CHAPTER 4

ADVERTISING, SEMIOTICS AND STRATEGIC BRAND MANAGEMENT

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Introduction

The phenomenal growth of advertising in the 21st century has helped to sustain a consumer culture and create new markets. Advertising has been regarded as a marketing communication catalyst that aids productivity, but, as White (2000) has noted, it is also an ideal tool to build strong brands and create unshakeable consumer loyalty. Generally speaking, the purpose of advertising is to inform customers about the existence of a brand or to help reinforce commitment to that brand. Advertising consists of a series of related, well-turned and carefully placed adverts that reinforce personal selling and sale promotion efforts. It may communicate information about a sale promotion or announce a public relations event. Ultimately, it helps to maintain loyalty to the brand, offer customer service and reinforce existing bonds, relationships and commitments between the customer and the advertiser. The task of *competitive* advertising is to seduce one brand's loyal users and persuade them to consume one's own brand.

The use of semiotics in promoting advertised messages is as an ideal tool for reaching large numbers of people economically. In the European market, there is an increasing awareness of the use of semiotics in advertising. This awareness is evident in the large number of articles in marketing and advertising journals which mention or discuss signs and semiotics as marketing communication tools. In 1989, the first Marketing and Semiotics Symposium was held in Copenhagen. This symposium was arranged by the Marketing Institute of the Copenhagen Business School and attended by various people from universities and business schools. The event demonstrated the new prominence of semiotics in the advertising industry, especially in advanced capitalist nations.

Since the inauguration of the modern advertising profession in Pennsylvania in 1841, when Volney B. Palmer opened his advertising agency, advertising methods have changed radically. Advertising no longer simply presents the benefits of a product, it creates an image for that product. In the 21st century, advertising is to strategic brand management what branding is to total product packaging and image. The main objective of this chapter is to examine the use of semiotics in advertising and brand management with particular reference to how semiotics affects strategic brand management. I discuss the various facets of brand management and the relationship of brand management to advertising and review the theory of semiotics as a backup link to its relationship to advertising. I begin with a general discussion of the nature of advertising and the advertising business before clarifying the relationship between advertising and brand management, then give an overview of the concept of semiotics, with an emphasis on the relationship between signs and meaning in theories of semiotics, particularly in Umberto Eco's work. This is followed by a discussion of the relationship between advertising, semiotics and strategic brand management. I conclude with some recommendations on the use of semiotics as a strategic brand management tool.

The Nature and Business of Advertising

Doghudje (1985) observes that advertising is a marketing communication tool whose aim is to build preference for advertised brands or services. Rossiter and Percy (1997:3) define advertising as a "relatively indirect form of persuasion … designed to create favourable mental impressions that turn the mind towards purchase". The British Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) points out that the purpose of advertising is to create "the most persuasive possible selling message to the right prospect for the lowest possible cost" (cited in Rossiter and Percy 1997: 40). The American Marketing Association defines it as "any paid form of impersonal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services by an identified sponsor." Thus, advertising includes any form of paid strategic communication that is commercially oriented and aimed at informing, reminding and persuading the market of the existence and availability of a product, brand or service with the ultimate purpose of encouraging patronage and use.

White (2000) emphasises the complexity of advertising, noting how it interacts with numerous marketing concerns, including personal selling, product development, branding, merchandising and research. Cole (1979) categorises the numerous benefits of advertising to the advertiser as follows:

- announcing a product or service
- attracting buyers
- launching a brand
- promoting a public service course
- introducing new packages
- maintaining sales of certain packages
- increasing turnover and profits
- encouraging patronage and use of a particular product, brand or service.

The pivotal role of advertising, however, is to find new customers by generating sales leads, a concept used to refer to potential customers who have been identified as having a need for or interest in a product or service and the ability to purchase it.

In organisational management, determining the advertising objective is essential to the overall productivity and efficiency of products or services. Generally, the advertising objective should be realistic, precise, measureable and consistent with the firm's overall marketing and communication objectives. Setting objectives enhances the firm's ability to evaluate the effectiveness of its advertising.

Across the globe, companies use one or more of five promotional alternatives: advertising, personal selling, sale promotion, public relations and direct marketing. Three of these (advertising, sale promotion and public relations) are often used for mass selling because they are used with a group of prospective buyers (Berkowitz and Rudelius 2000). Furthermore, advertising supports other promotional efforts. It may communicate information about sale promotion or announce public relations events.

