

In the Realm of the Senses

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Karam Slassi explores the ways marketers can use the five senses to create an intense experience for their customers.

Sensory pleasure is the core of branding. The taste of a favourite wine, the smell of one's own cigarette brand, the sense of comfort as you stretch your legs and sink into an airline seat. Playing on the five senses in marketing is nothing new, but there is still a core of mystery to sensory experience, rooted in its subjectivity. What are marketers doing to create sensory excellence in their products, and what can they do to lead customers towards these sensory treats?

There is an increasing trend for products to offer a polysensory experience, in other words attempt to trigger multiple senses. In our Return of the Product study, we found that people describing intense connections with brands often spoke about these connections in polysensory terms. A Czech consumer, talking about Rey ice hockey equipment, talked about the "velvety touch", the "exquisite shapes" and even the "sweetish smell". All three of these sensory touchpoints added to the excitement of using the brand.

Why are sensory and polysensory excellence so vital to creating brand experiences? For one thing a sensory touchpoint can confirm the experience, make it real "for one Norwegian, "the click from my Nikon is the sign that we have created something together". Sensory pleasure is also often linked with the natural world by people "so for urban consumers it can turn brands into refuges from a virtual or industrialised environment.

A sensory touchpoint can act as the point of transmission for a brand's communications "one Japanese consumer praised the "quiet and dignified" sound Nikka whisky makes as it is poured. These attributes might be part of the brand image, and sensory excellence has made them real. Finally, consumers have a tendency to attribute human qualities to brands they feel connected to, and a polysensory experience can make a product seem more rounded and alive.

However marketing a polysensory experience is a delicate business: sense perceptions are extremely subjective and tend to be linked to a personal history. A particular sensory trigger can cause a flood of memories " "Nivea," sighs one French consumer, "they used to dab it on me after my bath." But this is hard for a marketer to use "after all, there will be millions of potential customers who were not dabbed with Nivea. Would they respond to such a trigger?

Our study suggested three current strategies for marketers to create and communicate sensory excellence.

The first is for products to develop sensory touchpoints not normally associated with their category. Apple's iMac series is a classic example of this " by bringing colour to the world of the personal computer it managed to revive and revolutionise its image. In the UK, Walkers' crisps boast that their new lines are the noisiest, crunchiest snacks yet. A tyre company in Japan has patented the smell of its products. A polysensory approach allows marketers to think laterally about their product experiences. "The sound of the doors on my Volvo", says a Norwegian user, "is like pouring champagne into a glass."

The second approach takes this a step further, creating touchpoints which play on senses that cannot usually be a part of the product experience. Lush cosmetics in the UK is an example of this " their soap bars are often designed to look and smell like huge bars of chocolate or coloured fudge, giving their stores a "sweetshop" ambience which instantly differentiates them from any other cosmetics retailer by allowing users to fantasise about how these objects might taste. Other service environments might use music or special features like a games-playing area to create a similar polysensory environment.

The third approach is to create a sensory experience that is somehow "extreme". This can be a double-edged sword, particularly where the sense of smell is concerned. But for brands dealing in taste and vision a challenging sensory experience can immediately differentiate a product, and can then be used in future communication. Miko's "Krazy Kracker" ice cream contains parts of fizzing sweets; the distinctive taste of the Marmite spread allows it to base its communication on a "you either love it or hate it" message. Other brands can hyperstimulate their users' senses by creating exaggerated versions of existing products for marketing purposes " experimental cars for demonstrations and shows, or giant versions of toy products.

A polysensory approach can pay particular dividends in low-involvement categories " "a touch of beauty in my everyday life" as one consumer put it. But any product can benefit from a renewed focus on how it affects all five of its users' senses. Subjective it may be, but sensory excellence is perhaps the simplest route to differentiating a brand at the experience level.