

WHAT CAN SEMIOTICS CONTRIBUTE TO PACKAGING DESIGN?

Words: Chris Arning

'Consumers shop for meaning, not stuff.' – Laura Oswald

This is certainly true of brand communication and no less true of packaging. As a brand owner, do you know what messages you transmit through the cues embedded in your pack design replicated millions of times? Consumers see packaging as an integral part of a product's value proposition. This includes the language conveyed on packs, the materials used and the graphical schema employed including colours, typography and symbols.

Psychotherapist Louis Cheskin, spent most of his life investigating how design elements impacted people's perceptions of value, appeal, and relevance. He also discovered that most people could not resist transferring their feelings towards the packaging to the product itself. His most famous achievement was turning Marlboro cigarettes into a 'man's' cigarette from its original appeal to women. At the time its unique product differentiation was a red wrapper; to hide lipstick marks. Because more men than women were smokers, Cheskin convinced Phillip Morris that they would have more success by appealing to men. Cheskin's recommendations were to redesign the package to denote masculinity, whilst keeping the red colour.

His recommendations underlie everything from the 'Man-Sized Flavour' advertising campaign and the now iconic packaging (resembling a medal), to the masculine and virile Marlboro Man himself. The Marlboro Man sported tattoos to give him a rugged back-story and often appeared as a cowboy on horseback (the predominant image that has survived today).

We have lived through an age of mass affluence and during this time, packaging has undergone a mass wave of so-called 'premiumisation' across all sectors, with even cleaning products like Fairy Liquid getting in on

the act. In such a context, packaging in the UK and elsewhere is no longer just a container, but a manifesto for brand communication. For some consumers, it is even fetishistic. This means that the bar for what is considered quality has been raised. We expect charming and emotionally engaging packaging as part of the overall product proposition, and in certain categories it is even a brand discriminator.

Plastic versus glass, rotund versus rectilinear, puce versus cobalt: the devil is in the detail, and these details can be critical to the success of packaging. Whilst pack designers are technically competent and have a knack for aesthetics, it is sometimes necessary to have a more in-depth understanding of how to express brand distinction in pack communication. This is where semiotics comes in to play.

So, what is semiotics? Semiotics is the study of meaning and communication. It can inject rigour and more rationality into design processes, making us more mindful of our choices. Residing in academic research, mainly in disciplines such as linguistics, media studies and sociology, the application of semiotics has taken off in the commercial world and provided enormous value in the area of brand packaging. More and more, the use of semiotics research is penetrating the sphere of packaging design, giving brands a tremendous head start in communicating core values, personality and brand positioning to the market. So what can semiotics contribute to packaging design? Mega multi-nationals such as Procter & Gamble (P&G) and Unilever were asking this question five years ago. These days semiotics is a part of their vocabulary and insight budget. The interest in the 'S' word is now spreading among brand developers, designers,

advertisers and packaging experts, making it worthwhile to take a closer look at what the semiotics research approach is all about.

The British writer J.G. Ballard once remarked that he could read the respective political ideologies of Britain and the USA inscribed into the front grill designs of Rolls Royce (parliamentary, monarchical) and Cadillacs (democratic, presidential). Whilst semiotics is not always that grandiose in interpretation, it does make links from the material detail to the ideas these details are likely to trigger in the minds of consumers' encountering brand packs on a shelf - it is a powerful interpretive tool.

