This essay examines the differences between Canadian and American cultures as they manifest themselves in business discourse. Studies of Canadian identity note the complexity inherent in a multicultural society such as Canada, but they also identify some of the common characteristics—a concern for and tolerance of others, awareness of class distinctions, concern for the collective over the individual. This distinct Canadian identity affects genres such as the direct marketing letter because the genre depends on shared understandings between writers and readers; these understandings in turn depend upon cultural values. The essay then examines direct mail letters addressed to both Canadian and American addresses using concepts from cross-cultural communication: power distance, directness, and individualism. Two pairs of letters—one written for Canadians, one for Americans—that have similar goals are then examined to identify the differences between their approaches to each audience. Business communicators need to be aware that Canadians see themselves as culturally distinct, and they need to write differently for Canadian audiences. More research that identifies specific reader’s responses to direct marketing letters is needed.

“Dear Friend” (?): Culture and Genre in American and Canadian Direct Marketing Letters

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Canadians are different from Americans. Business communicators know this, after a fashion. They know that they have to change money at the border, that they need their birth certificate (but not their passport) to cross the border, and they know that handguns are not allowed into the country (well, they should know this but they do not always). In short, they have a general sense that things are different north of the border even if they have trouble explaining exactly how they are different. If they smoke, business communicators may be so familiar with the following warning as to not read it (and certainly not heed it) anymore:

Surgeon General’s Warning: Smoking Causes Lung Cancer, Heart Disease, Emphysema, and May Complicate Pregnancy.

However, on the insert to the first package of cigarettes they buy in Canada will be a large print, bold, black warning. The warnings recently printed include the following: “Cigarettes cause strokes and heart disease,” “Smoking can kill you,” “Tobacco smoke can harm your children,” and “Cigarettes are addictive” (see Figure 1).

This is business communication Canadian-style. It conveys more or less the same denotative message that the American message conveys, but it does so in a more highly charged way—and in French, too. The link between smoking and hurting children would be resisted
aggressively by the tobacco lobby in Washington, and the general public might see it as transgressing public discourse decorum. For Canadians, however, smoking is not just a public health issue; it is a matter of morality (hence the link to children’s health). You do not just make yourself sick when you smoke – you also impinge on the rights of others to live a healthy life.

Figure 1. Warnings from Canadian Cigarette Packages

I bring up this example to highlight the different approaches Canadians and Americans have elected to take to their public communications. Business communicators, both in North America and the rest of the world, need to be aware that effective business communication for Canadians treats them as a distinct culture and audience. Others in business communication are already aware of this. Both Limaye and Victor (1992) and Victor (1994) call for more studies of other cultures; Victor (1994) draws specific attention to “variations in written business communication across cultures and languages (e.g., resumes, sales letters)” (p. 42). This study adds to the response to this call for research by examining some variations in sales letters written for English-speaking Canadian audiences. The differences between American and English-speaking Canadian cultures involve more than switching allegiances between teams – replacing the White Sox with the Blue Jays in references, for example. These differences are a much more complex matter, requiring understanding of how cultural meanings are created and held. Some of these meanings are shared across the cultural divide, which is precisely why it is difficult to identify the “hidden” or
less obvious ways that English-speaking Canadian readers understand and create meanings out of texts written for American audiences.

In the remainder of this essay, I will argue that in order for business communicators to write successfully for Canadian audiences they need to conceptualize Canadians as different from American audiences. The next section of this essay reviews a small segment of the vast literature on Canadian and American cultural identity, much of it written from a Canadian point of view. Out of this knowledge we can then understand how marketing letters are cultural objects peculiar to the culture that spawned them and not pan-cultural or universally understood and accepted artifacts. Instead, I will argue that they are examples of a genre particular to the United States. To understand how this genre works, I examined over 60 letters: 50 letters sent to various people (including myself) at U.S. addresses, and 12 letters sent to English-speaking Canadian addresses. Many of the letters advertised similar — and in one case identical — products and services. My reading of the letters in the light of the literature on Canadian and American cultural differences suggests that there are significant differences in the ways some of the letters approach evidence and credibility. However, this study is limited because the letters addressed to Canadians were drawn only from Ontario; letters drawn from across Canada might provide different insights. Much more research needs to be done on a systematic scale to determine if the acknowledged cultural differences between the two countries necessitates different business writing practices.

