

Semiotics can make brands magical

Brand communication comprises signs that captivate audiences and make an ad memorable, such as the 'randomness' aspect of the Cadbury 'Gorilla' execution that connected with young people

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Traditional research methods use an 'inside-out' approach to understanding consumers; they assume that opinions and perceptions are individual choices. Semiotics, on the other hand, uses an 'outside-in' approach - consumers' opinions and perceptions originate from culture. For example, it is no coincidence that consumers all agree that gold packaging implies a luxury product because the colour gold is a cultural sign for wealth, and consumers have been subconsciously trained to associate the two.

Gold is just one example of the many signs that consumers encounter on a daily basis. Every brand, product and piece of communication contains numerous signs, so it is imperative that the correct ones are used to have the right effect. If the packaging of a new premium product uses orange as well as gold, this will have a negative effect on consumers' take-out of 'luxury' because they associate orange with down-to-earth, everyday brands such as Easyjet and Homebase.

At the most basic level, using the correct cultural signs is crucial for managing consistent and on-message brand comms - be that through advertising, marketing or media. However, semiotics can go further than this. There are certain iconic brands, such as Coke, Google and Nike, that have so great an appeal that they 'cast a spell' over consumers; it would be a genuine insight to understand how they achieve this. Semiotic analysis is perfectly situated to do this, because it is

capable of decoding the signs of these brands' communications - it can literally identify the formula for magic.

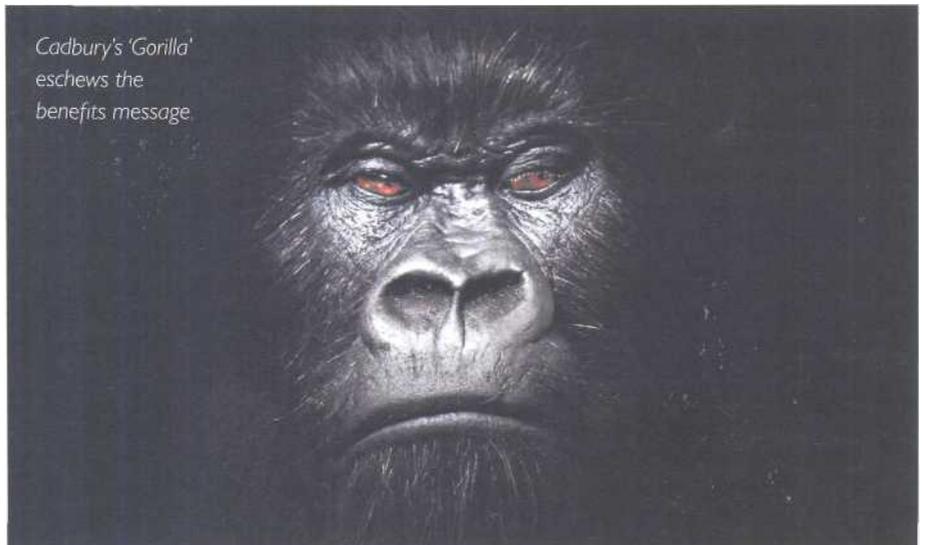
This formula is simpler than might be expected. Magic in anthropology is defined by asymmetry in cause and effect - ie the effect, the outcome, is greater than expected of the cause. In layman's terms, consumers have certain expectations about what brand comms will be like (whether that is unknown actor, use of jingle, tagline or setting) so when a brand does something very different, consumers respond with awe. In a nutshell, brand magic is about making the impossible possible for consumers.

This understanding of magic can

be demonstrated as a simple formula: Understand conventions of category > Transcend conventions of category. At first glance, this may seem difficult to achieve, but with the use of semiotics it becomes much more do-able. There are many ways that your brand can do magic. The list below contains three of the most popular ways it can be done.

I Technical mastery - this kind of magic is used to wow consumers through the demonstration of technical genius and skill that goes way beyond consumer expectations. In terms of ads, Honda's 'Cog' is a very good example of this kind of magic.

Cadbury's 'Gorilla' eschews the benefits message



In 'Cog' consumers are simply awed by the degree of attention to detail and skill required to create the sequence of interacting car parts, and this impacts on their perceptions of the brand. Other examples include Sony's 'Bouncy Balls' and Guinness's 'Horses'. In the case of the former, the sheer spectacle of thousands of coloured balls falling from the sky is a breathtaking experience and, in the latter, the dramatic and elegant use of visual effects to enhance a natural phenomenon is a fascinating sight for consumers.

