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Project Darwin: Discovering the Seven Secrets of Men

by [Nancy Pekala](#)

Long before to we were told men were from mars and women were from venus, women have sought to find the secrets of understanding the opposite sex. What makes men tick? What drives their behaviors, thoughts and feelings? Those answers unlock the key to not only better relationships between men and women but also to improved brand engagement with male shoppers.

Canadian Tire Corporation, an 85-year-old mass merchandiser of automotive parts and services, home and garden products and recreational equipment, sought to obtain those answers. With 500 locations across Canada and a customer base that includes 86% of Canadian shoppers, men are a key target audience for the retailer, but recent research had focused on understanding the influence of women.



Men in Canadian society are evolving. Male roles are changing and gender lines are blurring. When Canadian Tire saw signs of erosion among male shoppers, the company undertook a comprehensive study of the 21st Century Man, uncovering insights aimed at reclaiming their devotion for the next 85 years.

During the recent Symposium on Excellence in Qualitative Research conducted by [QRCA](#), an AMA Content Partner, Cedric Painvin, Consumer Research Manager for Canadian Tire explained the retailer's research approach and findings.

"Men hide their true feelings," Painvin explained. "It's not until you scratch deep below the surface that you find out what drives satisfaction in men."

Painvin said Canadian Tire began to notice some disturbing trends in 2009. An equity study found that satisfaction among Canadian men began to decline and men were beginning to feel disenfranchised and not as positive about the brand.

As a result, the research team initiated a project that became known as Project Darwin. The goal was to better understand the evolution of the Canadian male and reclaim the devotion of Canadian males for the next 85 years. "It was the first corporate project with corporate-wide impact that was spearheaded by the consumer research team," Painvin

said. "We built a case for the project and sold it throughout the organization. As a result, we piloted a new consumer insight process."

The new consumer insight process included six strategic elements:

1. Define all stakeholders and align the true objective
2. Explore the issue by scouring the Internet, reading books, articles and existing research.
3. Immerse themselves in the world of their target. Members of the core research team broke off individually from the team and became immersed in the lives of their target audience. For example, one team member mystery shopped toy stores to determine the differences between boy toys and girl toys. Another engaged in conversations with a minister who acknowledged that men mostly questioned, "Is this all there is?"
4. Generate research hypotheses but assembling all collected information and connect points.
5. Evaluate the hypotheses to formulate an action plan.
6. Take action based on the results of the first five steps of the process.

Lisa Elder, President, Heads Up, a Toronto-based qualitative research company, explained the research team used the following methodology to implement its research plan in order to better learn about Canadian men:

1. Deconstruction.

In the deconstruction phase, round tables were conducted to learn "what makes men tick and how they view themselves." Elder related how she told one man to just ignore her presence and to feel free to chat. "He said, 'So, you're not going to interrupt me or finish my sentence?'"

Part of the exercise included asking the male subjects to create 3D pyramids of themselves representing their different roles such as husband, friend, traveler, etc. "The pyramids talked about their goals in an intimate setting (3 men in roundtable)," Elder explained. The man placed an item inside the pyramid that represented their hidden desires and what they'd like women to know about them. "One 65-year-old said, 'we're just lucky to get through the day without a major screw up!'" She added, "It really plays into the perfection women want men to strive for yet set up for failure."

2. Exploration.

The second phase of the plan focused on exploration utilizing online forums. Over a four-day period, 32 men shared their insights via answers to questions in bulletin boards. Additionally, the spouse or child of the man was also asked to participate in bulletin boards over a two-day period (answers were not shared between the two groups).

3. Excavation.

The third phase focused on excavation through the use of ethnographic immersions. The immersions covered 12 days in the lives of the men for periods of either 6 hours or 3 hours.

4. Reconstruction.

The reconstruction phase of the plan aimed to uncover the ideal and future retail experience for men. Male subjects were asked to talk about their ideal retail

experience and then were brought to two Canadian Tire stores with the entire project team. All of the client representatives and researchers involved walked the men through the store and asked them to compare the retail experience with their ideal retail experience. As a group, they generated ideas for making Canadian Tire a better retail experience.

5. Transformation.

The final phase of the research plan aimed to distill all of the insights obtained and validate them.

Catherine Dine, President, Dine & Associates, a Toronto-based full-service qualitative/quantitative research firm, also noted that another important element of the research included a survey. She noted that they had very specific guidelines they followed when constructing the survey:

1. The survey needed to encourage honesty. "We encouraged open sharing from the men as opposed to providing us with social or politically correct answers," Dine said.
2. Participants needed to feel it was an inclusive study. "No matter what their background, lifestyle, life stage, or preferences, male participants needed to feel they would be embraced in the survey," Dine said. For example, the men in the study could use whatever term they wanted to describe their significant other so that there would be no implicit judgment.
3. The survey needed to mirror their thinking style. "While the pyramids isolated the different roles men had in their lives, the survey contextualized those roles," Dine explained.
4. The survey also encompassed the use of analytics in the data. "We used a simple gap analysis and compared the answers of the 1,500 men to the responses of women who talked about their men," Dine said. "There was quite a bit of divergence in this data so we relied heavily on the qualitative."

