe its claims than English Canadians. They're also more likely than other Canadians to say that they have been offended by an ad.^{vii}

18. **The “nationalisms”** – 41% of Quebeckers claim they identify first and foremost with their province while 32% do so with Canada. But they are not alone. Residents of Atlantic Canada also identify with their province first (40%) and with Canada second (32%).^{viii}

The Catholic Root

The clergy no longer runs the province. Almost one quarter (22%) of Quebeckers, significantly more than any other region of the country, say their belief in God has declined over the years.^{ix}

19. **Antimercantilism** – Making money is no longer a sin in Quebec.

The 36 keys of the Québécois

20. **Mysticism** – Quebeckers are more likely to say they believe in an “afterlife but not necessarily a Heaven or Hell”. They are also most likely to believe in the ability to ‘channel or communicate with the dead’^{ix}
21. **The herd mentality** – Or the flock mentality: winters in Florida. 71% of French Canadians agree with the statement “I feel a need to be with people whose outlook on life and sense of values are similar to my own” compared to 62% of English Canadians.ⁱ
22. **Fatalism** – 28% of French Canadians say they often feel that there’s nothing in this world worth striving for compared to 16% of English Canadians.ⁱ
23. **Conservatism** – Quebeckers are surprisingly traditional. They’re more brand loyal than other Canadians and more likely to say that they have traditional tastes.ⁱⁱ
24. **Xenophobia** – Draw your own conclusions on this one. Asked if Canada accepts too many immigrants, 54% of Canadians say yes, 53% of Ontarians and 59% of Quebeckers.^x 48% of French Canadians say they feel closer to people who have the same religious, national or ethnic background as their own compared to 34% of English Canadians.ⁱ
25. **Love of children** – The birthrate might be among the lowest in the world but they nevertheless love kids. 78% of Quebeckers say that having a child is an experience every woman should have vs. 58% of English Canadians.ⁱ
26. **A need to be seen** – They enjoy looking good and young. 58% of Quebeckers say they’ll do whatever they can to look as young as possible compared to 31% of English Canadians.ⁱ Could Quebec be the land of extreme makeovers and Botox?
27. **Artistic talent** – Three quarters of Quebeckers feel the need to fulfill themselves as individuals by being more creative compared to 60% of English Canadians. They also apply their creativity to what marketers create for them; two thirds of Quebeckers feel the need to add their own touch to the things they buy compared to 48% of English Canadians.ⁱ
28. **Sentimentality** – Quebeckers seek love and tenderness. 27% wish they lived in an earlier age of adventure and romance vs. 18% in English Canada.ⁱ They’re more open-minded and least likely to say that extra marital affairs are immoral^{xi} or that they have had their heart broken by a partner.^{xii} But married Quebeckers are also the most frustrated of married Canadians wishing they could ask their partner to be more affectionate and wanting to discuss their sex life more often.^{xiii}
29. **Instinctiveness** – Quebeckers are more likely to say they follow their instincts than listen to experts.ⁱ 85% of French Canadians say there should be more emphasis on feeling than

The Latin Root

Quebeckers are Latin albeit “northernized” by the climate.

25. **Joie de vivre** – Asked what’s most important to them, Quebeckers are more likely than other Canadians to say “enjoying life” and “seeking happiness”.ⁱ

The 36 keys of the Québécois

thinking compared to 60% of English Canadians.ⁱ

The French Root

Roots are rather easy to trace when your family's name is a region of France - Champagne, Normand, Breton and Picard.

31. Chauvinism – Quebec remains a province of distinct regions, even distinct municipalities. This might explain why they merge cities only to “demerge” them later.

32. Cartesianism – “*Laissez-faire*” might be a French expression but Quebeckers prefer to make plans. 54% say they are “the kind of person who likes to plan things in advance” compared to 45% of English Canadians.ⁱ This might explain why they're more likely to shop with a grocery list.ⁱⁱ

33. Individualism – 79% of French Canadians believe everybody should be free to do their own thing compared to 68% of English Canadians.ⁱ They're also more likely to believe there should be less emphasis on family togetherness and more on the individual (29% in French Canada vs. 21% in English Canada).ⁱ

34. Sensuality – The pleasure of the senses. 38% of Quebeckers have used bath additives in the past six months compared to only 21% of Canadians in the rest of Canada.ⁱⁱ 30% of Quebec women say they don't feel complete without perfume compared to 23% of women in the rest of Canada.ⁱⁱ

35. Boastfulness – 43% of French Canadians claim they probably know more things than other people

compared to 35% of English Canadians.ⁱ They're also more likely to choose brands that let people know they've made it (23% in French Canada vs. 16% in English Canada)ⁱ

36. Lack of practical sense – Quebeckers are pragmatic in many areas of their lives but only 41% describe themselves as down-to-earth compared to 66% of Canadians in the rest of Canada.ⁱ

Although much has happened in Quebec in the past thirty years, there's a saying that sums it all up: “*plus ça change, plus c'est pareil*” (The more things change, the more they stay the same). Marketers who decide to adopt, adapt or create for Quebec can't ignore the thirty-six keys.

ⁱ Creative Research International, The Yankelovich Monitor in Canada, 1998

ⁱⁱ PMB 2004, Two-Year Readership Database

ⁱⁱⁱ Goldfarb Consultants for Bank of Nova Scotia, Globe & Mail, December 19, 1996

^{iv} Léger Marketing, Canadian Perceptions of Homosexuality, June 22, 2001

^v Léger Marketing, How Canadians Perceive Euthanasia, June 22, 2001

^{vi} Léger Marketing, A Study of How Canadians Perceive Canada-U.S. Relations, August 2001

^{vii} Léger Marketing, Canadians and Advertising, October 2001

^{viii} Léger Marketing, Canadians and Canada, March 2002

^{ix} Ipsos-Reid, God and Other Mysteries: A look into the religious and spiritual beliefs of Canadians, November 2003

^x Léger Marketing, Canadians and Immigration, February 2002

^{xi} Léger Marketing, Canadians and Immorality, January 2002

^{xii} Ipsos-Reid, 2nd Annual Tainted Love Poll, January 2003

^{xiii} Ipsos-Reid, A Readers's Digest Poll: Marriage in Canada, March 2003