Consumers intuitively read and respond to the codes contained in brand communication, especially in brand packaging. For example, consider the packaging of personal care products containing lavender and how it has changed over time. Dated or clichéd packaging of lavender conveyed the symbolic code of 'grannies floral' - pale mauve labelling, italicised old-world fonts and lavender sprig designs used as borders. The images conveyed the message that this product is best kept in white linens and lingerie drawers. The dominant design of packaging lavender today has shifted from nostalgic old world notions to expressing the code of authenticity. Use of labels with images of lavender; overt use of pale purple for package and copy that states it is lavender - all convey a message that reads, "I am really lavender." The more emergent expression of lavender in personal care is shifting toward the key benefit of lavender; namely its role in aromatherapy and relaxation. Packaging design is more evocative, using explicit language such as 'relax, unwind, calm down.' The colour palette embraces dark purple to emphasise deep relaxation and the word 'lavender,'





is not always stated on pack. Understanding these semiotic codes and patterns of change does more than provide interesting historical dimensions. The codes create confident foundations for brands to be relevant, contemporary and, above all else, appealing to consumers. By considering semiotics, a brand has a greater ability to pitch its packaging execution at exactly the right angle for consumers to read the desired message.

For example, this Courvoisier bottle conveys value through metaphors of opulence. As with many premium luxury items, it is as much an *objet d'art* to be contemplated, as it is a commodity to be consumed. The effect is achieved through solidity of material, flamboyant fluting of its bottle shape and other such extravagant features. As a cognac, it is squat and rotund, which evokes the lavishness of 16th century France where the drink originated. Arguably it is about possessing an object of beauty and identifying with an object of power and prestige - both anchored by the prominent Napoleon emblem. Many fast-moving consumer goods categories are also subject to what is called code convergence

(where dominant graphical schemas tend to imitate category leaders and become more homogeneous over time), so packaging designers are pushed even further to innovate whilst still respecting product category norms.

Applied semiotics in brand strategy and design can help bring awareness that meaning, and therefore perceived value, is generated via the differences that exist between brands within a category and that signs change according to the prevailing culture. This market intelligence can be a key competitive advantage, particularly in mature, cluttered product categories. This understanding can be strategic, e.g. how the changing meanings of gold vs. bronze (via their connotations in art and other areas) affect their optimal use on pack, tactical, e.g. how the choice of font typeface can convey the right impression and inflect meaning.

In practice, there are typically four main uses of semiotics methodology in package design:

- brand understanding
- inspiration
- evaluation, and;
- global intelligence.

BRAND UNDERSTANDING

This is a very common area for a semiotics investigation. It is usually triggered by a brand review, to understand the rules or 'codes' of a category in order to sharpen communication and become more differentiated. For instance, when a well-known Swiss chocolate manufacturer recognised the need to become more suited to the UK market, it undertook a brand audit. The first step was to show the connotations of propriety and stuffy conservatism and the positioning of chocolate as a confectionary item. This was conveyed via the use of glossy materials, rectilinear neo-classical motifs and other outdated signifiers going as far as the fussy scoring of chocolate tablets. The second step was to show the trajectory of change in the chocolate category towards more organic motifs, rougher, pulped materials and a move away from *fin-de-siècle* refinement, towards an inter-cultural awareness and how this was being reflected in and on pack. The third step was to suggest some ways that the brand could incorporate some of the new, emergent codes into the design brief.

In a more recent project, a company, for NPD purposes, needed to understand the codes of beauty serums used in packaging material and formulation. The analysis revealed that some of the codes used in the serums, which included the use of the golden ratio and contour bias in pack design, conveyed a deft sense of symmetry and perfection. There was also a strong brand value association communicated via emotional design. Semiotics also revealed intertextual links between serums and the mythology of elixirs as life giving essence. Semiotics, like a serum itself, delivered a succinct, concentrated and easily absorbed dose of market intelligence that helped in the decision-making process.

BRAND INSPIRATION

Semiotics leverages nuanced understanding of cultural change, aesthetic theory and lateral thinking to be a powerful hypotheses - generating engine. For instance, if we wanted to communicate the more emergent, leading-edge expressions of "naturalness" in a pack design for a cosmetics product, the initial analysis would involve understanding the cultural connotations of naturalness. Some questions that would be explored are: What does natural mean to us today? How is it different from three years ago? How do other categories communicate natural in their packaging? What are the new ways of communicating natural in cosmetics packaging? The semiotics research would decode the meanings of natural in a wider cultural context and within the cosmetics category.

