

The Canadian national psyche

As an enthusiastic immigrant years ago, I was dumbfounded at the negative perception Canadians had as to how this country is seen by the rest of the world. I was excited to be in a country with a clean domestic/international history, economic prosperity that no-one else has had to pay for, and that blinked as a beacon for the oppressed world-wide.

My new compatriots did not seem to share my passion. I was also taken aback by the almost dispassionate reaction of the Canadian media to Canadian events and achievement—certainly it did not jive with how the foreign media portrays Canada. As a former diplomat who served in Europe and Africa, I do not have words

to describe the respect and reverence afforded this nation.

Our current Prime Minister’s puzzling, yet regular chant to the effect that “the world will now have to take note of Canada” has reawakened my anguish over this phenomenon. Surely the world already takes note? In some circles, sabre rattling, bagpipe laments, flag-draped coffins, threats to “bloody noses” and politicians badmouthing select nations is mistaken for leadership. Why is this?

While Canada could be a more powerful military force, what would be the price? Would riding roughshod over others, just because we can, erode the special flavour that embodies the essence of our society? This country is envied for its balanced approach to economics, trade and international affairs (an extremely courageous, difficult goal). Our reputation for equitably applied human rights, demanding the same standards of ourselves, allies and foes, is what causes millions of immigrants to annually vote with their feet, not out of desperation but because this country traditionally represents a guaranteed fair deal.

I have an unscientifically arrived-at theory: Interacting with scores of diverse individuals and organizations as a management consultant, I have beyond doubt become aware of an *undersell culture* and a clear reluctance of Canadians to “toot their own horn”. In broad strokes they define modesty as pretending to be less than they are! Surely this will result in a situation where perception becomes reality.

For me the problem with this has its roots in the definition of modesty. True modesty requires acceptance/celebration of talent, skill, benefit, expertise, etc. without feelings of superiority to the less fortunate or those with a different set of attributes. If this definition resonates, then the first step in being modest would be to perceive, understand, accept and celebrate our individual, organizational, industry and national worth.

My involvement in the Canadian Women in Communications *One-to-One* program, and its focus on validating excellence, provides an industry snapshot to illustrate my point. I see so many



Rodger Harding, a former lawyer and diplomat, is a business leadership and corporate intelligence awareness consultant. He may be reached by phone at (416) 962-6700, by e-mail at rodger@hardingintelligence.com.

talented women, all leaders in the broadcast/media/communications field, who sell themselves short. Many are not only loath to “toot their own horn” but appear genuinely unaware of the value of their obvious ability or contribution.

My analysis puts this situation down to a simple lack of validation. Do we put enough emphasis on positive affirmation of people, their strengths and their accomplishments? If individuals are not aware of their own excellence, they are less likely to perceive excellence around them in their team, organization or industry.

Logically, perhaps, it follows that the ensuing frustration and bitterness that will inevitably install itself, hardly facilitates a passionate advertisement on any level of Canadian influence. Looking at it that way, false modesty can lead to lack of self worth and pride that in time permeates entire organizations and eventually the national psyche.

Let us make a disinterested, industry-wide effort to validate excellence wherever we find it:

- Directly reinforce the core excellence of others by pointedly drawing attention to what it is we appreciate about their contribution.
- Avoid and reject ridiculous comparisons with others that would result in a denial of our own excellence and who we are.
- Recognize and celebrate Canadian values by taking note of how we are perceived by the international community.

Our industry carries the responsibility of influence. Strong leadership in reinforcing our excellence will surely reinforce our industry and our national self-esteem.