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The Semiotics of THEF Marketing

■ Introduction

This chapter examines how signs and sign systems are utilised in marketing to give meaning and award value(s) to tourism, hospitality, events and food (THEF) products, activities and experiences. It also seeks to portray the dominant semiotic codes and signifiers presently operative in each of these sectors. This chapter will draw to a close with a critical examination of the power effects of these representation systems and practices. The meaning production process, which has its roots in the structural linguistic science and philosophy of semiotics is recognised as an integral and fundamental constituent of marketing practice (e.g. McCracken, 1986; Mick et al., 2004, Mick and Oswald, 2006; Oswald, 2012). It is integral to the marketing communication process, the meaning of products and brands, the design and configuration of servicescapes and retail environments, as well as market segmentation practice and positioning more generally. By examining the semiotic structure that constitutes the various forms of marketing practice, objects and materials that are located and utilised within our sectors, it is possible to identify a semiotic language or code, that is used by marketers and which frames marketing practice. These meanings are intended to be read and understood by the consumer and other marketplace stakeholders for the purpose of achieving numerous marketing goals and ends. What is more, semiotics is also considered to be essential to the understanding of specific consumption practices within the THEF sectors and consumer behaviour generally. This is

based upon the premise that consumers exist within a semiotic system of signs, they resultantly become integral nodes within this system and, are compelled into thinking and behaving symbolically. That is, they symbolically interact in the world socially and experientially – they interact with symbolic products, engage in symbolic activities and engage in symbolic experiences.

■ Semiotics and the significance of signs

Semiotics is very simply the study of signs and systems of representation. “Signs are *simply* anything that stands for something (its object/*referent*), to somebody (interpreter), in some respect (its context, *i.e. in an advert, label, package, servicescape or retail environment*)” (Mick, 1986, p.198, italics added), therefore, as consumers or citizens we are all amateur semioticians. We are surrounded by signs from the moment we awaken in the morning until we go to bed at night. Signs essentially make the world intelligible and meaningful to us, they tell us when we can cross the road, which door to use and how we can exit a building. In the main we all understand the meaning of these sorts of signs, and this is possible because we read, interpret and comprehend them. Comprehension in this case is made possible from belonging to a shared cultural context and system of meaning that frames and directs our reading and understanding.

In the literature this context is sometimes referred to as the *code* (e.g. Alexander, 2000; McCracken & Roth, 1989; Holt & Cameron, 2010) or a *cultural template* (Thompson & Arsel, 2004). Essentially these codes or templates provide an interpretive or organising framework through which signs make sense and things in the world come to have personal and social significance. A good example of this is to think about a set of traffic lights. We all recognise and understand the function they perform: through historical convention and experience we equate the colour red with danger so we stop; Green connotes safety so when the green light shows we know to proceed. Therefore, these rule based systems or organising frameworks allow us to make sense of everyday reality and navigate our experience in the world. Codes also allow us

to read into someone's communicative intentions even when drawing upon the most arbitrary of signs. For example it is only through experience and being privy to the code that: the cowboy comes to symbolise rugged individualism (Solomon, 2013; McCracken, 1993), the cafetiere becomes a representamen of the self-proclaimed British middle classes (Britain Thinks, 2011); and Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall turns into a totemic symbol of the Bourgeoisie-Bohemian (Bo-Bo) contemporary ascetic lifestyle (Holt & Cameron, 2010). With regards to the latter, on top of Holt and Cameron's insightful treatise, the interested reader should turn to McCracken (1989) for a discussion of the semiotics of celebrities and the cultural foundations of the endorsement process.

As codes are accumulated and assimilated through our lived experience and interactions with material and social realities of everyday life, they are not always universally shared. That is to say, they may vary between individual consumers and particularly across different market segments, such as age cohorts, ethnic groups or lifestyle sub cultures. In this respect, where we are unfamiliar with the rules or do not understand the code in use, we may experience discomfort, disorientation, or surprise, and struggle to interpret and make sense of what confronts us. For example while it is no surprise to find coffee being sold in branded paper cups or oversize mugs from specialised dedicated retailers in the UK, we may be uncertain of the product if confronted by coffee being served over ice in a plastic bag but, research by Denny & Sunderland (2002) and Sunderland & Denny (2007) found that this is the dominant mode of consuming this commodity in Bangkok. Equally this research also found that coffee in Bangkok has no 'clearly' identifiable place. Unlike familiar elsewheres, coffee is not found in cafés, or specialised shops, but is sold instead by street vendors from market stalls. In sum, the cultural template or code, and the semiotic chain of symbols and signs that mark it out, and which direct the production and consumption of coffee in this part of Thailand is very different to the one that frames and signposts these value creating activities in Europe and the USA and other parts of the world.