**Canadian Identity**

Griswold (1994) and Victor (1992) have both noted that there is no clear-cut distinction between a dominant group in a culture and the sub-groups or sub-cultures within the main group. As Weiss (1993) points out, the concept of a nation is less forceful now than it has been; other allegiances (language, ethnicity) compete for our loyalties. In Canada, for example, there are Anglophones, Francophones, First Nations (indigenous) peoples, and groups with multiple languages and cultural identities. There are also groups who are multilingual, and there are increasingly bilingual groups whose languages are English and a language other than French. In addition to negotiating these diverse groups, direct mail must compete with cultural allegiances to attract members of the target group (middle-class audiences). Within these groups ethnic ties may be more important than marginally cheaper or better services. For example, recent immigrants may feel much more comfortable banking with a branch of the Greek national bank or a Hong Kong bank than with a Canadian bank. In various regions within Canada, local banks or trust companies may be favored because of their
local identity (the Bank of Nova Scotia in the East, Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec, or the Province of Alberta Treasury branches).

Within this context it is difficult to speak of national identity. In her study of communication and identity in Canada and the United States, Ferguson (1993) spoke of the "complex multidimensionality of the issue of collective identity" (p. 43) and the "complexity of audience engagements and constructions cross-culturally" (p. 45). Ferguson argues that "key elements of the ideological underpinnings of American and Canadian 'national' identities" are quite distinct (p. 43). She notes that while both countries share aspects of new nation construction and new tradition invention, in the United States "the symbols of state and nationhood are articulated and rearticulated through national symbols, myths, and heroes" while in Canada "a national iconography barely exists, and popular symbols tend to emphasize linguistic and regional divisions" (Ferguson, 1993, p. 46). The recent media coverage of the Quebec referendum vote (October, 1995) provided ample evidence to support this emphasis on linguistic and regional divisions: the blue fleur de lis flag of Quebec was used to oppose the red and white maple leaf of the Canadian national flag.

With these limitations in mind, Ferguson quotes Lipset's summary of Canada as "more class-aware, elitist, law-abiding, statist, collectivity-oriented, and particularistic (group oriented) than the United States" (Ferguson, 1993, p. 46; Lipset, 1990, p. 8). Lipset's (1990) argument for Canadian distinctiveness begins with the historical differences in the formation of each country. The United States grew out of an ideologically-motivated revolution that focused on liberty; Canada grew more slowly as a colony with clear ties to Britain and a concern for order. Lipset quotes Berton (in Why We Act Like Canadians) to introduce the characterization of Canadians as more willing to accept government control and infringements on individual freedom (p. 44). To support this characterization, Lipset (1990) presents a wide variety of evidence. For cultural icons Canadians have the Royal Canadian Mounted Police as a national symbol rather than an outlaw gunslinger. Regarding individual behavior, Canadians have the propensity to wait for stoplights rather than jaywalk across streets even when there is no traffic. Constitutional precepts are peace, order, and good government in Canada but life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the United States. Finally, there are the statistics. Protest demonstrations in Canada from 1978 to 1982 totalled 13; whereas, in the United States there were 1,166. The number of police personnel per 100,000 people in Canada is 210; whereas, in the United States it is 422 (for further statistics, see Lipset, 1990, Chapter 6).

Lipset (1990) argues that the statistical differences he notes can be accounted for by the differing histories of the two countries. Canada
represents the counterrevolution – the place where the United Empire Loyalists went when Great Britain lost the American revolutionary war. While the newly independent United States could serve as “the extreme example of a classically liberal or Lockean society,” Canada maintained a “more British- or European-type conservative society” (Lipset, 1990, pp. 47-48). Part of this Canadian conservatism resulted in state support for religious institutions, primarily the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, a practice that continues today in all provinces (Lipset, 1990, p. 49). The government structures of Canada allow for a “parliamentary system with an executive (cabinet) that can have its way with the House of Commons” – a kind of tyranny that interrupts itself for a vote every few years (Lipset, 1990, p. 50). This is quite different from the United States, where the president must negotiate with Congress. The recent (1982) establishment of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms represents a move in the direction of limiting government interference in the affairs of the individual, but it is not the equal of the American Bill of Rights (Lipset, 1990, p. 50). The Canadian version provides less protection of individuals accused of crime and less protection of property rights (Lipset, 1990, pp. 102-103). Furthermore, Lipset (1990) notes that “Parliament or a provincial legislature can ‘opt out’ of many of the constitutional restrictions” (pp. 102-103). Many of these rights, then, can be overridden or limited by the government.

