

BUSINESS INNOVATION / THE INSIGHT ECONOMY

Selling what it means to be British

Understanding how meaning is created and communicated, sometimes through signs and symbols, can assist brands in selling their products

BY [MARK FRARY](#) – SEPTEMBER 1, 2016

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What is a cup of tea? You may think of it as simply a receptacle containing a hot drink, but that's not how Alex Gordon sees it.



Dr Gordon is the founder and chief executive of semiotics and cultural insights agency Sign Salad whose views are sought by global brands such as Kellogg's, Samsung and Ritz-Carlton.

"I spoke with a major British tea brand recently," he says. "I asked them what a cup of tea was. They said a hot drink. I disagreed. A cup of tea is a cup of class consciousness, of post-colonialism or of Yorkshireness."

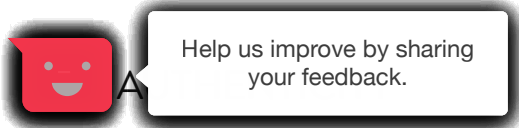
Semioticians like Dr Gordon look beyond products and logos to find deeper meanings. "Yorkshire Tea is sold hugely more in the South than in Yorkshire and that is because of what Yorkshire represents – integrity, bloody-mindedness, grit and authenticity. These are big ideas which we as human beings want to communicate to ourselves and to others," he says.

Sign Salad helps brands identify how global culture is changing and, crucially, the way in which seemingly simple concepts can change over time.

"We define the narrative, the cultural definition at its heart, and give clients recommendations about the signs and symbols to use. These can take the form of the type of font, the colours they might use, a particular logo design, packaging formats and materials, and even the product make-up itself," says Dr Gordon.

Semioticians look beyond products and logos to find deeper meanings

Macroeconomic factors can change consumer perceptions and it is here that semiotics can help. Consider the rise of brands which sell on the basis of authenticity, such as sharing-economy companies or craft breweries.



Dr Gordon says: “As semioticians, we see an idea like authenticity as a signifier of a cultural shift.”



It is partly down to millennial change. Until the end of the millennium, people felt they were reaching the end of things. Now there is an element of people wanting something to hold on to rather than something slipping out of their hands. The desire for authentic products is a desire for security and trust.

“Craft beer is a symbol of authenticity which goes well beyond the product itself. It is a signifier of bigger cultural value and meaning. It is handmade by someone who is an expert rather than a big company where care has not been taken. We know the craft beer comes from a microbrewery around the corner, reconnecting us to individuals.”



Semiotician Alex Gordon believes the rise of craft beer breweries, such as Wild Beer Co (pictured), is down to the consumer desire for independent authenticity

Insurance companies have long recognised the power of semiotics, he adds. “Historically, Norwich Union had been a leading brand with its church spire. It wasn’t just insurance, but it was God’s insurance company and you were protected by divine power,” he says.



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...ing frontman, is top dog. “Churchill is not above you
...e is a mate walking alongside

you,” says Dr Gordon. On top of that his name is Churchill with all the cultural value that leverages – integrity, heritage, nationhood and trustworthiness.”



The Britishness that Churchill represents may be crucial in the years to come following the Brexit vote and is incredibly valuable to the

country. Brand Finance’s Nation Brands 2015 report says that as a country the United Kingdom has a brand value of more than \$3 trillion, exceeded only by the United States, China and Germany.



Dr Gordon says Churchill’s mascot is a prime example of Britishness that public can relate to

UNCERTAINTY CAUSED BY BREXIT

Dr Gordon says this Britishness was clear for all the world to see at the 2012 Olympics in London and he calls the opening ceremony “a work of genius”, selling British expertise, knowledge, stability and reliability.



But it has created a vacuum in which there is uncertainty about what it means. He says: “The world knew what we represented, but it doesn’t understand that now. There is a question on departing Europe

about whether Britain is still capable of delivering on those values. Can we still represent excellence, expertise and quality when Ted Baker opens a store in Shanghai or Marks & Spencer in Rio?"



The power of the semiotic dimension of brands is in the mythology

Yet you only have to look to American Coca-Cola to recognise the power and durability of nation brands. "Soft drinks as a category have been declining for ten years in terms of consumption yet Coke ranks very highly for brand value," says Laura R. Oswald, author of the successful business book *Creating Value* and founder of consultancy Marketing Semiotics.

"Ninety nine per cent of the time, if a brand is in trouble, it is because their communication is ambiguous and consumers don't understand what the brand stands for," says Ms Oswald. "Coke, by contrast, has these deep and strong associations with certain emotional qualities – family values and the endless optimism of the American people.

"The power of the semiotic dimension of brands is in the mythology. American culture has a lot of trouble, racial conflict for one, but the national mythology of family values and optimism is what the American cultural myth is all about. Brands that can take that national mythology and tie it to deep universal values such as courage, respect and hope have a chance of penetrating other countries."

Dr Gordon adds: "Coca-Cola is bad for you, but you don't buy it for that reason. It is the idea of American innocence, nostalgia and social harmony which Coca-Cola has always represented since the hilltop campaign which was so fundamentally important."

Yet in the wake of the Brexit vote, exporters may have to look more closely at what semioticians have to say about just what it means to sell British products and how it comes more difficult for British companies to sell in the European markets and they are forced to look to new,



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unfamiliar developing economies, will their brands and products translate and can the values that Britishness represents shine through?



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Source: Sign Salad

BRITAIN'S BRAND IDENTITY

David Haigh, Brand Finance's chief executive, thinks they will. "In terms of fundamentals, I believe Brexit will be a very good thing for Britain. Britain has always been a very international trading nation and I feel that outside the EU, it will still have the opportunity of trading effectively with EU members as well as non-EU countries," he says.

"As a nation, we have been developing our brand identity for hundreds of years around things like heritage, quality and luxury, which go far beyond the short term. I don't think there is likely to be much of a change towards, for example, companies supplying products with a royal warrant. Asprey and Fortnum & Masons are not going to be significantly affected by this," he believes. "They might arguably do better because we have a reinforced sense of nationhood."

Mr Haigh points to the success of the GREAT Britain campaign in attracting tourists here. "There has been a boom in the number of tourists this year from Germany. Part of that is an exchange-rate effect, but I think also Britain is also seen as a very secure and pleasant place to come," he says.

Where Mr Haigh does see a potential bump in the road is if the UK breaks up as a
 re goes off on its own or the situation changes between
 It d then that would change the nature of our nation
 brand," he warns.



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Ms Oswald concludes: “It comes back to how strong the British myth is. Is it just about castles and the Queen or are there resources around that myth which need to be leveraged?”

“The European Union is a small segment in British history. Britain’s reach is impressive and global. You can’t turn around anywhere in the world without seeing the English language or British rituals.” Drinking a cup of Yorkshireness is just one of them.

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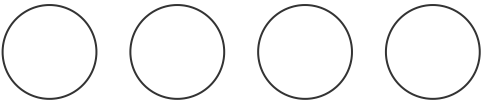
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