

## The importance of semiotics in branding

---

Written by Dr Kishore Budha, 1HQ

Wednesday, 27 July 2011 10:15

SocButtons plugin

Semiotics delivers strategic research and analysis that generates robust and inspirational outcomes that can be used for a range of activities from brand strategy, planning to creative development.



Brand managers and marketing heads need every insight and strategic tool to develop and grow their branded assets. Unlike conventional research, semiotics delivers strategic research and analysis that generates robust and inspirational outcomes that can be used for a range of activities from brand strategy, planning to creative development.

Semiotics can be described as the science of studying all the signs and symbols in a given culture that interact with the signs and symbols embedded in a brand, whether communications, packaging or product and shape consumer understanding. Semiotics can thus be a powerful tool to create awareness, develop brand associations and add brand values that make a difference in the market.

### So, how can brands benefit from semiotics?

#### **Semiotics leads to innovations that are rooted in lived experiences**

The key benefit of semiotics is that all innovation, communication/product/packaging design is rooted in the lived experience of human beings. This means any new product, brand, or communication will immediately make sense to consumers as the outcomes are derived from the culture itself.

Take the Nintendo Wii, for example. When we consider the semiotics of gaming culture, the development of the Wii was an inspired outcome that not only leveraged culture but also changed culture. Prior to the launch of the Wii, gaming had become synonymous with youth, masculinity and alienation. Gaming had thus become a “sign” of the “couch potatoes” and symbolised everything wrong with technological societies where human relations eventually broke down. It was also associated with the obesity panics. Gaming thus symbolised a culture of “laziness”, inactivity

and therefore non-participation in society.

Nintendo used gaming and created a brand that symbolised a solution to problems associated with gaming culture. It combined a latent – and unarticulated need for human interaction and activity. Traditional research would have ordinarily talked to gamers who would respond by asking for more of the same. The opportunity lay in stepping outside of the gaming immersion and looking outside in. Clearly the opportunity lay in bringing the family together, enhanced community play and making people active. The solution – Wii – defined the norms of gaming, which were earlier focused on higher video resolution and action, which demanded faster processing. Wii, interestingly uses a lower video resolution and a rather clunky console and controller.

### **Semiotic analysis vs traditional market research**

Whilst traditional market research asks consumers for their opinions and behaviours, semiotics closely examines culture to uncover the underlying cultural triggers for those responses.

Take, for example, black tea. Traditional market research will ask consumers about their thoughts on tea, what they like about tea, what they don't like, what they would change. It may bring about some very interesting insights. However, what semiotics uncovers is the cultural significance of tea. Tea drinking is a British tradition which spans the last 350 years. It signifies a way of socialising, a way of relaxing and a way of recovering from a stressful day. Tea drinking, as we know it, is deeply engrained into British culture. Even though people may take their tea in different ways, different strengths, different amounts of milk and different amounts of sugar, there is an unwritten law about tea, i.e., the leaves, and the brew itself, never change. 1HQ has worked in the area of black tea innovation and was able to advise a tea major on go and no-go areas as the cultural stakes were too high to be lost, especially when black tea constitutes 70 per cent of the UK market.

### **Brands can create culture rather than respond to it**

Another benefit of semiotics is to help brands actively create culture, rather than merely responding to it. Brands can either be product leaders, or follower brands. Product leader brands are the trend-setters. They reach the top of their field through radical product innovations that shape the way we think about our relationship with other objects, people or even the world.

Take for example Twitter. Not only does it allow everyone to publish digitally, but it introduces an element of speed and changes the nature of communication in the online world. We are only too aware of the impact of Twitter on politics, fashion, relief efforts and even war. It has changed the way at least a section of the world think of humanity. Red Bull, Facebook, Dyson are examples of product leader brands. Then there are brands such as Dell or Gap, which tend to be follower brands: although they are successful, their competitors have the better of them.

Semiotics can help brands shift from being followers to leaders: from responding to culture, to creating it.

Firstly brands must consider the cultural environment, and whether they are creating it, or merely responding to it. If they are responding to it they must ask themselves how they can innovate to create culture to avoid being passed over.

## Conclusion

Semiotics can have a great influence on brands and brand development, and some of the most exciting innovations in recent years have used semiotic analysis. Semiotics can help brands in a number of ways: they make innovations that naturally fit into society, they uncover ideas and insights that do not necessarily arise from traditional market research, and they help brands create culture rather than merely respond to it.

Semiotics need not be costly or time consuming. Even a few hours of semiotic consideration can inspire you and push the boundaries of thinking, helping you to think laterally and strategically. Even in today's time-pressured society, taking just a little time out to think semiotically can help answer the one hard question your brand is facing and solve problems which may take huge amounts of time with traditional methods.

Semiotic thinking really is the brand management tool of the future.

---

*Dr Budha is an expert brand semiotician and leading brand culture strategist. He has a PhD in Semiotics and Cultural Studies and an MA in International Communications from the University of Leeds. Dr Budha specialises in uncovering wider and deeper social meanings in order to further enhance existing brands and new products.*

*Dr Budha works with some major brands at IHQ, including Heinz, Unilever, Nokia and Nestle to name a few. IHQ tackle branding problems by asking 'the one hard question' your company is facing and try to find a solution by asking the right questions first – of which semiotics plays a major role. As a result IHQ have been the brains behind some of Britain's best loved products such as pyramid tea bags, Snack-A-Jacks, Rowntree Randoms and Nestle Celebrations.*