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When anthropologist Dr. Victor Barac is on a job, he interviews everyone from upper management to the warehouse staff.

# Anthropology in the workplace

## Cultural context proves just as crucial to improving business as tech solutions

BY CATHERINE MULRONEY

**M**ention anthropology and most people think of studying wedding customs in a far-off place or observing gender roles in a sheltered community.

But Victor Barac's career as a cultural anthropologist has taken him from the ghettos of Detroit to the bowels of Buckingham Palace, conducting research for companies hoping to better understand themselves and their customers.

One of the most obvious applications of anthropology to the business world, and perhaps the best known, is in retail sales. Paco Underhill detailed the world of retail anthropology in his book *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping* (Touchstone), explaining, for example, why we might go into a store for one thing and end up buying another, or what kind of store atmosphere is most effective for influencing shopping behaviour.

But applied anthropology also includes studying everything from marketing strategies to the corporate climate, applying traditional anthropological methods of research and observation to understand and reflect business culture, Dr. Barac says.

"As a culture, we are dependent on rumour for knowledge," he adds.

The field "evolved from a growing suspicion of older research techniques, that companies were

using old paradigms," he says. "Anthropologists focus on direct observation."

For Toronto-based Dr. Barac, who also teaches social anthropology at the University of Toronto, that has meant that no two working days are the same. His first corporate job, about three years ago, arose from a conversation at a cocktail party, when he was asked to troubleshoot for an advertising agency looking to keep Mutual of Omaha Insurance Co. as a client. What he discovered in studying the insurance giant was that its advertising campaign was outdated, still relying on the image of the old *Wild Kingdom* television show, even though young customers were not familiar with the program. By explaining how the company was not being true to itself, he was able to help the advertising agency change its campaign and keep a significant customer.

"Management looks for technical solutions, while I am able to offer a cultural context," he explains. "In this case, the image just didn't fit the company."

More recently, he completed a job for the Canadian film industry. That entailed hanging around movie theatres observing everything from the behaviour of customers at the food court to what posters drew people's attention, and interviewing patrons about their attitudes and experiences.

In studying the corporate climate of a Minnesota advertising agency, he found he was able to

get at the heart of the business only after he asked management to leave a meeting.

"Once they left, it was like turning a tap on, and discerning social fault lines was much easier," Dr. Barac recalls.

A current client is a furniture business, and that has involved spending time in the company's stores, taking pictures and talking to sales representatives and customers.

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"I always demand to look at company literature and advertising to see the face of the business. Sometimes it's inconsistent." Dr. Barac's fees range from \$150 to \$200 an hour in Canada. Depending on the scale of the job, his fee for some large U.S. firms has been \$225 an hour. Contacts in the still-developing field are often by word of mouth, he says.

One of the most unusual jobs he has undertaken was to help an engineering firm in its quest to expand the market for a hydraulic pump it manufactured. His observation of the pump took him from inner-city Detroit to London, where he visited Canary Wharf and the basement of Buckingham Palace.

Anthropologists can be inval-

able "any time a company wants to understand a consumer — for example, to know why teenagers are still smoking," says Liz Torlee, president of Kaleidovision Inc., a market research and consultancy firm in Toronto. Ms. Torlee has been involving anthropologists in her work for about 10 years, because, as she says, for a company to work, "you must understand yourself first."

She credits anthropologist Grant McCracken, author of *Culture and Consumption* (Indiana University Press), with paving the way for the acceptance of marrying the disciplines of anthropology and marketing.

The mention of an anthropologist can be intimidating, "but what they're doing is watching. Anthropologists are taught to assimilate, and it results in a deeper, richer understanding," Ms. Torlee argues.

Some of the accounts for which she has used anthropologists include a financial planning company and a supermarket chain.

"It makes sense to go to people's homes, to hang around and watch and listen as they consume goods and services," she says. That observation can be particularly useful when upper management finds itself distanced from day-to-day workplace issues, Ms. Torlee adds. And that's why, when Dr. Barac is on a job, he interviews everyone from upper management to staff in the warehouse.

"I used to work in a warehouse," he says. "That's why I always go there. I know they'll have useful input."

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