

Some Notes on Semiotics and “Sensory Marketing”



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The following two points serve as a foundation for approaching brands from in terms of sensory, esthetic, and emotional needs they satisfy in the consumer:

- A brand is a sign for the field of meanings consumers integrate into their personal space to enhance, complement or transform themselves and their world.
- Semiotic analysis clarifies the codes shaping the meaning of the brand in creative execution.

“Sensory marketing” is another way of describing the form and function of all marketing communication, which aims to create awareness and influence consumer behavior via the various sensory channels leading to the brain. Moreover, the tools available to the marketer to create and interpret meanings can be traced back to classical rhetoric. Brands are less about “stuff,” the material benefits of goods and services, than about the meanings and emotions they trigger in the hearts and minds of consumers. Branding not only influences the choice of goods and services, but extends to the realms of politics, social activism, and personal identity, shaping our views of the world and of each other. The power of brand communication to move huge masses of people to feel, think, and act - proves that the ancient art of persuasion is alive and well in our time.

In my marketing research practice I employ the analytical tools and theories of semiotics, a branch of cultural anthropology devoted to the study of signs. Semiotic theories and methods can be used to identify trends in popular culture, to understand how consumer attitudes and behavior are formed in relation to popular culture, including brands, and how marketing and advertising programs can best meet the needs of consumers by improving communication with the end user. Semiotics - some call it a discipline, others a doctrine - makes possible the rigorous and systematic collection and analysis of data drawn from communication of all kinds - artistic or everyday, in all kinds of media including verbal, visual, and olfactory. Semiotics is particularly useful for clarifying brand equities in the brand audit, then tracking the implementation of these equities across all elements of the marketing mix.

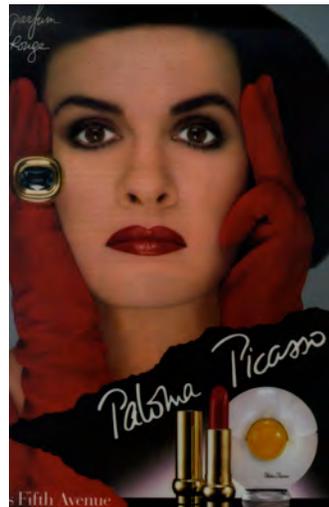
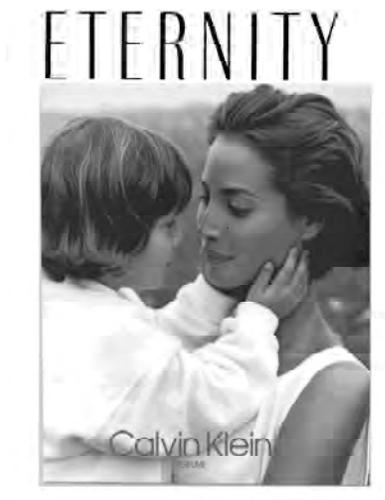
We are living in an age of the visible, therefore to a great extent the other senses are subordinate to vision for the tasks of reading, interpreting, and understanding the world. For this reason my first examples will focus on visual communication.

Years ago I was brought in to help with a new product launch by a major designer in the luxury perfume category. Since perfume is intimately tied to the consumer’s interpretation of the feminine, I decided to begin examining the perfume category with the question, What is Woman? Beginning with a large collection of print ads for perfumes and colognes from magazines, I performed a semiotic “sort” of the ads, eliminating those that clearly fell outside the category of luxury perfumes and ending

with two stacks of ads representing two categories of the meaning for “woman.” The first line of division was between the ads in color and the ads in black and white. A semiotic sort not only classifies units of data by things they have in common, such as look and feel, but by the meanings they share with other units. In this example, to make a long story short, the ads in color form one subcategory of luxury perfumes and shared other semiotic characteristics such as the placement of the model in the ad, the social status of her clothing, and the social context in which she was placed. The ads in black and white form a second subcategory of luxury perfumes, and also shared similar semiotic dimensions. Following is a grid outlining the oppositions between one stack of ads and the other. Each column represents a *sign system*, a web of interrelated variables that contribute to the semiotic world of the subcategory.

You will notice that rhetoric comes in here, particularly in terms of visual stylistics. The more realistic, narrative style of the image on the left is what I’d call “metonymical,” inasmuch as it is a slice of life that leads the spectator into the character’s story by means of a mental association of contiguity. The image on the right is more metaphorical, inasmuch as it emphasizes the look of the character in a more static way, by means of a mental association of similarity.

Example: What is Woman? The Semiotic World of Luxury Perfumes



BLACK AND WHITE ADS	ADS IN COLOR
Mode of Representation: Narrative prose	Mode of Representation: Icon.
Model as the “girl next door”	Model as “universal goddess”
Model in medium shot looking at someone else in the image.	Model in close-up looking straight into the camera.
Metonymy [based on contiguity]	Metaphor [based on similarity]
Casual, realistic lifestyle.	Formal, fantasy lifestyle.
Concept of “woman” as everyday <i>women</i> .	Concept of woman as unattainable ideal, <i>Woman</i> .
Ads for American perfumes.	Ads for French perfumes.

Since the client was an American designer, we recommended that the new product inhabit the semiotic world in the left column. We also recommended that they borrow some of the meanings in the right column, such as the universal goddess theme, in order to break away from other American brands, without however, betraying their legacy as the designer brand celebrating an American ideal of the natural, everyday women in real life settings. A Cindy Crawford type was considered for the model.

This positioning in the realm of brand meaning influenced other aspects of the product positioning such as the name, the package design, the retail display, and even the scent. In other words, communication aimed at various sensory receptors - vision, olfactory, and touch, and produced within a consistent set of cultural meanings for American women, contributed to the clarity, focus, and persuasive power of the brand. In this example, semiotics intervened at various stages of the new product launch, including research, strategy, and design.

All brand communication should play a role in build a relationship with the consumer, a relationship that should be developed and sustained across other points of contact with the brand. Though analysis of brand equities in print and television advertising is the most obvious application of semiotics, this methodology makes a science out of integrating brand communication across other marketing “occasions,” such as packaging, retail display, media choices, and even sponsored events.