

# The value of semiotics in design innovation processes

by Clío Meurer and Luz Romero March 19, 2013

One of the major difficulties for a business is to maintain coherence between “how it thinks of itself” and “how it is perceived” through its communication, products and services. Frequently the manner of communicating, of establishing dialogue with the public, can bring about a misconception or a feeble idea of the brand’s values. The intention to validate how assertive a brand is in its discourse from the corporate perspective of those who live with the brand on a daily basis, can, due to its bias, be grounded in an unrealistic view.

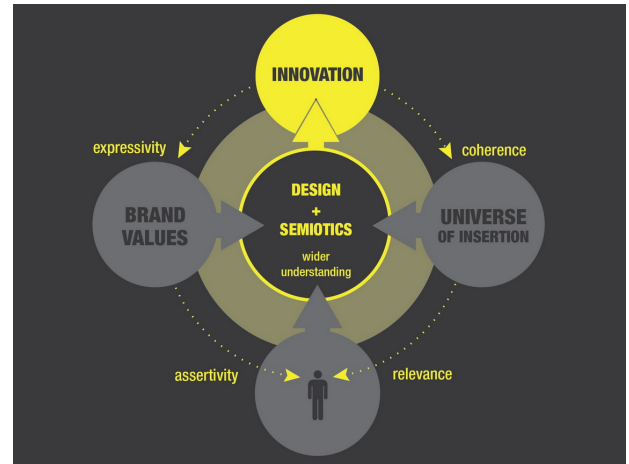
Realizing how commonplace is the lack of synchrony between the brand’s intentions and the public’s interpretation, we felt the need to immerse ourselves in the brand’s discourse from another perspective. Semiotics, by offering a more generalized point of view on the mechanisms of signification, materialized as a complement capable of enriching the design processes, establishing an interchange between the creative and the scientific domains, between aesthetic perception and philosophical discourse.

This discipline investigates the activity of the sign in the meaning-making process (semiosis), and offers analytical tools capable of diagnosing the communicative situation of a brand from a conceptual perspective. This is because the sign, as indicated by Klinkenberg (1996), simultaneously structures data from the material universe (sounds, colors, shapes, scents, tactile impressions, objects, situations) and elements of the conceptual universe (ideas, mental representations, affects, values). This structuring is valid within a specific context. Therefore, the meanings of a brand’s values cannot be understood merely as words, as abstract dictionary definitions. Their mechanisms of production and reception involve a complexity of factors, whose understanding depends on a thorough knowledge of the culture and the society in which they are inserted.

Semiotics investigates the production of signification through a theoretical and discursive apparatus which serves as a platform for dialogue with other disciplines such as the philosophy of language, psychology and sociology. By looking at how a brand’s values and objectives are actualized in its products and communications, and how they are perceived within a given cultural context, semiotics offers another point of view, complementing the corporate perspective and the perceptions of consumers. This viewpoint is that of the product in and of itself, considered in its dimension of meaning.

Our first exchanges of expertise between design thinking and the semiotic perspective began in 2008, and matured as a methodology in 2011. Although we intuitively sensed the potential of this partnership, the “how” of putting it into practice was still a mystery. We needed to find a way to conduct an in-depth study of the occult discourses in the products, that could preserve the complexity of these discourses in graphical logic. In other words, the challenge—with a sensitive, scientific investigation as starting point—was to construct a tool that could locate the discursive strength and the communicative dimension of the product within a visually tangible comparative metric.

The construction of a specific analytical methodology took place incrementally, and was marked by synergy between the two ways of



thinking. As is the case in the processes of design, this constructive activity navigated between more rational moments and more creative moments, in an articulation of scientific theory with interpretive reading.

The method, systematized to create a precise diagnostic of the discursive identity of a product (the object and its communication), maintains this same dynamic process. Our starting point is the conviction that a product's communicative dimension is conditioned by its coexistence with, and—why not be clear about it—its confrontation with other products of its kind. For this reason, an analysis of the product and its competitors in the spaces where they are inscribed, that is, in the contexts where they are located, becomes a fundamental step.

The spaces in which a product is inscribed reveal the conceptual universe to which it belongs. This universe is governed not only by the values and conventions of the buyers, but also, and above all, by a kind of “culture” specific to the category itself. The main impasses occur when the aesthetic solution, in its choice of codes, ignores the conceptual universe. To cite just one example, the minimalist style, elaborated within the codes of the cosmetics universe, may be inappropriate when dealing with food—which is not to say that there cannot be a minimalist aesthetic solution appropriate to that universe. Rather, this demonstrates the possibility of having a unique stance and, at the same time, a competitive discourse in its segment.

The study of the effects of context makes it possible to evaluate the assertiveness of a brand's values as embodied in concrete expression, incorporated, bringing very different results from when we take these values as generic definitions, isolated from their actual manifestation. By incorporating other players in the study with equal rigorosity, it was possible—in addition to conducting this assessment—to establish a comparative metric capable of bringing new insight into the marketplace. By new insight, we mean that, in addition to the mastery of data about the volume of sales, it is possible to understand which of the players has the most competitive, the most forceful discourse, and why.

Recently we have had very positive return with regard to the involvement of semiotic studies in innovation processes. Major consumer goods companies have been questioning themselves as to the future of important brands, dealing with the mixed emotions that come from wanting to take a step forward and being apprehensive about losing part of their history. In these cases, the integration of semiotics in our methods has contributed to defining pivotal new lines of action, expanding the scope of innovation and increasing the argumentative repertoire. It has represented a new perspective for analysis, capable of revealing the riches inherent in the simplest of things, bringing a quasi “psychological” dimension to Designers' and corporate members' knowledge of the object.

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