Lipset (1990) constructs a characterization of Canadians as a product of “tradition and convention” who resist American values and traditions (p. 53). Canadians see themselves as morally superior because they are not “as materialistic, achievement-oriented, and competitive as Americans” (p. 55). Instead, they are accommodating of the differences of others and prize civility (Callwood, 1994, p. 8). In the words of author Joy Kogawa, “Haven’t we always known that the greatness of Canadians lies in how good they are to each other, how kind they are? In a world of intolerance, we have shown ourselves to be uncommonly tolerant” (quoted in Dwyer, 1994, p. 19). And when asked what they see in themselves that makes them distinct from other peoples of the world, one in three Canadians cite tolerance of people with different backgrounds, social programs, and a tendency towards nonviolence (“Surprising Returns,” 1995, p. 15).

For all of their hard work at constructing a different identity from Americans, Canadians have “followed the general tendencies of most western nations toward greater acceptance of communitarian welfare and egalitarian objectives, a decline in religious commitment, smaller nuclear families, and increase in educational attainment, a greater role for government, continued economic growth, a higher standard
of living, more leisure, increased longevity, growing urbanization" (Lipset, 1990, p. 55).

These developments have erased or eroded some of the cultural differences between the United States and Canada, but other differences have persisted—particularly "national or group consciousness" among the Quebecois in Canada (Lipset, 1990, p. 55). Lipset (1990) cites approvingly an analogy that places Canadians and Americans as similarly distinct as Germans are from the French (p. 56). For Lipset, Canadians and Americans, then, are two distinct kinds of North Americans in much the same way that Germans and the French are two distinct kinds of Europeans.

This characterization accounts for the ease of movement between the two cultures which at times effectively masks the difference between Americans and Canadians, but it is a difference Canadians often feel acutely and which has implications for rhetorical appeals in business discourse. While culture and communication are inextricably bound up in each other as Edward Hall suggests, many cases of rhetorical appeal obey the dictum that culture governs communication behavior (Goodenough; quoted in Beamer, 1992, p. 291). It follows, then, that business communicators must know something about the culture of the people with whom they are attempting to communicate.

**Cultures and Genres**

Griswold (1994) distinguishes between culture and society by aligning culture with "the expressive aspect of human existence" and society with "the relational (and often practical) aspect" (p. 4). A cultural view would emphasize, for example, how a business card is an extension of the self for Japanese people, while a social view would focus on the function these cards have of providing information about business contacts. Culture has been broadly defined as "an entire way of life" or the "totality of [wo]man's products" (Griswold, 1994, p. 8), but more recent definitions emphasize the importance of the creation and maintenance of symbols. Griswold (1994) cites Geertz's definition of culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [wo]men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life" (p. 9). Griswold (1994) herself defines culture as referring to the "expressive side of life—behavior, objects, and ideas that can be seen to express, to stand for, something else . . . its pattern of meanings, its enduring expressive aspects, its symbols that represent and guide the thinking, feeling, and behavior of its members" (p. 11).

As an analytical tool, Griswold (1994) uses the concept of "the cultural object," which she defines as "shared significance in form . . . a
socially meaningful expression that is audible, or visible, or tangible, or can be articulated" (p. 11). The American flag with its distinctive pattern of stars and bars and the bald eagle are prominent cultural objects for citizens of the United States; the Canadian flag, with a red maple leaf, and the flag of the province of Quebec (with the fleur de lis) are prominent cultural objects for Canadian citizens. These cultural objects are not simply a reflection of the society they emerge from or live in but must be understood in relation to the "horizon of expectations" that participants in the culture share (Jauss; quoted in Griswold, 1994, p. 83). That is, these objects exist and attain meaning only in so far as they are part of the context of society – the expectations that members in the society give to them.

