

Reading Between The Lines

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Alfie Spencer - Flamingo

Semiotician Alfie Spencer tells Jo Bowman how cultural analysis can inform brand positioning and communication, and aid sales of everything from technology to toothpaste.

As manufacturers increasingly look for a place not only in consumers' shopping trolleys but also in their hearts, they're seeking out new sources of insight, and new ways of measuring society's pulse. The science of semiotics has been used by anthropologists for more than a century to further understanding of human action and motivation. Increasingly, it's becoming a commercial tool that can help businesses interpret cultural signs and make sense of "and profits from " them.

Indeed, brand managers around the world are coming to understand the value of semiotics in the way they understand and relate to consumers. In the US, for instance, the Chicago-based consultancy Marketing Semiotics has the likes of Kraft, Ford, Kodak and Nokia on its books, as well as several advertising agencies in the WPP group. In Europe, Greg Rowland Semiotics has helped iconic brands as varied as Guinness, Lynx/Axe, UBS, Mercedes-Benz and Pot Noodle identify what it means to be Irish, masculine, luxurious or even trashy, and how to help a brand vocalise and visualise that.

Alfie Spencer, associate director and head of semiotics at the London-based brand consultancy Flamingo, trained in commercial semiotics after studying philosophy and Chinese. His clients have spanned the retail, personal care, luxury, beauty, food, drink, sports and technology sectors, and include Unilever, Diageo and PepsiCo.

Yet, Spencer says, semiotics has something of an image problem of its own to contend with: arising from academia and with a language still rich in academic terminology, the name semiotics is enough to put off many clients. If he could start afresh with a new name for commercial semiotics, he'd call it "cultural theory for business." "There's a problem and for so long it's had this completely polarising effect. Some people say "god it's so wonderful" and love it, and "it's pretentious, it's not actionable", he says. "There's a lot of energy around this kind of thing today but more that brands take cultural positions. Our particular sense is that we have a rigorous and compelling argument, but we only do things that are actionable."

Getting directions

Semiotics for business can be highly actionable, Spencer says. Understanding, for instance, what female beauty means to Europeans helped a medical aesthetics company design a marketing campaign, while TV producers have used it to generate ideas for new programmes and drive an already successful show into other media formats. Analysis of what beauty has meant in the media, in history, in politics and in public life helped explain why some forms of communication weren't working, and identify the particular language that was likely to resonate.

"We've helped a toothpaste brand to understand what "modern China" means, and how they might be a "modern toothpaste". We've looked at the discourses of sustainability for a government agency that wanted to find a new way of talking about the need for green policies. We've analysed the myths embodied by luxury vodka. We've studied how to use provenance to create a wine brand, and we analysed the meaning of "Swedishness" and how to embody it globally for a famous Swedish brand."

The analysis that uncovers such insights can range from examination of a daily newspaper and pop songs to TV debates and public imagery. The approach, Spencer says, is not dissimilar to the analysis an art critic does when looking at a piece of art, or the work of a literary critic reading a novel. They use a broad theoretical knowledge of the genre to know how to look at something in different ways, a strong historical sensibility and knowledge of cultural history to put ideas into context, and rely on a powerful technical understanding of narrative, imagery, language and rhetoric. Even a single image of an actress in a broadsheet newspaper can contain a vast amount of cultural information that's deeply historical, he says.

"They may have particular interests, but [a commercial semiotician] will grasp how to approach an advert or TV show through various lenses," says Spencer. "They'll have a strong sense of what is happening in the cultural life of the moment, musical, visual arts, film, literature " and have a sense of the shape of the discipline, new ways of reading, new political and critical writing. They'll keep bothering their friends and colleagues who deal with trends, so that they have new things to think about. And they'll take what their more psychologically and ethnographically minded colleagues are talking about really seriously, and encourage dialogue between cultural theory and other modes of enquiry."