Back in 2005, Wrigley's commissioned a semiotics study to feed into an innovation workshop to develop concepts for a new gum for young adults. The result was '5 gum', a sensation in its category, which has enjoyed great commercial success and numerous industry awards. In this case, the semiotic insight showed that there was a stark discrepancy between the codes used within the gum market (fiddly, childish packs with primary colour cartoon graphics) and the market for US teens which was increasingly mature, ironic and enamoured of darker themes like the occult and extreme sports. Following the semiotic research, Wrigley's decided to translate some of this danger and mystique into the pack design for the new product.

BRAND EVALUATION

Semiotics can help assess and adjudicate between different strategic options for packaging, helping to fast-track the design and development process. In a recent study, a leading semiotics consultancy was asked to help a client develop new packaging for a premium yoghurt brand that would have an increased price point. Using applied semiotic research the consultancy derived a model and list of criteria including pack shape, material, haptic cues, graphic schema, layout, colour and gradation from a rubric of similar projects to help the client achieve a solid competitive advantage.

GLOBAL INTELLIGENCE

Simplicity is not as simple as it used to be. At least, this was the conclusion drawn from a study looking at so-called 'simple' packaging. The trouble is that 'simple' cannot be equated with 'basic' anymore: it is more about 'managed complexity' and what counts as optimal varies significantly across markets. Of course, there is a set of universal rules regarding what counts as simplicity. Visual tricks such as symmetry, the law of thirds, golden ratio and contour bias that create a pleasing visual impression operate within the realm of neuroaesthetics. It seems however, that hard-wired ideas are themselves subject to regional variation and inflection too - indeed 'simplicity' turns out to be almost as subject to variation as notions such as authenticity and other diffuse marketing terms. The American economist, Professor Theodore Levitt, famous for popularising the term 'globalisation' was only half right. The world has become globalised and there is more standardisation, but the keynote of design is hybridisation between global design idiom and local motifs. In certain enclaves of consumer society, parochial tastes stubbornly persist and food packaging is one such niche.

GLOBAL FOOD PACKAGING

For a global food brand wanting to reconnect with notions such as simplicity, this is not an easy task when semiotics shows such a wide global variation in pack codes. For example, in Mexico, the baroque and riotous colours rule supreme, high colour saturation; negligible colour contrast and ornamentation are favoured. By contrast in Japan, a Zen-inflected subtlety and restraint with a generous use of white space dominate. In the UK, revivalist motifs and a return to thrift prevail and in France notions of regionality and terroir are the main focus. In India, simplicity per se is not a resonant term and seems only to be signified in food through proxies like spiritual purity or motherly love. In general, in developing markets, references to simplicity run up against a desire to flee poverty and taste abundance and packaging seems to reflect that paradox. These are the sorts of differences that applied use of semiotics can bring to a design team's attention.

The use of semiotic research can assist in developing effective packaging solutions, whether acting as a spring board for brand innovation and new product development; harmonising the appearance of the brand across markets; refreshing and/or updating the look of a brand; determining what signs and symbols the category is accessing and ensuring a solid competitive advantage. It provides a toolkit for utilising signs and symbols in terms of pack format (shape, size, texture), colour, labelling and copy. It can also help determine what enhances or detracts from the emergent expressions of a particular trait or ingredient and how this links back to what is emerging in society.

Not intended to be prescriptive, semiotics provides a direction for packaging design innovation and implementation that is rooted in the wider culture. It can give brands the confidence to see beyond faddish and seasonal trends. It can be used as a guide in constructing packaging with both relevant and contemporary meaning that truly communicates the brand's personality and values for achieving successful brand growth.

Semiotics helps to bring to the fore the relationship between meaning and value, the influence of the competitive context and cultural changes. Semiotics can help create new opportunities, provide critical market intelligence for forays into new product categories and is vital in accounting for global variation.

This article has been edited from the author's original.

For more information please contact chris@creativesemiotics.co.uk www.creativesemiotics.co.uk