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What is a Mother?

Using Semiotics to Find a New Cultural Space for Baby Diapers

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The semiotic analysis identifies a unique cultural positioning for the brand and consumer segment, based upon their shared interpretation of cultural categories.

Semiotics is a social-science discipline that anchors the study of signs and symbols in cultural codes. Although the semiotic analysis of marketing texts — from ads to environments in which services are performed — forms the initial stage of semiotic research, the contributions of semiotics to marketing extend beyond rhetorical or textual interpretation, and they are not limited to the analysis of a single text.

The strategic application of semiotics to marketing situates the meaning of any given text in the broader framework of the codes that structure meaning in the competitive set, the product or service category and, ultimately, in the broader cultural context. It also identifies semiotic tensions between consumer statements and the meanings

communicated by their lived environments, behaviors and product choices.

Semiotics-based consumer research employs specific methodologies for recruiting, collecting data and data analysis:

- Semiotics takes a big brushstroke approach to the patterns that structure consumer behavior, cultural trends and brand meaning.
- Data is drawn from consumer research, advertising for the category and cultural texts, such as popular books or websites.
- The semiotician analyzes the data to find dominant values, or codes, for a consumer segment. In the example presented here, codes that structure the meaning of diaper brands included motherhood, being a woman in society and ideology.

- The semiotic analysis identifies a unique cultural positioning for the brand and consumer segment, based upon their shared interpretation of these cultural categories (i.e., the “Good Mother,” the metrosexual male, etc.). Consumers usually play within the extremes of each binary: they are not entirely good or bad, masculine or not masculine and so on.

The Use of Semiotics for Brand Positioning: “Mom’s Best” Diapers Case

This article illustrates these methods in a brief summary of a 2005 project that involved two competing diaper brands. Within this article, we will call our client’s brand “Mom’s Best” diapers. Our firm, Marketing Semiotics,



employed semiotic research to identify a distinctive cultural positioning for Mom's Best diapers that would differentiate it from Pampers, the category leader. The study included advertising research, cultural research and qualitative research with consumers. Some of the study details have been changed to protect proprietary findings and to illustrate with clarity the applications of semiotics to qualitative research.

Phase I. Competitive Advertising Research

Research began with a semiotic analysis of the dominant codes associated with diapers, babies and mothers in competitive advertising for Mom's Best.

Findings. The category is structured by a cultural paradigm that equates "dryness" with godliness and control

of nature. Advertising associates dry diapers with the myth of the "Good Mother." Pampers claimed leadership of the category because it has traditionally owned the "Good Mother" positioning. Competitors typically played within the Good Mother space in order to avoid being associated with its binary opposite, the "Bad Mother."

Phase II. Cultural Research

Secondary research identified emergent codes related to women and babies in popular culture, as represented in magazines, self-help books and the work of experts, and in new products in the baby and maternity categories.

Findings. At the time of the research, a *Newsweek* magazine (February 2005) cover, titled "The Myth of the

Perfect Mother," showed a woman with a half dozen arms, each one accomplishing a different role, from holding a baby to cooking to doing business. The image captured something of the stress that new mothers experienced in the face of growing expectations about their "goodness" as mothers.

Judging by the plethora of new products and technologies on the market, women who juggled career, homemaking and motherhood sought "Good Mother" status by out-buying and out-working their peers who stayed at home. Expensive prams, designer clothing and new technologies for feeding, teaching and washing baby seemed positioned to assuage the insecurities of these mothers.

Although some consumers identified closely with the Good Mother ideal, others communicated dissatisfaction with unrealistic social expectations and even referenced popular characters in film and television that celebrated the Real Mother.

We identified an emergent theme in popular culture that debunked the Good Mother myth by showing real, imperfect women dealing with motherhood on their own terms, often using humor to release tensions about these cultural expectations. Television shows like “Roseanne,” “Nanny 911,” “The Simpsons” and “Family Guy” exemplified this trend.

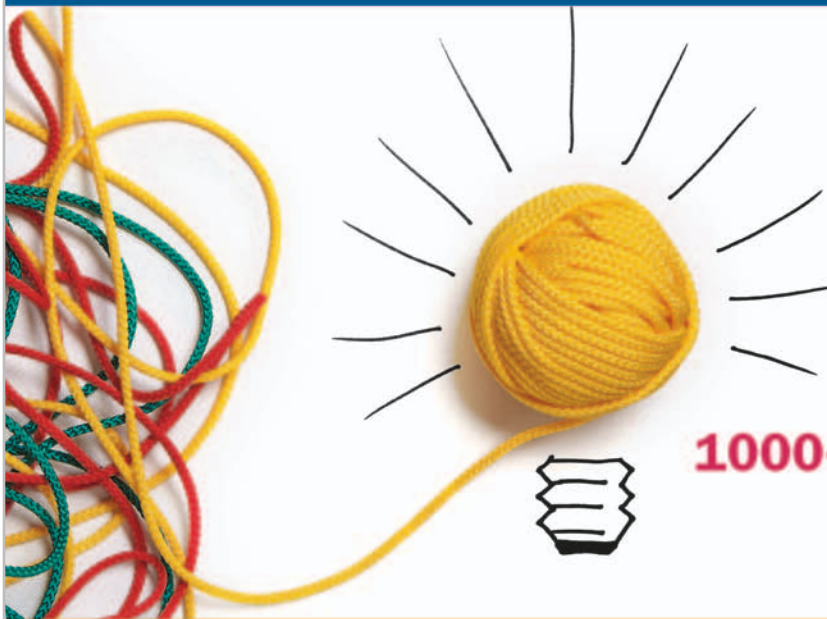
Phase III. Qualitative Research

The first two phases of research identified the broad cultural codes associated with the diaper category. We conducted focus groups in three markets to add flesh to these findings and identify any regional differences that would account for different perceptions of consumers in different markets. We recruited first-time mothers, who

were likely to be more susceptible to social pressures than more experienced moms. Groups were segmented into working mothers and mothers who chose to stay home or work part-time. The research protocol moved from the discussion of lifestyles and media choices to cultural values associated with parenting, shopping for baby and brand perceptions, including but not limited to diaper brands. The protocol included projective tasks to elicit free associations with concepts such as motherhood, personal wellbeing and life goals.

