

Making Sense of the Brandscape

Summary of an interview with NPR's Salt Magazine in 2018.

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In a recent interview for NPR's [SALT](#) (2018), we discussed the challenges facing global food companies such as PepsiCo as they pursue the promise of endless growth in emerging markets. For many big name brands, the allure of these markets has proven disappointing, regardless of the brand's prestige in the West, its product benefits, or the scope of its media campaigns. Time after time, despite management's efforts to tailor their products to local consumers through taste tests and advertising research, cultural differences continue to create barriers to consumer acceptance and loyalty. In the interview, I also explained that semiotics-based research is a surefire way to mitigate these cultural barriers by accounting for the cultural codes that structure how consumers communicate, move about in social space, and assign more or less value to goods.

The Semiotic Solution

Semiotics is a hybrid of communication science and anthropology that accounts for the codes that regulate and perpetuate culture. Though we may think of culture simply as the set of codes responsible for our national identity, i.e. Mom, baseball, and apple pie, consumers engage and move about in a variety of subcultures in daily life, from home or gym to the workplace or supermarket.

Semiotic codes are the visible signs of the cultural norms responsible for social organization, value creation, and group identity. Semioticians identify these codes by observing patterns in consumer behavior and communication that recur over time. Think of semioticians as Martians visiting Chicago from outer space. To decode the meaning of a Stop sign, they would track what happens when drivers approached the sign. In a matter of time, the Martian-semioticians would infer that the red octagonal sign means "Stop," since drivers routinely stop when they approach the sign. Likewise, marketing semioticians spend a lot of time observing consumers at home,

work and at the market to figure out the underlying codes that structure the ways consumers make sense of the marketplace. They comb through dozens of artifacts from popular media to service environments to uncover links between the visible semiotics of fashion, technology use, and food consumption and intangible rewards such as status, sex appeal, or belonging.

In the marketplace, codes regulate the meaning and value of goods in a product category such as food and beverage. On the supermarket shelf, codes organize brands in terms of things like product quality, health benefits and value and appear in the design and language on packaging. The color scheme, lettering font, rhetorical style, and overall design of packaging represent in shorthand the brand positioning and value proposition. Consider the contrasts between the packaging on generic and premium brands, for instance.

In language, as in culture, semiotic systems are binary structures that define distinctions between contrasting units of meaning. The notion of "value" is entirely dependent upon oppositions within cultural categories, such as premium vs mass marketed or Natural vs Processed ingredients. Such contrasts are clearly visible in packaging style and design. For example, a study of the snack food category in North America found that brands in the Natural category consistently use packaging with a white background, matte paper, a simple, all natural ingredient panel, and a photograph of a key ingredient such as a vanilla bean or flowing milk. In contrast, Processed brands consistently use packaging with bright primary (not natural) colors, shiny paper, a complex ingredient panel that includes chemicals, and hyperbolic claims that emphasize pleasure and taste – "Wow!" We also found that these codes were not limited to snack foods but structure the meaning and the perception of brand value across packaged food categories.

([Oswald 2012](#)) Consumers internalize these distinctions through repeated exposure over time, not unlike the way we acquire our native language. Packaging codes facilitate consumer choice at point of purchase, since shoppers do not have to read the ingredient panel on every package to determine if the brand is Processed, Natural, or Organic, if the price point is economical or premium, or if the brand is positioned as healthy or fun.

Semiotic codes also structure the flow of shopper traffic in stores where they form a kind of "rules of the road" for the customer experience. These codes are tailored to the specific needs of

each retail category, from boutiques to supermarkets, and also to the specific cultural traditions in a given market. Through force of habit, shoppers know where to look for the checkout counter at most supermarkets without asking for directions ([Oswald 2015](#), 88-115) They can discern the boundaries separating consumer space from the spaces reserved for the merchant, such as the cash counter or the kitchen. And they know from habit that grocers place the milk at the back of the store to encourage shoppers to browse other departments on their way to the dairy department.

A Cultural Brand Strategy

Just as semiotic codes structure the meaning and value of goods and define distinctions between subcultures in established markets, semiotic codes also account for the cultural differences that distinguish national cultures on a global scale. Since consumers in emerging markets associate different meanings and values to brands, consumer rituals, and packaging semiotics, imported brands often miss the mark. Far too often marketers in the West behave as if the marketplace still evolved around white European culture. It is still common management practice to centralize global strategy around a single positioning originating in North America and then translate the positioning into signs and language tailored to consumers in local markets (see [Aaker and Joachimsthaler 1999](#)). They may conduct taste testing to adjust flavor to local preferences, but overlook the meanings, rituals, and nostalgia for tradition that shape consumers' taste preferences.

The meaning and value that consumers associate with brands are shaped to a great extent by the cultural norms or codes that regulate how they speak, navigate social space, and make sense of the market. In my own research I observe barriers to brand acceptance in countries such as China and India due to tensions between the brand and the local culture. Local consumers may not find a fit between a product such as dry breakfast bars and their breakfast routine, or relate the brand to the specific meaning of hot versus cold foods in their world. Furthermore, advertising strategy may miss the mark entirely if local consumers do not even relate to the concept of a brand identity or "relationship" at all ([Oswald 2016](#)).

Even taste tests fall short of aligning brands with foreign cultures. Flavor has psychosomatic dimensions that cannot be summed up in its chemical properties. Examples abound in literature. [Proust's](#) famous Madeleine cakes and [Rushdie's](#) curries are loaded with cultural references, childhood memories, and a particular nostalgia for home and homeland.

Cultural codes are so deeply embedded in our habits and routines that consumers hardly notice them. We internalize these codes in the course of socialization and routine, the same way we learn language. Though personal preference plays a role in consumer behavior, unconscious cultural codes are responsible for social behaviors from speaking and shopping to serving a meal. They also determine the relative value that consumers associate with goods in a given market. For instance, while consumers in North America may assign certain foods, such as potato chips or fast food, to the "junk food" bucket, their counterparts in emerging markets such as China may perceive American fast food brands as tasty alternatives to their local food options. In the United States, consumers may associate Kentucky Fried Chicken™ with low-priced fast food, whereas in China consumers associate KFC with a tasty addition to their own culinary traditions. One man's meat is indeed another man's poison.

Cultural Creativity

Cultural codes form the foundations of social behavior. However they do not tell the whole story because consumers are not automatons. Though consumers rely on semiotic codes to make sense of the social world, they also enjoy a great deal of flexibility in the way they perform these codes and adapt them to their personal styles and dispositions. They personalize fashion codes, mix and match food categories, and blend multiple ethnicities in a household. The regular twists and turns of cultural codes in the dynamic of daily life account for cultural change over time. They also provide insights for marketers to assume category leadership by leveraging cultural creativity at home, abroad, and in emerging markets.

These examples highlight the efficiency of brand strategy that is aligned with the cultural codes structuring meaning and value of goods in a given market. They suggest the need for a whole new approach to global brand strategy that originates in a deep semiotic analysis of the codes

structuring the meaning and perceived value of goods in specific markets rather than in the boardroom.