

Signs, symbols and codes

It was highly reassuring, says Kathryn Coles, to hear Sign Salad's opening words: 'we're all semioticians', at AQR's semiotics course.

Thank goodness! Immediately the term semiotics felt less intimidating.

Semiotics, as Alex engagingly explained, is the study of signs, symbols and codes; of their meanings, and how these are interpreted. Signs exist everywhere – which is why we are all semioticians – but often we do not even realise we are involved in the 'decoding' process, so subtly do they present themselves.

Signs have meaning, but meanings can vary according to both context and interpretation – not all are received as they are intended. Semiotics encourages an awareness of the signs that are all around us, it helps us make sense of their meaning, but importantly it also focuses on why signs are received in the way they are.

In the context of brand development, semiotics has considerable value. By investigating the relationship between brands and the culture to which they are inexorably linked, through the medium of signs, meanings otherwise overlooked by more traditional research methods can be revealed.

This information can then be positively employed by brands to create greater impact/differentiation, by developing clear and consistent messages that have greatest relevance to their category and target audience. Even more interestingly, by using semiotics to identify 'emergent' cultural influences vs existing ones, a brand can go a step further and disrupt its category altogether.

A series of breakout sessions helped us to first get to grips with the types of influences that a brand might be affected by, both at a category and also broader, cultural level. Working across tea, biscuit, spread and – my personal favourite – crisps categories, we spent time discussing the signs, symbols and codes used consistently within each category to communicate certain messages.

A second session was then spent exploring how and why we interpreted these signs in the way we did, by debating the broader cultural issues at play. The third and final session allowed us to unleash our inner Apprentice candidate spirits and develop a new brand, using the various category and cultural influences identified earlier in the day.

Modestly, I think Sir Alan would have loved our half-baked 'Bake Well' biscuits that borrowed heavily from 'celebrity chef' culture, as well as tapping into a perceived desire for home cooking without the effort. Other suggestions were equally innovative, although the 'tea gel' may require more time to take off.

The day ended with a useful insight into how semiotics and qualitative research can work together, and how a need for semiotics can be spotted in a research brief. In all, a fascinating day that showed us how semiotics can unlock deeper levels of brand meaning, by understanding unconscious consumer motivations and their reasons for interpreting signs in the way they do.

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