The marketing letters that form the basis of this study are "cultural objects" within the terms of Griswold's definition. That is, the letters aimed at English-speaking Canadian audiences have particular meanings within the horizon of expectations of English-speaking Canadians; the same genre of letter aimed at American audiences may not function in an identical fashion, but instead may function according to the ways Americans use direct mail.

Yates and Orlikowski's (1992; 1994) studies of genre in organizational communication use conceptualizations of genre drawn from recent work in genre theory. Swales (1990) defines genre as a class of communicative events with a shared set of communicative purposes (pp. 45-46); exemplars of the genre vary in their prototypicality while at the same time existing within constraints on content, positioning, and form (pp. 49, 52). Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) add to this definition the concept of "situatedness":

Our knowledge of genres is derived from and embedded in our participation in the communicative activities of daily and professional life. As such, genre knowledge is a form of "situated cognition," which continues to develop as we participate in the activities of the culture. (p. 478; emphasis added)

Freedman, Adam, and Smart (1994), in their study of genre simulations in a financial analysis course, note the importance of shared experiences and quote Bakhtin's concept of "dialogism or the 'addressivity' of genres – the ways in which the discourse is shaped by the anticipated hearer or reader's response as well as by other elements in the textual, social, cultural, and political context" (pp. 196-197; emphasis added).

Yates and Orlikowski (1992) speculated that genres in organizational communication could cross between communities, but they did not speculate on the ability of genres to cross cultural boundaries (p. 304). In their subsequent study, Orlikowski and Yates (1994) note the importance of "community" to the ability of genre to support social action
and activity; they define community as "identifiable social units such as groups, organizations, and occupations or communities of practice" (p. 542). They do not raise the question of whether or not "communities" can transcend cultural borders. Swales (1990), a linguist, does comment on this issue. He notes that there are some "universalist" tendencies across languages and cultures; he cites the example of the diplomatic press communiqué as a genre that spans discourse community members across the globe (p. 64). Ultimately, though, Swales (1990) concludes that "the jury is still out" (p. 64). He cites the counterexample of scientific discourse in universities which can be quite different across cultures because of "powerful local influences of many kinds: national, social, cultural, technical, and religious" (p. 66). Swales (1990), Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993), and Freedman, Adam, and Smart (1994) all point to the importance of culture and community as essential elements for understanding communications in a genre.

What happens, then, when a genre is extended across cultural boundaries? A letter from then Governor Clinton asking for campaign contributions is an unheard of request in Canada; in Canada, politicians do not ask people directly for money. There is no equivalent cultural object of the political fund-raising letter in Canada, not because there are no political fundraising letters, but because these letters come from party organizers and not from the candidate directly. The discourse of the only fund-raising letter I could locate from a Canadian political party situated itself as an information-gathering exercise rather than as a personal appeal. As cultural objects, those letters created for English-speaking Canadian audiences differ from the letters created for American audiences in their actual language and approach.

**Cultural Variables in Direct Mail Letters**

But how do these cultural differences play out in the letters themselves? I examined in detail two sets of letters produced for direct-mail marketing campaigns: two from federal election candidates (one in Canada, one in the United States), and two from the same banking company (one for English-speaking Canadian audiences, one for Americans). These examples of particular letters in context help to give a greater sense of the differences between English-speaking Canadian and American audiences.

As Jameson (1994) points out, it is difficult to gather representative samples for cross-cultural research, and this study is no exception (p. 40). The letters I analyzed here were sent from American companies to American addresses in Ohio and Illinois (50 letters) and from both English-speaking Canadian and American organizations to Canadian addresses in Ontario (12 letters). Letters sent to Quebec
addresses or in French would quite possibly reveal different attitudes and relationships than the ones sent to the Ontario address, for example. The letters cited here were sent to four different people, including letters sent to the same people with addresses in both Canada and the United States. The following analysis uses concepts drawn from the work of cross-cultural business communication researchers to identify potentially important distinctions.