Findings: Consumer perceptions of diaper brands confirmed our finding about the prevalence of the Good Mother myth in the category. Respondents in both working and non-working groups communicated tensions in their own lives between their personal goals and the social

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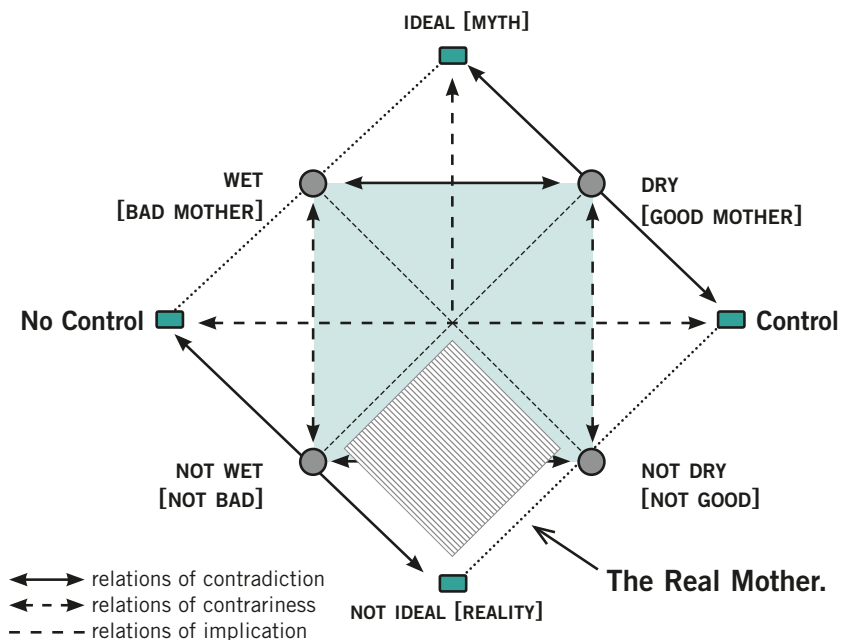
expectations associated with motherhood. Although some consumers identified closely with the Good Mother ideal, others communicated dissatisfaction with unrealistic social expectations and even referenced popular characters in film and television that celebrated the Real Mother.

In marketing, as in life, cultural myths pair binaries with each other in a broad paradigmatic system. For example, in the diaper category, the Good Mother myth associates the good/bad binary on a grid with dry/wet baby.

To identify a unique cultural positioning for Mom's Best diapers, we mapped these pairs of binaries on a double-axis grid, creating four quadrants. These quadrants represent the range of cultural positionings available in relation to good/bad mothers and dry/wet binaries. Brands had little choice but to move out of the dominant mommy myth without moving into negative cultural spaces. We realized that to differentiate Mom's Best from Pampers and also claim a positive identity for Mom's Best moms, we would have to deconstruct the mommy myth altogether, looking for a cultural space that was neither good nor bad, neither dry nor wet, neither controlled nor out of mother's control.

We drew upon theories from structural semantics to shed light on this problem. The French linguist Algirdas Julien Greimas recognized that the world of meaning is much more complicated than the simple binary structures proposed by the early structuralists. Culture and human behavior do not fall into neat categories, but instead they navigate the tensions within these binaries. Real life unfolds not on the basis of absolutes, such as good and bad mothers, but of the struggle to reach ideals and also accept imperfections. Greimas developed a theory of structural semantics that breaks down the simple binary structure (A/B) by means of a process of negation that includes not-A/not-B. He mapped this dialectic on a double-axis semiotic square that exposes the nuances of meaning that fall between the binary dimensions of culture.

Figure 1. A New Cultural Space for "Mom's Best"



By mapping the Good Mother myth on the semiotic square, we identified a liminal cultural space between wet and dry, good and bad [Figure 1].

The semiotic analysis shifted focus from mythology to reality and positioned Real Mothers against the dominant Good Mother myth. The Mom's Best mother would keep baby "dry enough," rather than strive for perfection, because she values happiness and well-being over perfection.

The new cultural positioning also reflected the broader cultural trends and representations of women that we identified in the analysis of popular culture. Like Roseanne and Marge Simpson, the "Mom's Best" mother would emphasize happiness over perfection and would touch real women through humor and compassion.

References

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A Brief Semiotics Glossary

The binary analysis: In semiotics, the binary analysis classifies data into cultural categories, such as gender and age, and analyzes them into pairs of contrasting terms, such as masculine/feminine and young/old.

The paradigmatic system: The paradigmatic analysis accounts for parallels between the terms of multiple binaries, creating the paradigmatic system. To cite a very limited example, in Western culture, the masculinity/femininity binary is traditionally paired with binaries such as power/vulnerability. The series of potential associations is endless.

Structuralists: Structuralists are concerned with systems or structures, rather than with referential meaning. Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, was a pioneer of structuralist thinking. His work undergirds much of semiotics today.