Painvin added, "Most surveys are very formal; the intro blurb is always the same. We wrote the survey very informally, using 'general guy' language and asked questions in lots of different ways scattered in various areas of the survey. Ultimately, the way the male respondents answered was exactly how they felt."

What exactly are the secrets of Canadian men? The research uncovered the following seven secrets:

- **Secret 1: What would men most likely do if they had 2 extra hours a week?**
Answer: (It's not what you think!). Sleep.
Opportunity: You may think men are sex starved, but they are starved for many more things
- **Secret 2: What percentage of men is proud of what they do at work?**
Answer: 71%
Opportunity: Work alone not enough to drive life satisfaction. The modern male is so much more than a uni-dimensional person these days.
- **Secret 3: What percentage of men feel like is going really well?**
Answer: 26%. The results revealed that tire customers are happier than other men (39%).

Opportunity: Discover what your brand experience contributes to the satisfaction of men.

- **Secret 4: What percentage of men claims their wives nag them?**

Answer: 23%. Men hate to complain. Conversely, 48% of the women in the research admitted to nagging their husbands. Men also tend to ignore or absorb negativity, but not entirely. The research revealed that 1 in 4 of the men surveyed would like to find someone else.

Opportunity: Since men are loathe to complain, don't show them complaining in creative communications.

- **Secret 5: What is the percentage of men who say their spouses decide what they'll buy?**

Answer: 19%. Men shop but on their terms. They're task oriented and don't like browsing. They will buy on sale for a treat for themselves. They'll also pursue sales to stock their workshops with what they need.

Opportunity: Look beyond the female head of household for purchase decisions.

- **Secret 6: What percentage of men doesn't have enough time for themselves?**

Answer: 40%. Men do desire time for themselves and are looking for time away from home for personal pursuits. However, they often have to justify this personal time to their spouse. Often, men will engage in chores that provides them time by themselves.

Opportunity: Explore how your brand helps men to be or discover themselves.

- **Secret 7: What percentage of men feels alone and isolated?**

Answer: 37%. Almost 4 in 10 feel emotionally isolated.

It is a key differentiator between men who were coping well in life and not.

Opportunity: Identify how your brand helps build the key connections men need.

Aside from providing fascinating insights about what makes men tick, what was the "So what?" in this for Canadian Tire?

According to Painvin, the research provided major implications for the retailer's brand. "It fundamentally changed how we communicate with our core customer," he said. "The insights generated are now working at deep levels within the organization. Everything we do is assessed through the Darwin lens. We're not optimizing business opportunities based on these insights."



Case in point. Prior to the "Project Darwin" project, the retailer ran an ad depicting a couple in marital discord (albeit in gest). In the ad spot, dialogue focuses on how the couple argues about everything, including how often they should replace their tires. The ad did not perform well with the retailer's target male audience.

However, following the Darwin project, the retailer launched a new ad ([Skate](#)). The ad illustrated a father and son spending time together playing ice hockey. The ad concludes with the tagline: "Every minute goes so fast. If I could, I'd make it last."

Another Post-Darwin ad ([Nod](#)) was based on the insights culled from the research. The ad features several men expressing satisfaction and appreciation through the gesture of a head nod as they utilize their socket wrench. As the voiceover in the ad says, "There's something every man worth his knuckle hair does when he's done right by the car. It says that lug nut didn't know just who it was messing with. It's a deep man brain nourishing inhale and a nod. A cranial confirmation that you are a socket wrench wielding god."



Canadian Tire's Painvin reflected that "We sought to understand men within our brand and culture in Canada. We achieved the impossible. We got men to look inwardly at themselves. They did this without even knowing it."

Interestingly, the research team involved both female and male members with female research suppliers intentionally being hired to manage the project.

Elder related that "We were blown away by how much men appreciated being listened to.

We found that if we calmed down and just listened to them and didn't challenge at all what they said, they opened up. I laid back and didn't lead the interview in any obvious way. The process became slower but in slowness, the men started exchanging instead of selling or presenting. Often times, they looked at me as if they could have had a V8. One group member said, "You know, I've never enjoyed a conversation more. I should have one of these with my wife."

Ultimately, Painvin suggested that the lessons learned from Project Darwin could be applied to any brand: collaborate to generate real insights; challenge what you know you know and champion change.

[Nancy Pekala](#) is the AMA's Director of Online Content and Editor of [Marketing Researchers](#). Project Darwin has taught her to be nicer to the men in her life. Continue the conversation in the Marketing Research group in [AMACONNECT™](#).