**Power Distance, Directness, Individualism**

Hofstede (1984) defined power distance as “a measure of the interpersonal power or influence between B and S as perceived by the least powerful of the two” (pp. 70-71). Hofstede (1984) argues that this relationship is in fact supported to a considerable degree by the national culture of the organization. Beamer and Varner (1994) note that business discourse is also imbued with power relationships in the tone, volume, and explicitness of its discourse:

> According to the work of the Dutch researcher Hofstede, power distance in the United States is comparatively small. That means that ... the distance between the highest and the lowest members of society is generally smaller than in cultures with a great power distance. Cultures with a smaller power distance are more horizontal, less hierarchical, and less authoritarian than cultures with high power distance. ... A friendly and considerate tone is important in business communication in the United States. ... To assure that the message is clear, businesspeople from the United States may use many words and lots of examples, typical characteristics of a low-context culture. Ideas are encoded explicitly. (pp. 171-172)

In the letters I collected, the factors Beamer and Varner identified – tone, clarity, copiousness – were all important. In many of the letters written to American audiences the organizations attempted to reduce power distance by using the salutation “Dear Friend”:

> Dear Friend, I'm so excited to be able to tell you all about the great things your membership in the [Dental Plan] can mean to you and your household.

> Dear Friend, I cordially invite you to become a [Charge] customer.

> Dear Friend, Let me repeat our rather extraordinary offer.

These organizations also attempted to reduce power distance inequity by asserting that the receiver is virtuous, similar to the sender, or deserving of some reward:

> Congratulations! Your outstanding credit history pre-qualifies you to receive . . .

> Like most of us, your wallet probably carries . . . [emphasis added]

> Because you are one of our valued Cardholders, we'd like to express our thanks to you.
In the letters written for English-speaking Canadian audiences, writers sometimes elected to recognize the power distance inequity rather than attempt to reduce it. The tone is less informal and less likely to attempt to establish a relationship between sender and receiver based on anything other than the business being transacted:

This letter is being written so that you and members of the ___ may become aware of an exciting new program . . .

I am writing to ask you for your thoughts . . .

I would like to inform you that I have joined the ____ as a Financial Services Advisor. Our company provides important financial services which you may be interested in.

The more formal tone results, in part, from the open assertion of the purpose of the letter. The focus is on the product or the service that the letter elaborates; any assertion about the character of the receiver may be viewed as insincere, a ruse to deflect attention from the product or service that is the subject of the letter. In some ways, Canadians seem to prefer an even more direct approach to communication than Americans. However, as both Beamer and Varner (1994) and Victor (1992) point out, directness is a feature of the organization of communication for both Canadian and American discourse.

As recent research makes clear, the differences in directness and individualism between Canadian culture and American culture are not as clear cut as the differences between the Mexican and American use of these two features of discourse (Hofstede, 1984; Victor, 1992; Beamer & Varner, 1994). These categories (power distance, individualism, directness), however, are very broad. Success or failure in direct mail letters addressed to Canadian audiences depends upon recognizing some of the different ways evidence, credibility, and rewards are treated.

**Evidence, Credibility, Rewards**

The direct mail letters sent to an American address use many kinds of evidence in their rhetorical appeals to entice the receiver to buy the service or product being advertised. These appeals are based on economics, nationalistic or patriotic sensibilities, and aesthetics, as Figure 2 shows.

The letters addressed to Canadian audiences in this research sample did not include any appeals to patriotism or vanity. However, they did include appeals to economics:

For example, gas and retail credit cards charge as much as 28.8% interest. That means that on an average balance of $1,200 you could pay up to $345.60 a year in interest. But if you put those purchases on a low-interest [bank name] card, you could save $219.60 in interest costs alone.
This particular example is more thorough than many of the examples in the letters aimed at American audiences, perhaps reflecting the concern for logical appeals ("exactly how much will this save me?") in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical Appeal</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>&quot;We'll pay you to use your card&quot; Carry a $2000 balance on a typical 17% APR card, and pay $170 in finance charges over six months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriotism</td>
<td>&quot;America's Card – credit card value never looked better!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>(offers various photographs as background scenes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanity</td>
<td>&quot;The exclusive [lastname] FamilyCard Visa Card&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features</td>
<td>&quot;$2000 Credit Line; Purchase Protection; Extended Warranty&quot;</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 2. Rhetorical Features of Direct Mail Letters to American Audiences

