

15, 2007

## Sensory Branding Power

There can be no doubt that the financial benefits of branding campaigns are on a steady decline. As the cost of reaching consumers rises, competition for securing their attention increases likewise. A cacophony of commercial messages bombards the global population through multitudinous media channels every hour. Household television viewing hours are increasingly becoming the domain of children. The average child is exposed to 85,000 television commercials a year.

Contrast this with the 1,000,000 television commercials viewed through life by adults. A quick calculation will reveal that this equals watching 8 hours of TV commercials a day, seven days a week for six years. We're in a frenzied world indeed. Close to 1,000 new brands appear on store shelves each year, all clamouring for an introduction to the consumer. The frequency and volume of such introductions makes it increasingly difficult for marketers to harness the consumer attention that's fundamental to building those brands. The infiltration of every advertising method into every corner of people's lives is thorough. It's no wonder that the effectiveness of any one medium is diminishing, and that return on marketing expenditure is sliding.

The fact is, an ad that works is rare. The ever-decreasing power of advertising to influence consumer choice has resulted in a conversely-increasing stream of commercials that find their way into our homes. A recent McKinsey report states that the effect of TV commercials is likely to fall some 40 per cent over the coming years. Even though these statistics apply specifically to the United States, we're more than likely to see a similar trend in Europe. The reason is as simple as its remedy is distant: the more communications clutter there is, the less effect any part of it has on receivers. You could say that our brains have reached full capacity in decoding the enormous amount of commercial data.

Brand-builders need something new.

Perhaps the way we communicate our brand messages needs to be re-evaluated. How do we optimise the success of commercials? How do we align them with the world of the contemporary consumer? We need something to break the advertising impasse. So let's take a look at that blockage. What's missing in the advertiser's armoury? It seems that messages are disabled before they're even discharged. They're missing their targets and failing to elicit purchase responses. So where does the future lie for brands and brand-builders?

Let's discuss the role of our senses in the advertising context. Suppose we broadened our horizons to encompass as many of the five senses as possible in our messages. Would this work to help break down that advertising impasse?

Sceptics correctly point out that deploying the sense of smell through television advertising is simply a nonsensical impossibility. But this physics-defying supposition is not what I'm suggesting. My argument is that, while a brand cannot impart an aroma via a television set, there's nothing stopping an aroma being fully integrated within the brand. Every householder makes it routine to sniff milk from the refrigerator before pouring it all over their cereal. This brief act of caution is instinctive - often born of bitter, or should I say, curdling, experience. Smelling for signs of decay helps keep us safe from foods that might have gone bad. When selecting meat and vegetables we employ these and more examination procedures: we feel for bruising, look out for suspicious worm-sized holes, smell for ripeness - and over-ripeness - before placing any item in the shopping basket. We open jars of jam in full expectation of hearing the 'click' that signifies the hermetically sealed contents have only now, for the first time, been exposed to the air.

Obviously, our senses play vital and complex roles in our discriminations about, and choices of, brands. Yet, until now, we have invested little time in gathering evidence of the effectiveness of exploiting any of the senses, apart

from sight. With few exceptions, the visual dimension has, to date, been the only sense to have been nurtured by the advertising and associated design community. And, from the receiver's side, consumers tend to tune their senses to danger detection, rather than any expectation of sensory indulgence, when negotiating advertising messages. On both the transmission and receiving sides, advertising communications have remained implacably two-dimensional.

A French study conducted for a major food manufacturer tested this and yielded interesting results. The research tested two different packages for a diet mayonnaise product. The test subjects were female. Both containers held the same mayonnaise, and both even carried the same label. But the shapes of the bottles differed. One was slim-waisted, almost like an hourglass. The other was the opposite: rotund and reminiscent of Buddha's jolly and corpulent manifestations. You can probably guess which container was favoured by the women whose responses to the packaging were tested. The hourglass version was preferred in 100 per cent of cases. So, the signals sent by the packaging shape made a substantial impact on subjects' choices. And the design was perceived from a tactile as well as a visual perspective. At last the marketing world's sole focus on visual stimuli is being broadened to encompass our four other senses.

In the past, any brand's appeal to hearing, touch, taste or smell has been, except in rare cases, either a matter of happy coincidence or the inevitable and obvious result of product function. Yet, much of our understanding of our environment is informed by our senses. In turn, our experiences inform our senses, the senses being linked to memory. And memories tap right into our emotional makeups. We store our values, feelings and emotions in memory banks.