“This means that we deal with linguistic analysis – metaphor, metonymy, register, syntax, speech acts and so on, and all the theoretical concerns – ground and figure, colour palettes, graphic form, symmetry, symbolism and narrative implication. In music there are musical structures: repetition, rhythm, harmony, form and so on, then narrative and character explanation.” Media theory, inter-textual referencing and critical theory all have a role to play as well.

Where to begin

Where, then, does a semiotician begin to determine what to analyse and what to cast aside when working with a brand? The balancing act between what’s possible, what’s rigorous and what the problem or opportunity is is achieved through experience and expertise, Spencer says. “It changes all the time, from job to job. Sometimes we need to deal with up to 500 sources. Sometimes we only need to look at 2 adverts. It depends on what answers we need.

It’s a central presumption of semiotics that all sources are part of a more general schema, that is, that there are going to be myths and “codes” in common wherever you look in a particular culture. So of course, you don’t get to answers about teen culture by listening to BBC Radio 4 programmes, but if you are looking at “British” culture in the English language, you will be able to say general things held in common by MTV and Radio 4. At the most basic level, they both use the same language, and share a good deal more than that, in actual fact.

For some problems, it’s spotting structural similarities between cultures that can open the door. In Chinese culture, it would be like X. Well, what would a UK equivalent of that be? For other problems, it’s just about really clear reasoning and the power of good argument. So if a TV commercial says something, then it is presuming something else, and that means it’s different to its competitors in the following way – is that desirable?”

Is there a danger of focusing too sharply on the implications of a single work, or even a collection of works? Spencer says not. “I don’t really believe that there is such a thing as “reading too much into it”, he says. “There will always be different positions about a text – the question is whether the particular position you have developed is rigorous, comprehensive, has explanatory power, and is useful. There’s not one right reading, but there is a difference between an adequate and inadequate reading.”

The challenge to brand managers, Spencer says, is in understanding how their brand fits in and responds to the geographical and cultural environment. How does it help, how does it respond not only to what consumers want but also the values of modern societies. What social ideals does the brand embody, and how are consumers being subtly reminded of that?

Part of the package

Measuring the effectiveness of a semiotic analysis of a brand can be a tricky thing. “Commercial semiotics is about developing great ideas and responses to brand challenges and opportunities,” Spencer says. “As such, good work aims to result in a campaign or brand that comes out with the scores and measurements that the stakeholder team wants, and if you can measure any consultancy technique, you should be able to apply this to semiotics. Of course, some great brand thinking can really help but not turn up on any measure – but this is true of many specialisms.”

Spencer sees semiotics as a tool to be used alongside other business problem-solving techniques, including many traditional market research methodologies. “Commercial semiotics or brand semiotics demarcates not a set of theories but an approach to a certain kind of problem. That is to say yes, it’s fantastic to talk to people, look at quantitative statistics and do in-depth ethnographic work, but here’s another approach, which is that a great brand undoubtedly responds to people but is also a part of the culture,” he says. “Let’s not worry about what people think for a moment, look at what surrounds people and see how a brand can most relevantly respond to the cultural environment. Identify the fact that ethnography will get a part of the problem solved. Focus groups will get you something else.”

Spencer uses the analogy of a person crossing a bridge to explain the difference in approach between market research generally and commercial semiotics. “The research industry says “Hey, how was it crossing the bridge?” That’s generally what market research asks how the bridge was made. Often, semiotic analysis is used in conjunction with market research techniques to identify, explain or solve client problems. It’s not either/or,” Spencer says. “It’s more about “does it make sense?” There’s very much a science and tech bias: if you say “I’ve got statistics”, people are inclined more readily, but in humanities, what makes it good is that the argument is rigorous.

“You tend to use semiotics when you’re trying to determine what a problem might be, rather than to say that it’s been solved, and often that work is in response to statistical findings. It’s a myth that statistics make decisions by themselves – but any semiotician who dismisses other techniques is an idiot.”

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