Canadian reader's mind. The Canadian letters also included lists of "features" for the products and services, but the claims made in support of these features were generally less extravagant. One financial advisor, for example, did not promise (or did not seem to promise) a wealthy retirement by describing in great detail what one could expect to be doing on some sun-drenched beach; instead, he promised "professional, confidential analysis of your planning needs . . . recommendations for enhancements to your financial plans . . . [and] regular reviews of individual investments and cumulative portfolios." One credit card letter even notes that it "doesn't come with unnecessary extras," choosing instead to emphasize safety and convenience.

The turn away from emotionally exciting language toward safety and convenience is related to issues of credibility. In the letters to Canadian audiences, the writers selling less well-established products or services must work harder at establishing credibility. A credit card "invitation" from a major Canadian bank says nothing about itself, presumably because the name says it all. While this is also true of some of the letters from larger financial institutions directed at American audiences, it is not true of them all. Many of the letters directed to American audiences included brief comments about the companies themselves as a way of establishing credibility:

[bank name] is the nation's oldest continuous bank card operation. With over 3.4 million accounts, [bank name] is recognized as one of the top credit card issuers in the country.

Since our establishment in 19xx, we have grown to become one of the largest and most highly respected insurance companies in the United States.

When you carry your new card, you'll be confident in the support of two names you have come to trust – [bank name] and VISA.
Two explanations may account for these results. First, the larger and more complex marketplace in the United States may create a need for some explanation or description of the company selling the product or service since the reader is likely to be unfamiliar with that company. In Canada, the reader may be familiar with the company name (certainly this is true in the financial services sector) and therefore not require any explanation. Alternatively, the reader may not know anything at all and will need a detailed explanation or description of the company to establish the trustworthiness or credibility of the writer.

Trustworthiness or credibility may also be linked to rewards. Canadians tend to view extrinsic rewards for responding to direct mail with suspicion because extrinsic rewards may suggest that the products themselves are not worth purchasing. None of the direct mail letters aimed at Canadian audiences offered an extrinsic reward for responding to them, unlike the American letters. Several letters for American audiences offered bonuses like $5 credits on account balances, cash rebates on purchases, and even a "$50 reward check" for transferring account balances. The only letter which comes close to offering an extrinsic reward to the Canadian reader does so in moral terms: responding to the offer would help support a charitable cause.

**Two Contrasting Examples**

The sections that follow compare letters sent to Americans with letters sent to Canadians in similar marketing situations to highlight how the different constraints of these genres result in substantially different discourses. The first example compares two appeals from federal election candidates. While some of the circumstances are notably different (Clinton won while the Progressive Conservative party was all but obliterated; Clinton was a popular outsider while then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was the unpopular incumbent), both of these letters seek to gather either funds or information for a federal election campaign. The second case study examines letters written by a banking company seeking to sell a very similar service to both Canadians and Americans. The ways they choose to persuade Canadians and Americans are, however, remarkably different.

**American Candidate and Canadian Political Party Requests**

During the 1991 presidential campaign the Clinton campaign wrote the fundraising letter, the first page of which appears in Figure 3.

There are all kinds of rhetorical appeals being made in this letter, of course, but I want to focus on what I see as the essential American quality of it. It is a direct appeal for money, ostensibly from the candidate himself. The letter is dated "Monday evening, 10 p.m." and signed
“Bill Clinton” (in handwritten blue ink) to reduce distance. Such a tactic—reducing the distance between the writer and reader—also plays to the anti-government feelings of people who believe that most politicians have lost touch with the people. Nevertheless, reducing distance in this way is one characteristic of American culture (Hofstede, 1984, p. 77). In a similar way the salutation “Dear Friend,” would strike Canadians as too familiar because it assumes too great an intimacy with the audience; in the context of an American direct mail letter, though, it functions as a polite greeting from an equal.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic marking this as an example of American discourse is the allegory of “riding the campaign trail.” If a Canadian politician might have written this letter she or he might have alluded to patrolling the great northwest as a member of the RCMP. The letter builds on the ethos of the honest cowboy or sheriff and transfers it to the honest people who have been tricked by the “con artists” of the Republican party. The appeal to rewarding “hard work and honest effort” with advancement is a basic and abiding belief that is characteristic of American culture; it is not that other cultures do not also hold this belief but that they apply it and conceive of it differently. In Canada, for example, hard work and honest effort are
Also important, but the tax system, health care system, and other forms of social welfare express a concern for the community that balances the focus on the self. Finally, the appeal to plain-dealing also strikes me as characteristic of American culture:

