



- DAVID WATTLING, eHEALTH EDITOR -

## Of beer, hockey, and all good things Canadian

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**A**fter spending 10 days riding a motorcycle through the Northwest US I am struck but by a few things. And I don't mean how seemingly respectful the young highway patrolman was when he handed me a speeding ticket that, when converted to our currency, represents a king's ransom. No I'm talking about the ubiquitous "Made in the USA". Arguably our cousins to the south have created one of the most powerful brands in the world. Domestically it signifies jobs for neighbors, friends and family, and their healthy pursuit of the American dream. It is also clear that buying American assures economic stability and growth. Abroad the "Made in the USA" label stands for quality and allows foreigners to share vicariously in the American mystique.

Now turning our attention inward, what would foreigners think of Canada? - Likely, great expanses of land, natural beauty, a clean and unspoiled wilderness, and nice people. If they were sports fans they'd know the great game of hockey and, if they didn't "click through" the adverts, they'd know about our beer. The latter, in my opinion, being an incredibly well done "proud to be Canadian" brand - one I see resonating with our young people. But would the average foreigner know about our inventive nature, about the amount of R&D we do, the number of patents we file, and the like? Would they know that the quality of our healthcare system is second to none in the world? Likely not.

Inasmuch as the American brand has evolved from "the American dream" to "Made in the USA", so must Canada's evolve from one that is presently lifestyle focused, if I may generalize, to one that is economically based.

So what does any of this have to do with eHealth? I would suggest that, next to beer and hockey, most Canadians identify strongly with our social system, notably embodied in healthcare. Secondly if memory serves, we are the most wired country in the world. Put the two together and we can foresee a place on the world stage for a "Canadian built" eHealth industry. Why shouldn't we claim this space? - Maybe not for the administrative, but certainly for the clinical side.

I see so many Canadian companies trying to disguise themselves as American when they do business there. Why? We have a lot to be proud of, both in healthcare and our innovation/science sectors.

Now this is a job for all parties to collaborate on - and to benefit from.

For the private sector, we need to get organized. There are too many cottage industry companies fighting with each other for business, and good people. None are that healthy. What we need to be doing is increasing the size of the pie and creating capacity. This means

getting a larger proportion of Canada's business but also, with a more effective international marketing campaign, more of the global market.

For the public health system, which is about to embark on unprecedented levels of spending on IT, we have the ultimate tool to fuel an organized Canadian Health IT industry.

For the IT professional, who for the most part wants to work in Canada, there can be comparable compensation and working conditions. We all know that attraction and retention of healthcare professionals is probably the largest crisis in healthcare today. But have we considered whether we have the IT staff and more importantly, IT leaders, to step up to the demand that the new IT spending will necessitate? But, I digress - that's the subject of a whole editorial into itself.

And finally for the federal government - I'm thinking of Industry Canada and Western Diversification - here's a perfect opportunity to foster a new industry - one that can be a global leader.

Done well, Canada can build a strong industry within the country to service our healthcare system needs at an affordable price. In so doing we'll retain the best and brightest, as we'll be able to both pay and motivate them. If we don't take advantage of today's once-in-a-lifetime opportunity the industry will continue to flounder, the good people will head south, and our healthcare system will be buying foreign (mostly US) product, incurring a 50% premium, and paying to have it customized to meet Canadian needs.

So what's stopping us? Let's get the dialogue going - at the conferences, at the national "think talks" and among the industry players. Beer, hockey and our natural assets will only get us so far as a country - a "Canadian built" eHealth industry can help solidify our internal economy and put us squarely on the world stage.

