



IN DEPTH
Census

The marketing search for Anytown, Canada

Last Updated July 20, 2007

By Amil Niazi, CBC News

As the latest snapshot of Canada begins to emerge from the 2006 census, one group in particular is poring over the figures, eager to put together a mini-portrait of their own.

For marketing research analysts, Canada as a whole can often be summed up by a handful of cities, the 'anytowns' that epitomize the nation. These serve as a proxy for understanding where people live, how they eat and what they buy.

In fact, many of the products we use today, not to mention the countless wannabes that never made it onto shelves, were first marketed in a city that their developers hoped was a lot like yours.

Everything from the recycling blue box — originally tested in Kitchener, Ont., — to the now defunct McDonald's pizza that had its start in Kingston, a few hundred kilometres down the Trans-Canada, had been sampled and rated by a group of residents that were supposed to reflect the national reality.

These mini-markets decide whether products like coloured ketchups will be a hit or a bust (bust in this case) and whether it will be worth the cost to roll out new widgets to the mass market. Because of the power these test markets wield, finding the perfect region is critical.

The ideal test city must be representative of the larger consumer picture, but it should also be relatively isolated from a dense media market so that as objective a test run as possible can be carried out.

For Ipsos Reid marketing group, this means a city that's not too big and not too small. A place that is diverse, but not too diverse and has a well balanced urban to rural ratio. Kind of the Goldilocks theory of marketing.

"We've used Peterborough before because of its relatively large population as well as its realistic ethnic representation of Ontario," says Grace Tong, a public affairs researcher for Ipsos Reid. This, "as opposed to more diverse centres like Toronto, which don't truly reflect the country."

'Lifestyle clusters'

Over at rival Environics Analytics, Danny Heuman, the vice-president of product development, says the search for proxy cities is rigorous and time consuming, but provides Environics with a unique picture of Canadians in general.

For that firm, the census is a goldmine and they comb through the mountain of Canadian statistics to classify the over 53,000 neighbourhoods into 66 "lifestyle clusters."

In this way, communities are divided into categories such as "cosmopolitan elite," (Vancouver's classy Shaughnessy district for example) "urbane villagers" (the Queen Street West area of Toronto) and "suburban gentry" (like Markham, Ont.). The characteristics of these 66 clusters are then run against the national numbers and eventually a cross-section of Canada emerges that can be matched to individual cities.

Anytown, Canada

The following are the top 10 cities most closely resembling the country as a whole, according to Environics Analytics.

- Red Deer, Alta.
- Waterloo, Ont.
- Guelph, Ont.
- Kingston, Ont.
- Kelowna, B.C.
- Maple Ridge, B.C.
- Grande Prairie, Alta.
- London, Ont.
- Calgary, Alta.
- Langley, B.C.

This work is anything but static because, as the latest census results show, the face of Canada is constantly changing. And as Heuman says, as we change as a country, so do the cities that reflect us.

That's why Peterborough fell off Environics top-10 list. It used to be the place where marketers ran to test such things as the newest Anacin tablets. But it has greyed more than it should have to reflect the nation as a whole.

"We have to look at everything from occupation, income, ethnicity, language and the multi-dimensional labour force when assessing these cities," Heuman says. "And we are constantly adjusting segments to reflect the changing Canadian landscape."

Quintessential Canada

But is there a single city that truly sums up Canada? Well, yes and no.

There are a handful of actual cities that Environics tends to use to find the country's national likes and dislikes. These "any towns" embody the traits of the general population. From age and gender to income and ethnicity, they are small pockets of this vast country that bear a striking statistical resemblance to all of Canada, except of course, for Quebec.

As a French-language market with its own unique set of peculiarities and lifestyles, Quebec requires its own breakdown. But the rest of Canada can still be organized by a few cities that have the same mixed bag of urban/ethnic/rural/upscale/singles/families as the nation as a whole.

For the most part, these are middle-tier cities that reflect the overall nation best, places like Red Deer, Guelph and Maple Ridge, B.C. Large centres like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver do not show up on this list because there is such a thing as too urban, too diverse and too big.

It's not just product developers that are using this list either. Government agencies, non-profit groups, retailers and banks pay close attention to these statistical clones when determining their policies and strategies for the country as a whole.

So whether Grand Prairie, Alta., is a close reflection of your own lifestyle or not, how its residents respond to cherry-flavoured Coke can still have some bearing on your life.