You and I both know that every day between now and November 3rd will present us Democrats with a new set of challenges. But, we're ready to meet those challenges head-on because we know what's at stake.

This fund-raising letter from Bill Clinton relies upon narratives recalling the cowboy ("riding" on the "trail"), the frontiersman's basic moral decency, and the value in tackling problems "head-on." How does this compare to a Canadian approach?

The Canadian political letter is not written by the candidate for prime minister, which itself raises the power distance ratio rather than lowering it. Technically, voters do not cast ballots for the prime minister—they elect members of parliament who then choose a leader among them. In practice, the elections are contested with a focus on the person who will become the head of state in a manner similar to that of the United States. While this technicality may explain why the letter was not written by the leader, the unpopularity of the previous prime minister, Brian Mulroney (a Progressive Conservative), is an alternative explanation. The salutation for the letter reads "Dear Mr. _____" rather than "Dear Friend" or "Dear [firstname]." The document design of the two letters also send messages about distance. The Clinton letter does not use letterhead at all, opting instead for plain paper with a faint blue cross-hatch pattern that suggests a cotton-paper stock similar to personal letter-writing paper. The type is a heavy courier that suggests it was written on a old portable typewriter. In contrast, the Canadian letter has a header that reads "Official National Direction Survey" and a footer that gives a return address under a heavy double line. The print is set in a laser-printer serif font and includes a bulleted list in the middle of the third paragraph. These features suggest bureaucracy and formality; they also establish distance between the writer and reader while at the same time establishing credibility for the writer.

The text of the letter does not invoke any narratives about cowboys, trails, and con artists:

Lots of polls in the news tell us how people feel about some of the things which have been done in the past, but few tell us exactly what the individual citizen wants done in the future. I hope you will find a few minutes to fill out the attached questionnaire. When I have the results of all the people surveyed, I will be discussing your views with Prime Minister Kim Campbell because I believe it is crucial for me to share this information with the new leader of our Government. Those who respond will hear back from the Prime Minister after the results have been reviewed [emphasis in the original].
Instead, the text of this letter only increases the distance between the prime minister and the electorate: the writer of the letter mediates between whatever the results of the questionnaire are and the person who has power to do anything about the issues raised. Even phrases such as "what the individual citizen wants" establish distance as do the other vaguely bureaucratic phrases that characterize this letter. Furthermore, the questionnaire itself (the evidence used to support assertions that the writer wants to hear from individual citizens) is largely an exercise in checking boxes to questions that will be scored by a computer. Finally, rather than hearing from the leader right away, the Canadian letter promises some contact with the leader as a consequence or reward for filling out the survey. Reduced distance is an intrinsic reward or privilege rather than a strategy for getting a hearing. The language of this letter is one of bureaucratic power of the "Government" or collective.

In contrast, the American letters seek to reduce distance between the writer and reader in the salutations used, in the document design chosen, and in the construction of a suitable narrative for the audience. The evidence supplied for the American audience is anecdotal (stories from the campaign trail), while evidence for the Canadian reader is bureaucratic.

The Rhetoric of Financial Services

Politics, while never far removed from money, may use a different approach to direct mail than the financial services industry. The two letters examined in this section were sent by an American financial institution to an American address and by the Canadian subsidiary of the company to a Canadian address. The product is identical, although banking regulations in the two countries may allow the cards being advertised to be used slightly differently. The letters seem to have been sent from different people: the signatures and addresses are different, the size of the paper is different, and the letterhead is different. However, the cultural dimensions of both letters are American in the sense that they seek to reduce power distance and assert the value of the individual. The arguments in the letters, however, have been adapted to each audience.