Not so long ago, I was taking a stroll around Tokyo. As I made my way down the streets of Shibuya, I passed an elegantly-dressed woman. As arresting as she looked, it was her scent that stopped me in my tracks. In her wake she left an aromatic trail that immediately evoked a profusion of memories in me. Of

course, like everyone, I've experienced smell-provoked memories on numerous occasions in my life. Odour-evoked memories are the product of what is referred to as the Proust phenomenon, named for Marcel Proust whose multi-volume novel, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, devolves from a key scene in which the narrator experiences an emotional catharsis provoked when he sips warm tea into which crumbs from a madeleine cake have fallen. This multi-sensory experience stimulates memories from which the novel is woven. Although this account is one in which taste, smell, and touch are stimulated, the Proust phenomenon refers to spontaneous memory triggered by smell.

Brands aim to be memorable, yet mass communication and commercial messages remain resolutely two-dimensional: they're visual and they have sound. Yet humans are most receptive, and most likely to form, retain, revisit and reinterpret memory when all five senses are in operation. The power of sensory suggestion can be found everywhere. Kellogg's, the breakfast cereal experts, believe taste is as affected by the textures of the food as its flavour. Rice Crispies (also known as Rice Bubbles) that don't 'snap, crackle and pop' are quite simply considered to be stale, even though their taste will not have changed, and they may still be perfectly good to eat. So it's not surprising that Kellogg's considers the crunchiness of the grain as having everything to do with the success of the breakfast product. Emphasis is placed on the crunch we hear and feel in our mouths rather than the sound-effects we hear on commercials.

Additionally, Kellogg's has spent years experimenting with the synergy between crunch and taste. As part of their research they made contact with a Danish laboratory which specialises in obtaining the desired crunchiness of a breakfast cereal. Kellogg's wanted to patent their products' crunchiness, to trademark and own it in the same way they own their recipes and logo. So the Danish laboratory designed a unique crunch for Kellogg's. This patented crunch is indeed distinctive, so much so that anyone serving themselves generic cornflakes from a glass bowl at a breakfast buffet would be able to be recognise that the proffered cornflakes were not Kellogg's. The day Kellogg's

introduced their unique crunch to the market, the brand moved up the ladder. Kellogg's had expanded the perception of their brand to incorporate all senses, with an emphasis on touch and in so doing, broadened the brand platform.

Expanding your brand platform to appeal to as many senses as possible simply makes sense. What aroma do you associate with afternoons at the cinema? Chances are you're thinking of popcorn. In fact, the smell of popping corn has become so strongly linked with going to the movies that, if it weren't there, you would more than likely be troubled by an unidentifiable absence. But, to be honest, the unique aroma of popcorn, the texture and sound of crunching cornflakes, and the distinctive smell of a new car all have very little to do with the quality or performance of a product. Yet these components have come to play a vital role in our relationships with products. The sensory stimulation they offer not only attracts consumer choice and influences our behaviour, it helps us distinguish one product from the next. These points of sensory difference have embedded themselves in our sensory memories and have become part of our decision-making processes. It is this very process that points the way towards the future of brand-building.

Over the next decade we will witness giant shifts in the way we perceive brands, and in the ways in which they are presented for our perception. So, what should you do if you're a brand custodian - a marketer responsible for the health of a brand? Well, there are practical steps you can take in order to move your brand from a two-dimensional existence to five-dimensional life. The transition towards a sensory brand is a process which ensures you don't misrepresent the brand or find yourself in a situation in which the brand does not fulfil its promises.

To succeed with a sensory branding strategy, it is essential that you don't plunge right in and start adjusting the sound, smell and tactility of your brand. Before chefs touch their ingredients, they have a clear vision of the gastronomic journey they want to create for their customers. Setting the stage is another apt metaphor. Carefully select the channels and the tools you plan

to use and the senses you intend to tap into. Each element of your brand is integral to the eventual show. What exactly do you wish to present in your brand theatre? What messages will the brand impart? It's essential to be perfectly clear about the brand's core message from the outset. The trick is not to change every sensory experience at once, but to optimise your brand sense by sense. Your brand's sensory priorities will depend on the category of its products. But, from experience it is clear that working on sound, then smell, makes sense, not only because sound is easy to implement, but because sound is often underleveraged.

Consider your website. Does it include sound? Why not? A sensory experience should match your brand's values. So let the values drive the sensory signals you identify. Does your brand espouse feminine values? Let its sound, texture and aroma express this. Don't be afraid of the additional cost associated with building sensory touchpoints into your design. The investment will pay off. It simply makes sense.