All these ads go way beyond what consumers expect from the medium and do so in an awe-inspiring manner. Similarly, products like Apple's iPhone and Nintendo's Wii do things that consumers didn't think were possible - the former is essentially a pocket-sized, multi-functional computer, and the latter allows an entirely new way of interacting with video games.

2 Celebrity: touching the divine - brands have long used celebrity associations to increase their appeal because, for the average consumer, celebrities lives take place in what seems like another world and consumers want a glimpse, or ideally a piece, of that otherwise unattainable world. This kind of magic is particularly relevant to fashion and clothing brands such as Nike and Topshop, where consumers can own, for a relatively low price, items literally endowed with some of the glamour of the celebrity world. Kate Moss's lines for Topshop, that at one point included the model herself appearing in the shop window, breach this gap between the mundane world of consumers and the distant world of fame and success.

In helping consumers to cross what appears to be an insurmountable divide, between their own lives and the decadent and glamorous lives of the famous, the brand magic of celebrity is that it gives consumers access to something that they previously thought impossible.

3 The fantasy of reality - just as consumers are engrossed in the world of celebrity, they are increasingly concerned with authenticity - from the growth of organic and local foods to reality TV. At first it might seem unlikely that reality has

anything to do with magic, but the magic comes from the context into which reality is set. Consumers associate the world of brands with artifice - they are mass-produced, they are all about marketing and their ads are typically glossy and well-produced - these are the conventions of branding.

So, when consumers see reality elevated to this status, they are amazed. A poster brand for the fantasy of reality is Innocent, which was able to charge a premium price for a product that, although pure fruit, eschewed the kind of glamour and glossiness typically associated with premium products.

"Semiotic analysis is capable of decoding the signs in the communications for iconic brands - Coke, Google, Nike - that 'cast a spell' because it can literally identify the formula for magic"

A more contemporary example of magic in branding is the Cadbury's 'Gorilla' ad. This eschews the standard benefits message that consumers expect of ads and has no tagline. But the real magic of this ad lies in its use of the cultural trend of 'randomness' to wow consumers. 'Randomness' is a popular trend among youth, which is used to transform their often mundane lives into something more exciting: you might hear a group of girls describing a recent party as 'totally random'.

What they are saying is that they didn't plan to go to the party but, through chance, ended up there, implying that their life is naturally far more exciting than that of a normal person's.

The 'Gorilla' ad can be broken into three elements: gorilla; drum playing; Phil Collins's *In the Air Tonight*. From a semiotic perspective, two of these elements gave strong cultural appeal. Phil Collins's *In the Air Tonight* is on trend with 1980s revival, particularly 1980s rock/AOR. And the element of playing drums along to the song is very

on trend with video games such as Guitar Hero and Rock Band. These elements alone might make a likeable ad, but what makes this one magical is the element of randomness in the form of the gorilla, that plays the drums in a completely straight-laced and serious manner. When consumers see the ad they simply cannot grasp how this combination of elements was conceived and are enraptured by it - there is no logical reason for their association, but it works because there are enough meaningful cultural cues in there.

We can shed light on how well 'Gorilla' works if we consider why Cadbury's follow-up ad Trucks' wasn't

magical. Superficially, 'Gorilla' and 'Trucks' use the same formula, Trucks' also combined three elements: racing vehicles; airport runway; Queen's Don't Stop Me Now.

The reason this ad didn't captivate audiences in the same way was because, although it included on-trend elements such as a 1970s

revival soundtrack, and a rebellious act in the form of vehicles racing on an empty airport runway, none of these elements was particularly random - vehicles racing on empty spaces to a song called Don't Stop Me Now all makes too much sense to take its audience by surprise.

By understanding the kinds of signs that make up typical brand communications, semiotics allows us to understand how brands can go above and beyond the norm and literally wow their consumers.

It helps us to explain why a new concept in advertising has a particular effect, and how some brands succeed in casting magic over consumers, and how these formulae for magic can be repeated by your own brands and campaigns.

Nick Gadsby unveiled his thinking on 'brand magic' at last month's Market Research Society annual conference, Research 2010. See www.research-live.com/research2010

W for more on semiotics visit www.warc.com