The American letter begins by assuming the stance of a friend or acquaintance telling a story and establishing a connection with the reader through the use of the pronouns "us" and "we":

Like most of us, your wallet probably carries more than currency, a driver's license and credit cards. Perhaps tucked away inside are snapshots of family and friends. Or the fortune from a dinner at your favorite Chinese restaurant. These personal items we carry remind us of special times and places that mean a lot to us. And to get the most from those times and places,
I'd like to encourage you to apply for the _____ card. It fits into both the personal and financial sides of your wallet.

This narrative about the fictional contents of "our" wallets is meant to decrease the distance between the writer and reader of the letter. The emotional appeal to happy memories and family and friends also seeks to establish a connection, in much the same way as the Clinton letter's narrative sought to establish connection and play on emotion.

The Canadian letter also opens by seeking to reduce distance through the allegiance to a common value:

The difference between _____ [card holders] and the rest of the world can be summed up in two words: financial responsibility.

In a world of changing values, we believe you belong to that select group of people who spend wisely, and pay their bills on time. Whose word is their bond.

As in the earlier excerpt from a credit card letter from a Canadian bank, the appeal here is to financial responsibility – thriftiness. The American letter makes absolutely no mention of financial responsibility; in fact, it makes much of "savings opportunities – from Mrs. Fields Cookies to Saks Fifth Avenue; from Avis-Rent-a-Car to Cunard's Queen Elizabeth 2." The Canadian letter plays upon the commonplace of inclusion or exclusion: those who have the card belong to a "select group of people who spend wisely," while those who do not have it are financially irresponsible. The letter addressed to the American audience does not play upon this commonplace; for that audience the hope is that "the card fits into your lifestyle as easily as it fits into your wallet." Attaining the card is a way for Canadians to step up culturally and economically, while for Americans it is seen as simply another addition to their already "powerful" lifestyle.

The evidence used to support the argument that the receiver should spend $55 to obtain the card is also quite different in each letter. The longest paragraph in the Canadian letter describes the details of using the card; a version of this paragraph also appears in the American letter. In the American letter, three long paragraphs are devoted to explaining the features of the card – what you can purchase with it, how it will supply thousands of "friends" to help you out of trouble. The Canadian letter omits the information about what the card can purchase, and it casts company employees as "customer services representatives" rather than "friends." The Canadian letter also makes no mention of "we" or "us." This is not equivalent to the bureaucratic language found in the Canadian political letter; however, it is a more formal phrase that establishes some distance between the writer and reader. These locutions result in a greater distance between writer and reader in the Canadian letter, and they support the rhetorical appeal for readers to step up and become part of a select group.
Writing to Canadians

The case studies of the political letters and the letters promoting the same financial services card to Canadians and to Americans highlights some of the difficulty in revising American business discourse for Canadian audiences. The impulse to attempt to reduce distance, while appropriate for American discourse, must be done carefully with Canadian audiences. Canadians generally are not comfortable with phrases such as "friend" when applied to someone they have not already met. The bureaucratic language of the Canadian political letter obeys the cultural norms of respecting distance between two people who have never met. Furthermore, any hint that an American product or service will confer cultural capital upon the recipient will be regarded suspiciously. The evidence used in support of these letters must also be carefully chosen. American direct-mail letters provide a veritable cornucopia of consumer delights – what can’t you buy with a credit card? The letters examined here suggest that Canadian audiences are much more likely to focus on how they are going to pay for all these delights – financial responsibility, in the words of one letter.

The differences between American direct-mail letters and Canadian ones can best be explained as a difference in cultures. These letters are cultural objects – they appear to be the same, yet they are used differently because of the limits on how they will be read or understood. We need to use the term "cultural objects" because it reminds us that these things are different in different contexts, even when they seem the same. The idea of genres of business discourse as cultural objects themselves is important because such a conceptualization reminds us that direct mail in one culture may not be received or operate in the same way in another. Other genres of business discourse may also change from one culture to another. If this is true, then research and practice in various genres of business discourse need to be re-examined to identify the "horizon of expectations" each culture has for them.

NOTE

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REFERENCES


