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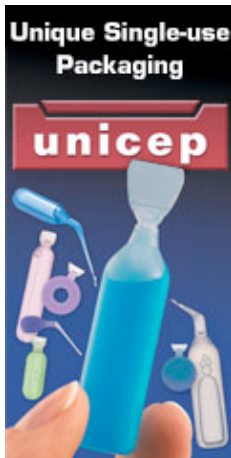
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RESEARCH

Heading Upstream

Semiotic Analysis for Package Design

By J. Duncan Berry

Upstream work has to be the most exciting and challenging area for package designers today. Everyday, in innovation workshops all over the country, new and established brands are seeking effective ways to bring vibrant, consumer-centric ideas to life.

Stakeholders from far-flung departments that rarely meet under "normal" circumstances are now coming together to share their knowledge. Marketers, R&D types, the finance group, brand owners, and designers all share a space for a day (or longer) in order to explore the elasticity of brand offerings by applying fresh consumer insights, new stimuli, and sometimes whacky exercises that jumpstart the creative process for the most left-brained among the group.

With this as the task at hand, and considering that a marketer's primary task is to increase "share of mind," it is truly pathetic to peer into managers' toolboxes only to discover that they've been fitted with perfectly gorgeous screwdrivers, when socket wrenches are the order of the day!

It goes without saying that to be successful, innovations must speak to consumers directly and in their own language. All the benefit-tweaking, the strategy maps and research "shelfware" in the world will never enable marketers to understand—let alone address—the process by which consumers recognize, integrate, and seek out meaningful offerings in an intensely crowded marketplace.

And this is where strategically-minded package designers have a unique qualification that can close this gap and add significantly to the value of the innovation proposition. We are finding global brands that demand a clear, simple, and systematic method to extend the life and vitality of upstream insight through to shelf are finding it in semiotics.



Diageo and Dove extend their brands so well because they pay attention—"semiotically"—to the strengths of their design elements.



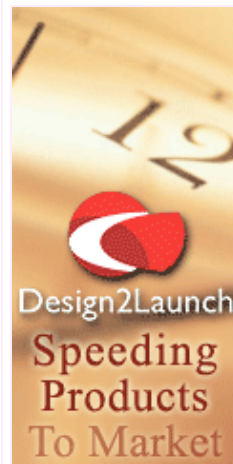
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What is semiotics?

Semiotics is the study of signs, or something that stands for something else, and codes, or combinations of signs. The term semiotics derives from the ancient Greek word for sign, but dedicated inquiry into the nature of signs as a whole did not really take off until a century ago, with the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American logician Charles Sanders Peirce.

Although semiotics has been widely used in undergraduate academic approaches to literature, film, and pop culture for a quarter of a century, it was deemed to be of limited value to directly commercial work because much of what semiotics taught was, quite frankly, anti-commercial.

However, in the last few years, a new generation of designers, researchers, and consumer insight specialists is looking to semiotics and finding enormous value. Because semioticians offer a clear framework and direct vocabulary for describing both how products project meanings as well as how people construct meaning, all of a sudden that path between initial insight and shelf presence begins to straighten out.

With semiotics, innovation starting points and goals need no longer be separated by a maze of conflicting claims. For instance, in my semiotic practice with a number of CPG brands, we often begin with a high-altitude semiotic examination of the "sensory images" that specific products use to convey meaning to individual consumers. Some brands or products are primarily tactile, while others are scent-dominant or taste-dominant. When we explain why a certain brand is in the "mouth business," for instance, it often comes as a shock to senior executives that the mouth is capable of carrying so many types of meanings and messages.

Every sense offers a wide spectrum of opportunities that marketers and designers can draw upon in order to expand the significance of a given innovation. While the fullness of sensory events is often lost on marketers, semiotics brings this central issue back on stage in a way that every stakeholder can witness and participate in the meaning-making effort around which all innovators strive.

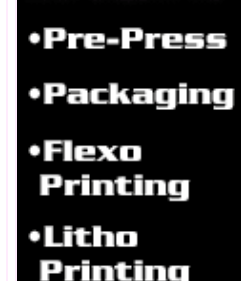
Making the connections

Regardless of sensory pathway, products only become meaningful (that is, valuable) when they connect a functional benefit to an emotional reward. Semiotics is a translator between brand intention and consumer recognition. It is the framing of these concerns with a simple vocabulary and coherent explanation of how we construct meaning that is semiotics' chief advantage for marketers.

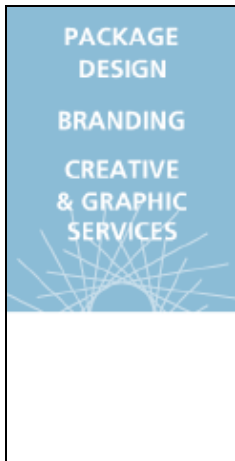
On a strategic level, semiotics enables a brand's stakeholders to grasp at once the overarching conversations within a given category. This level of semiotic analysis often comes as a surprise to marketers and brand owners, insofar as they may have thought all of these ideas at one time or another, but they have never had this "conversation" mapped out so clearly and compellingly.

This kind of strategic consideration of how meaning is being conveyed and constructed enables brand owners to see where the field may be crowded, and where the new opportunities are. It also allows brand owners to build metric models to measure which areas of the conversation are growing in value and which may be on the way out.

One of the leaders in using semiotics to honor their consumers is Diageo. They "decode" the various levels of discourse very well. For instance, they are able to nail



The versatility of the Tide brand can be attributed partly to the strength of the design elements, when analyzed under the science of semiotics.



down their demographic and psychographic profiles within a specific novelty market and produce a corresponding narrative and sign set that can then be "encoded" so as to connect immediately. It is a savvy and successful methodology that has been applied elsewhere in the consumer world.

There is a second level of semiotic work, one that mirrors these strategic considerations for new brands and products, but is dedicated to broadening the range of meaning and value of existing brands and products. Semiotics also offers an incredibly rich, granular approach to analyzing existing brand equities and morphing them toward more effective, resonant, and profitable designs.

Tactical semiotics is performed by breaking every signifying element of a package billboard and graphic into its constituent type. Most semioticians prefer Peirce's three-part system of sign, symbol, and index. From here, each sign type is isolated and evaluated according to its ability to "show"—as opposed to "tell"—the intended message.

This type of semiotic operation can be done in layers, with the graphics broken down in Photoshop-style components, or it can be done simultaneously. Either way, the most revealing aspect of this exercise is to see just how much "fat" or wasted signage is usually packed onto a label. There is often extra signage that is unseen, unread, and useless.

A tactical semiotic analysis of an existing SKU or SKU set is the perfect baseline for testing design innovations and renovations. This can be done in any number of ways, and can be used in to help parse out conjoint analysis tests, RDE design research, and agent-based modeling package research. All in all, semiotics is helping designers fill the gap between the intensely charged upstream insight and tactical downstream know-how.

J. Duncan Berry, Ph.D., is director of the Applied Iconology Inc. research firm that specializes in neuromarketing research analysis. He is currently working with laga to create a new design research and management tool called NeuroDesign™, an exacting analytical framework for orchestrating emotional resonance through design. Dr. Berry can be reached at dberry@laga.com.

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