



Signing on with Semiotics

Laura Oswald, Ph.D.

Semiotics provides tools for decoding the process of meaning formation that contributes to the force of brands.

Gender, ethnicity and social status contribute to the demographic profile of markets, but attitudes, feelings, and culture contribute to the living reality of consumers.

Semiotics is a social science that enables the researcher to identify the human factor at work in the communication process. Unlike classical rhetoric, which emphasizes the formal properties of word play independent of its historical or cultural context, semiotics emphasizes links between the form of meaning and the social and cultural world in which communication takes place. Moreover, unlike the psychology of perception, which emphasizes universal meanings such as the color blue for peace or the color red for sex and violence, semiotics looks for ways the context – the culture, the category, the retail setting, the consumer segment, for instance – determines meanings.

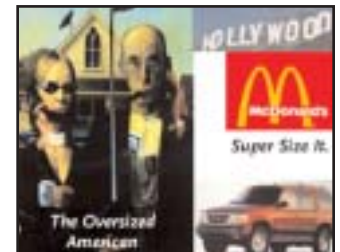
Consumer MindScapes

We are proud of our success in the area of new product development. Our primary ethnographic research provided a platform for building marketing strategy, positioning and advertising for the launch of the Ford Focus and the Ford Escape. Both vehicles were named "Car of the Year" in their respective categories.



Cultural SignScapes

Our recent study of the American family for a major advertising agency contrasted the contemporary family with families forty years ago. We drew particular attention to the way these contrasts emerged in the popular culture, in advertising imagery in particular. Findings had surprising implications for the ways marketers develop and promote products targeted to families.



The Place and Space of Consumption

In the mall, the spectacle of desire takes on social and semiological dimensions, since, for the most part, the "objects of desire" are not objects at all, but meanings or brands endowed with value by consumer culture. Kids buy Nikes, not shoes, and along with the acquisition of the brand goes participation in the Nike image and the Nike philosophy, "Just Do It!" The post-modern subject lacks an original core identity, constructed as it is by the image it projects for others in consumer culture, "I am what you perceive me to be." Consequently, the meaning of products, their "brand image," is central to the formation of personal and social identity. Products as brands, in this sense, constitute signs, i.e. symbols whose meaning and value are inseparable from the role they play in economy of desire driving consumption.

Laura Oswald, Design Issues: Volume 12 [1] (48-62), M.I.T. Press, 1996,



Director of Marketing Semiotics



Laura Oswald, Ph.D. is director of Marketing Semiotics Inc.

Dr. Oswald is an expert in the areas of brand strategy, consumer research, and semiotics – a branch of anthropology devoted to understanding the ways signs and symbols shape culture. She conducts consumer studies in a variety of formats, including focus groups, in-depth interviews and on-site ethnographies in North America, Europe and the Far East. Her qualitative

research consulting practice and her academic career encompass a variety of application areas, including automotive, cosmetics, food, entertainment, electronics, retailing, manufacturing, corporate culture and client relations. Dr. Oswald is Adjunct Professor of Marketing at the Kellstadt Graduate School of Business, De Paul University, and recently joined the advisory board of the Yaffe Center for Persuasive Communication at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

BrandScapes

Powerful brands not only reflect trends, they create them.

At the start of the Internet boom, we were hired to help a computer company leverage their brand in a new web-based business. A semiotic audit of their brand communication revealed that their brand positioning derived from an unhappy relationship between Man and Machine. Everything from the manual, to the advertising, to the technology itself contributed to the image of an impersonal, distant and insensitive authority figure targeted to experts. This positioning spelled disaster for their new venture. By conducting secondary research into successful Internet businesses, we discovered that the winners were sensitive to the human factor driving Internet usage. We then designed a consumer study that provided insights into ways our client could reposition their brand to include user-friendly qualities such as warmth, creativity, and empowerment while drawing upon core brand equities.

Beyond Maslow's Pyramid

A brand is a sign that triggers a field of meanings in the consumer's mind. By harnessing the myth behind these meanings, strong brands move beyond the codes governing a product category and enter the personal space of the consumer where they enhance, complement or transform the consumer's world. This explains the tendency of consumers to seek fulfillment of higher needs for love, status, and self-actualization by means of goods and services traditionally associated with lower, physiological needs such as food and transportation. As the ad claims, let McDonald's make you smile.

