

Semiotics Rising

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Increasingly, brands are tapping into a discipline that helps find the meaning of it all.

By Jennifer Vasilache

In selecting a name for a new service or product, brand stewards have long framed their choices around the answers to several key, practical questions. For instance, is the name memorable? Can our client own it? Does it get across what our offering is ultimately all about?

Navigating this matrix is always complex. But beyond it exists another threshold of understanding: the *why* of it all, the reasons that consumers approve or reject brand propositions, and the deep-seated associations that shape those instinctive, emotional responses.

Enter semiotics, a roughly century-old field that serves as a virtual code-breaker of visual and verbal cues, and provides a general framework of coherence. In branding, where it's just beginning to hit its stride, semiotics can be used to guide strategic choices by helping us to understand how communications function in systems that are unfamiliar to us. Indeed, brands are beginning to rely more on the discipline for guidance as they adapt to new realities of globalism as defined by the steady advance of digital. Doing so makes sense: Semiotics transcends borders, deciphers multicultural codes, and identifies key strategies that ultimately yield the best possible name for a product. At its best, semiotics points us to solutions we would have not likely discovered without its aid.

19th century namers

Brand naming, of course, was not on the minds of the two men who laid the basis for semiotics: Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the foundational American pragmatist Charles Sanders

Peirce (1839-1914). Saussure was a pivotal academician who greatly advanced the understanding of linguistic structure; Peirce, meanwhile, was a logician whose work contributed much to scientific methodology.

Also, as the field took shape, information was not traversing the globe with nearly the speed or fluidity we expect today. In our era of instantaneous worldwide communication, the systems Saussure, Peirce and others developed — ways to observe and decode both visual and verbal signs and processes, and clarify messages in order to understand their content and weigh their coherence — are taking on new uses. In the fields of design, cultural analysis, and especially naming, semiotics is making more of a name for itself as well.

Finding opportunities, avoiding mistakes

When entering markets and establishing presences far from home, a brand can meet with success if its chosen name is both highly cohesive with its strategy and attuned to local sensibilities. Alternately, a brand can land in trouble if associated language, carefully selected to project its identity and message in one culture, tumbles unmodified into parts of the world where cultural backgrounds and contexts are far different.

As it assigns and quantifies value of a specific communication, semiotics discovers treasure while also preventing missteps. It takes into account the acoustics of a name — how a word actually sounds — to reveal whether the received communication aligns well with brand values. It also ranks words comparatively against others that share similar meanings, but have otherwise dissimilar properties.

Other factors are scrutinized through the lens of semiotics to determine whether a name is the best fit in its native form or should be changed, and whether a brand's visual identity and messaging are in alignment with its overall proposition.

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Most brands find some strategic, linguistic or cultural adaptation is needed when branching out. Occasionally, though, semiotics can be used to confirm a perfect fit. Coca-Cola, for instance, was likely elated to learn that the literal translation of its brand name into Mandarin means both "tasty soft drink" and "tasty and happy."

Semiotic elegance in 140 characters or less

Twitter is another brand that, evaluated from a semiotic viewpoint, demonstrates nearly perfect alignment. Its logo is set in a sweetly naive graphic style, with light blue hues and rounded edges. All of it helps to code its iconic bird, chirping as it takes flight, as an icon of freedom, spontaneity, and limitless possibility. These characteristics are balanced by subtle allusions to Twitter's connection to other groundbreaking innovations in communications; blue, after all, has been associated with evolving networks since the early days of Bell Labs.

It's significant, too, that Twitter leans toward a lighter shade of blue while alluding at times to the darker, legacy-evoking shades long identified with Bell. Anchoring itself on the brighter side of the spectrum,

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the point at which light overcomes darkness, the color identifies Twitter with an increase in clarity — better integration, simpler assimilation, and greater ease of use.

In deconstructing “Twitter” itself using a semiotic framework, the smart alignment of its identity can be better understood. The word refers to a series of short and tremulous sounds. It can be classified as an onomatopoeia, as it evokes the sound of a bird. (The sound of “Twit” offers universal understanding, and offers cohesion between the logo and name even in the absence of a common language.) Meanwhile, its suffix — “er” — signals action: players, doers, things that move. Brought together, these elements form a name that blends airiness and accessibility with action and relatable functionality. In the two simple syllables that form Twitter, a softness and a sense of purpose are seamlessly joined.

Semiotics, essentially the study of signs and symbols as elements of communication, explains how people extract meaning from words, sounds and images. When semiotic principles are applied to visual identity and messaging, a product, event, company or service can be reduced to a simple, easily recognizable symbol that conveys multiple layers of information. By aligning an evocative name with a resonant image that can be interpreted easily, we can instantly understand what a brand stands for, what it offers us and whether or not it is relevant to us.

Exploring beyond the familiar

With the benefit of hindsight, we can understand why Coca-Cola and Twitter work from a semiotics standpoint. But branders and namers more often apply the discipline in a forward-facing context, using rigorous analysis to spot opportunities that conventional naming practices will miss.

Perhaps the leaders of a technology brand, seeking to convey the innovation at its core, might settle on a punchy, short name, having taken their cues from a standard creative brief. Semiotics, by contrast, undertakes a deeper analysis in order to identify names that are likely to be more unique and insightful. Time and again, its methodology yields naming possibilities that provide innate coherence and uniqueness for a brand, and a maximum level of assurance that consumers will receive a name as intended.

In brand naming, semiotics is one part global treasure hunt and one part safety protocol. And while words are almost always involved, semiotics is also about a lot more. While strategists look to see how a name functions across cultures, how a root concept is expressed and how other codes might express the same idea, designers can also rely on semiotics to gain understanding of how their choices of colors, shapes and symbols will be met. The result can lead to a soft drink flying from the shelves, or a social media platform becoming deeply integrated into global discourse.

Semiotics is an excellent tool for leading us into territory we might not have otherwise explored. At the same time, it can also ensure that branding experts do not unintentionally select a name that carries negative connotations in other cultures and environments. It isn't always employed outright in every branding or naming scenario, but when a name works on several levels, the principles of semiotics are always behind the success. ■



Jennifer Vasilache

Jennifer Vasilache is a Senior Consultant for Interbrand's New York Verbal Identity department. A semiotician and brandophile, she is passionate about brand analysis and always makes a point of delivering insightful, clear and actionable solutions to her clients.

Jennifer is an expert in semiotic analysis and uses this methodology to compare brand intention and consumer interpretation. She deciphers the structure of marketing strategies and materials by means of deep analysis of linguistics, visual signs and codes. She received her Master's Degree in Semiotics from the University of Limoges, France, and her thesis explores how semiotics can optimize product innovation. She also holds a Master's Degree in Linguistics from the Sorbonne University in Paris, France.

Over the years, Jennifer's client portfolio comprised: PepsiCo, Danone, Mars, Ferrero, Nestle, Lipton, Lindt, Citibank, BNP Paribas, La Banque Postale, BMW, Verizon, Orange, SFR, EDF, L'Oreal, Pierre Cardin, Dove, Tag Heuer, Carrefour.