

Semiotics and Strategic Brand Management

Laura Oswald, Ph.D.
Director, Marketing Semiotics Inc.

Semiotics and Brand Equity

Over the past ten years or so, brand strategy researchers have come to recognize the importance of brand communication in building and sustaining brand equity, the value attached to a brand name or logo that supercedes product attributes and differentiates brands in the competitive arena (See Aaker, Keller, Foster, Fournier, Schmidt, Holt) The contribution of brand meanings and perceptions to profitability – the Coca Cola brand is valued at over \$70 billion - testifies to the power of symbolic representation to capture the hearts and minds of consumers by means of visual, audio, and verbal signs. The semiotic dimension of brands is therefore instrumental for building awareness, positive associations, and long-term customer loyalty, and contributes to trademark ownership and operational advantages such as channel and media clout. Consequently, managing brand equity means managing brand semiotics.

For more information, see my new book, *Marketing Semiotics: Signs, Strategies and Brand Value* (Oxford U. Press).

Thus rather than define brand semiotics as a supplement to the traditional marketing toolbox of product, price, promotion and placement, I propose that brand equity management is entirely semiotic, and that a brand can be defined as a *system of signs* and symbols that engages the consumer in an imaginary/symbolic process that contributes tangible value to a product offering. This process may include a vicarious experience, a relationship, or need fulfillment and may operate at the levels of product, price, promotion, or placement. Semiotics is thus a cornerstone of brand equity management, since symbolic communication ties consumption to the form of brand communication in advertising, packaging, and brand logo.

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The Complexity of Marketing Sign Systems

As a sign system, brand communication is achieved through a complex matrix of signifying elements, including material, structural, conventional, contextual, and performative dimensions. Let me illustrate this reference to the logo for the McDonald's (on the right).

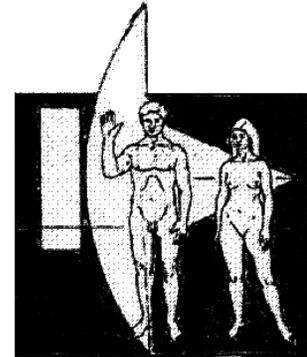
- *Material* – a visual icon.
- *Structural* – golden arches, red background, brand name superimposed on the arches in white, squared font. The arches located to the left of the square so the logo moves off to the right, suggesting movement.
- *Conventional or Codified* – the golden arches, the color scheme, and the brand name consistently signify the company and brand offerings for the McDonald's company. Anywhere in the world, in various languages, this logo tells the consumer that a burger and fries are not far away. (French McDonald's, on the right)
- *Contextual* – The time and place in which the logo is situated contributes to the subjective connotations of this sign system. For example, while some consumers in the U.S. market may associate McDonald's with cheap, unhealthy fast food, in many markets in the world, such as China, McDonald's represents a special treat. The contextual environment may also embed brand communication in cultural archetypes and myth, creating either positive or negative associations derived from local interpretations of the message. (Example below)
- *Performative* – Marketing sign systems engage consumer/spectators in a communication event by means of codes inscribing subject positions for I and you in representation. This dimension is crucial for building brand relationship and for calling the consumer to action, i.e. making a brand choice.



Controlling for Cultural Nuances

Marketers have more or less control over the material, structural and conventional elements of brand communication, but risk miscommunication and ambivalence at the levels of the contextual and performative elements. A case in point is the representation of women in an annual report for the McDonald’s corporation dating back to 1996. By decoding gender archetypes in the ads, I reveal an unfortunate stereotype about the role of women that could tarnish the brand.

Before I show that case, I will introduce the reader to elementary semiotic analysis of a cultural archetype that was placed on the side of a Pioneer Satellite in 1970, with the express purpose, according to NASA scientists, of communicating universal meanings about mankind to the potential interlocutors from outer space. (Image, right) A two-stage semiotic analysis reveals the difficulty of this task. Even if there were space creatures who ‘read’ visual communication in the expected way, they would not obtain an objective, universal understanding of mankind but a stereotypical communication about the dominance of the white male in the West at the end of the millennium.



A cursory binary analysis of the organization of the figures in the frame, the direction of their looks, and the details of their presentation, leads to paradigmatic oppositions linking the male to power, speech, action, and self-control, and linking the female to passivity, silence, inaction and lack of control. The male stands upright and strong in the foreground, feet planted squarely on the ground, looking out with authority towards the spectator and communicating with his right hand. The female slouches in the background, looking to him (is “spoken” through him?), relaxed, hands at her sides. The binary analysis is summarized in the following grid:

Plotting the Cultural Archetype	
Male	Female
Foreground	Background
Upright	Slouching
Strong	Weak
Looking	Looked at
Speaking	Silent
Power	Lack of Power

Implications for Brand Equity

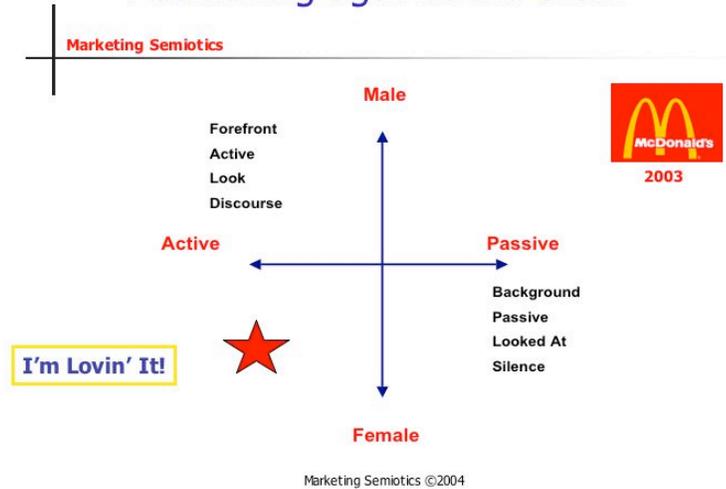
A quick look at the representation of women in an old (1996) annual report for the McDonald’s corporation illustrates the implications of the cultural context for brand communication. In the following ad, the two men engage in a power play – shaking hands, addressing each other with speech and looks, standing strongly and securely in the foreground of the image. The woman sits silently in the background, at a level below the men, eyes looking up to them as if to silence her own voice by listening to the men. The majority of the ads in this particular annual report repeat this pattern, supporting a discourse about the role of women in the brand legacy that belies the marketing strategy of a brand targeted, at that time, to moms and kids.

1996 Annual Report



The following binary grid demonstrates how the representation of cultural archetypes translates into brand positioning, and suggests ways a more relevant brand positioning in 2003 transcended cultural stereotype and included active females.

Positioning against the Grain



McDonald's made the correction in future advertising, signaling a sure if somewhat delayed response to the changing cultural environment. In following years, both the annual report and advertising communicated multicultural, assertive women looking straight into the camera, reflecting the post-modern nuances of global consumer culture. (Ads attached.)

McDonald's Repositioning 2003

