



Dr Alex Gordon, 37, is a self-styled 'cultural detective' who applies the science of semiotics to marketing and advertising on behalf of a wide range of clients. Here he describes a typically busy week of sifting through signs and imagery in search of clues to why consumers behave the way they do. Photographs by Naki

WORKING LIVES

the semiotician



MONDAY

In search of signs

The alarm goes off at 7am and the day begins with the *Today* programme. I live in northwest London with my wife, Laura, who runs her own documentary film company. We have a four-year-old daughter, Estie, and three-month-old twin boys, Isaac and Saul.

I shower, dress, then go downstairs to check my emails and answer any urgent ones that have come in overnight. Afterwards I have breakfast and take Estie to school.

I'm back at my desk at about 9.15. I'm finishing off a pre-pitch analysis that I'll be presenting to an ad agency in the afternoon. Semiotics is the study of the meaning of signs in society, or rather how signs create meaning for us. I apply semiotics to brand consultancy to give my clients insight into consumer behaviour, and to offer them creative strategies for brand positioning and communication.

In a very basic sense, when we want to move around the urban landscape we look for signs that tell us either that we're in a certain street or which direction to travel in and so on. Those are very simple directional signs but we rely upon them every day. In a similar way, the choice of someone to give you a drink of tea in a mug or in a cup and saucer is another kind of sign and tells you a lot about how that person sees himself. We understand the world we live in by means of these signs and they influence us subconsciously – culturally, socially,

aesthetically, psychologically and even politically.

Consumers don't make choices based only on conscious decisions about a brand's value and functionality. Semiotics is a key tool in helping to understand the critical unconscious cultural influences on consumer behaviour. In this sense, branded communications such as logos, packaging and advertising are rich cultural texts in precisely the same way as a piece of artwork or a novel or a film. Brands tell stories that are meaningful, and the consumer unconsciously reads these stories in signs and imagery associated with the brand. Understanding how this works is where I come in.

For instance, today the agency I'm helping out is pitching for the account of an alcoholic drink brand, so I'll be talking about the shift in the meaning of Britishness, drinking trends, the change in architecture of pub interiors, things like that. The presentation is after lunch in central London. I'm introduced to the planning team working on the pitch and I talk through the document I've prepared and go through some of the reasons why the brand they're pitching to might be able to change. I offer a different way of looking at things, and explain what key signs of cultural change they could employ in their communications.

That takes a couple of hours. Next it's off to west London, where I'm taking a brief for another piece of work at an ad agency that is working for a soft drink brand that's been having trouble. They want me to undertake an analysis into a territory the brand already

operates in. The drink has been positioned to appeal to young men and they haven't been able to tell a compelling enough story. The agency's won the account to create some exciting and innovative advertising to appeal to that target market and they've brought me in to help them understand what big cultural changes have gone on for men at the beginning of the 21st century, and to locate new cultural territory they can own. For instance, what does it mean to be a man in Britain today and how is that different from five years ago? Are there ways that they can tell a compellingly different story about masculinity which would fit with their brand?

They give me the background to the account and I tell them the best way I may be able to approach the problem and how semiotic analysis might best be applied to it.

I return to my office and start writing up the full proposal. At the end of the day I help put Estie to bed and read her stories, then it's dinner with the Missus followed by a film and feeding the twins before bedtime, hoping that they'll stay asleep during the night. Fingers crossed! >>



Much of the story of hair straightening is about communicating the idea of order and control in a woman's life



From soft drinks and beauty products to mobile phone use in India, Gordon seeks to understand how brands work in a wider cultural context

I look at people, buildings, clothing and vehicles and make links between apparently unrelated social and cultural trends



TUESDAY

Market differences

Today I'm working on an ongoing big project. It's a study for a telecoms brand across four markets – India, Japan, the US and Brazil. I'm going to India next week to conduct my own research and will visit the US later. In the meantime, I'm looking at the analysis that I've received from my partner semioticians in Japan and Brazil. I want to see the commonalities and differences between the two markets in terms of social trends and consumer behaviour.

I'm also starting my analysis of advertising in the telecoms category across those markets. In front of me is a large stack of advertising reels from Japan and Brazil. I have two or three hundred TV commercials to go through and analyse. I need to see if the brand's identity is coherent across all markets. If not, where are the differences and what does this tell us about the markets?

Over lunch I like to do a bit of reading from a website or magazine, just to give me an insight into what's going on in a range of areas. I might look at a gadgets magazine or a sports magazine, the *Architectural Review*, *Sight and Sound*, *Monocle* or a political magazine. I like to look at international publications as well to help me get an insight into what's going on around the world.

WEDNESDAY

What hair straighteners mean

I drop Estie at school and head for a credentials presentation at a large brand consultancy in central London. I'm introducing my company, Sign Salad, and semiotics, which I describe as cultural branding. I use examples from projects where I've been given a specific brief but where my insight has led to broader implications for positioning, and sometimes to new product development as well.

For instance, I helped a global skincare brand to understand how to introduce a nourishment proposition into the skincare category, which at the time was dominated by moisturisation codes. Moisturisation is about refreshment, correcting and repairing, while nourishment is about indulgence, improving and boosting. I showed them what the key social signs of improvement and boosting are, and how trends in food and dieting and particularly in food retail space were communicating values of nourishment and how they could apply some of those in the skincare category to offer a very different proposition.

The implications of my research flowed through to the nature of the product. I'd been brought in to do a study on repositioning, but it ended up having much wider implications. Often a brand is stuck in a certain place, while culture has moved on. I can show how a brand can move to where culture has moved to.

I get back to my desk after lunch to prepare

for a workshop tomorrow with a marketing team at a multinational company that's doing a study on hair straighteners. They want me to do a hands-on category analysis with them. I look at packaging and advertising from the hair straighteners category to get a good idea of the codes and imagery involved, and I read up some of the background material on consumer behaviour.

On the surface you would think this is just a story about keeping curly hair straight, an aesthetic idea. But actually much of the story of hair straightening is about communicating the idea of order and control in a woman's life, that she's cool, calm and collected in the face of disorder and has the competence and the ability to both control her life and at the same time look beautiful. It's arguably a story that's still stuck in what is a pre-feminist idea of women's beauty but it's allying that residual idea with a contemporary lifestyle.

That's the sort of thing that underpins the hair straighteners category, but different brands do it in different ways. Some communicate the idea of clinical power, by using a lot of whiteness in their packaging. Some use a lot of purples and deep reds to communicate the erotic undertones of the category, while others talk about technical efficiency. All of this is communicated by the packaging alone. What appears on the surface to be a fairly mundane beauty practice actually tells some fundamental stories about how women construct their identity in the 21st century.

THURSDAY

Cultural insight

It's the workshop today. There are about 30 people – consumer insight managers, brand managers, designers, local market managers from around the world – and I split them into groups of five, each with some packaging. The idea is to help them break out of traditional ways of thinking and to look at hair straighteners in a very different way, pulling apart all the images on the packaging, from the font to the colours and the photography. For example, how different is the story being told by one brand that's using a classical font and is talking about power and efficiency, to another that's using an Art Nouveau font and talking about creativity and artistry?

The workshop is fun. I do a range of exercises with the clients, culminating in reimagining in a very free way what their packaging might look like. We get some very different ways of looking at it, some of which could never be applied for both marketing and good business reasons!

My background is largely in academia. I gained a Doctorate in Semiotics and Identity Politics and taught in the English and American Studies department of the University of East Anglia and then at Goldsmith's College at the University of London. While I was there, a friend of mine who worked in

marketing for a global soft drinks company asked me to take a look at their logo design and tell them about the semiotics of it versus those of key competitors. I had a lot of fun with it and, to my surprise, my friend and her colleagues found my analysis useful. I then discovered that semiotics was a burgeoning methodology used to enhance qualitative market research. Where qualitative research is asking people their opinion about something in the moment, semiotics seeks to understand what cultural conditions formed those opinions.

I started to work freelance for a number of qualitative research companies and it became increasingly clear that the world of applied semiotics was a much more interesting world than academia! The largest independent qualitative market research agency in the world at the time offered me the opportunity to set up its semiotics division. I was there for five years and worked on large global strategic studies and creative development projects.

I decided to set up my own company six months ago because it struck me that there had been a shift in the industry towards the idea of cultural insight as a whole: understanding how brands operate not only in terms of their category competitors but the broader cultural sphere. It seemed the time was right for cultural insight to play a more dynamic role in marketing processes and indeed in advertising planning processes as well.

FRIDAY

Detective work in Delhi

I'm preparing for my trip next week to India. Primarily, I'm going on a 'cultural detective' mission. I'll be meeting up with my semiotics partner there and we're going to spend four days in Delhi looking at a range of trends to do with mobile phones. How are people holding handsets? What else are they carrying? I'll go to shopping malls to see how people move around and use their phones. Are there any ways they particularly behave that tell us something about the nature of Indian society today and offer an opportunity for a compellingly different story from that already told in the category? I'll be out and about looking at people, buildings, clothing and vehicles, gathering a range of materials and making links between apparently unrelated social and cultural trends.

I think that I'm immensely privileged in being able to bring a range of different ideas to bear upon brand issues and get an intellectual stimulus out of it. It's tremendously challenging. I love the fact that the worlds of brands and broader culture are intimately linked, and I get a thrill out of showing people how they can make the most of that linkage.

More information: signsalad.com