Importantly, advertising offers some significant advantages over other promotional techniques. The first is cost; advertising is relatively cheaper than other promotional alternatives. Advertising's second advantage is ease of repetition, which is often needed to get the message across effectively. Third, many consumers assign some level of prestige to advertising in the media. The simple fact is that when a product is advertised it has a better advantage in the marketplace (Jefkins 1998, Daramola 2003). However, scholars have also argued that advertising has several drawbacks within the context of the promotional mix. Belch and Belch (2003) list the most important of these as follows:

- Advertising cannot provide direct feedback, unlike personal selling and public relations
- Advertising is difficult to personalise

- Advertising cannot always motivate customers to action as effectively as personal selling will normally do.

Advertising and Brand Management

Advertising is a significant part of a range of marketing communication efforts that can support a brand (White 2000). A brand is any name, term, symbol, sign, design or underlying combination of these. Michael Jannini, Executive VP of Brand Management, Marriott International, defines a brand as follows:

> A brand is a promise. Your image, your message and your past performance should be clear and consistent indicators of the service you will deliver in the future, so people believe it is in their sincere best interest to come back to your brand time and time again **(source??? not in ref list)**.

Brand management, according to Lindstrom (2005), is the art of creating and maintaining a brand. A brand must carry a "promise" that a product or service has a certain quality that makes it special or unique. It is this promise which appeals to the core desires of the consumer and releases a series of processes towards the eventual purchase of the product. The promise creates a bond that defines the relationship between the advertiser and the consumer. Brand management is also regarded as the application of marketing techniques to a specific product line or brand. It seeks to increase the product's perceived value to the customer and thereby increase brand franchise and equity. Marketers see a brand as an implied promise which may increase sales by making a favourable comparison with competing products. It may also enable the manufacturer to charge more for the product. The value of the brand is determined partly by the amount of profit it generates for the manufacturer and partly by the amount of money consumers are prepared to pay for any of the brand's manifestations. This value can result from any combination of increased sales and increased price, and/or reduced cost of goods sold and/or reduced or more efficient marketing investment. All of these may improve the profitability of a brand. In this regard, brand management is often viewed in organisations as a broader and more strategic role than marketing alone.

The annual list of the world's most valuable brands, published by *Interbrand* and *Business Week*, indicates that the market value of companies often consists largely of brand equity. Research in 2000 by McKinsey and Company, a global consulting firm, suggests that strong, well-leveraged brands produce higher returns to shareholders than weaker, narrower brands. Taken together, this means that brands seriously impact shareholder value, which ultimately makes branding a

Chief Executive Officer's key responsibility. A good brand name is particularly important and should be:

- Protected (or at least protectable) under the trademark law
- Easy to pronounce
- Easy to remember
- Easy to recognise
- Easy to translate into all languages in the markets where the brand will be used
- An attention-getter
- Suggestive of product benefits or usage
- Suggestive of the company or product image
- Able to distinguish the product's placing relative to the competition
- Attractive
- Able to stand out among a group of other brands.

Advertising is an important determinant for brand image, along with the physical characteristics of the brand, the price charged and the satisfaction that is derived from the brand. Consumers' knowledge about a brand is often quite high, particularly when the decision-making process involves a lot of fact-finding and comparisons between alternatives. As Jobber (2003: 15) points out:

> An analytic framework of a brand can be used to dissect the current position in the market place and form the basis of a new brand positioning strategy. The strength of the brand position in the market place is built on six elements i.e. brand domain, brand heritage, brand value, brand asset, brand personality and brand reflection.

Belch and Belch (2003) maintain that a brand must have a brand domain. This means that the brand must target a market where it competes with others in its area of offerings. Also, there must be a brand heritage, by which is meant the background of the brand and its culture, how it has achieved success over its lifetime. Brand asset makes the brand distinctive from competing brands through symbols, feature images and relationships, and brand value stands for the core values and characteristics of the brand in the market. Other important details are brand personality (the 'character' of the brand described in terms of other entities such as people, animal or objects) and brand reflection which refers to the ideas the brand wants to communicate to its consumers.

Understanding the need to develop the equity of a brand underlines the importance of brand management. Basically, brand equity refers to the value of an organisation's compared to competitor's brands. Hawkins et al (2003) note:

> Brand equity is the value consumers assign a brand above the functional characteristics of the product. Generally, brand equity is nearly synonymous with reputation of the brand. However, the term equity refers to economic value; thus, brands with good reputation have the potential for high level of brand equity, whereas unknown brands with weak or negative reputation have not.

Kerin and Berkowitz (2004) thus call brand equity the added value a given brand name gives to a product beyond the fundamental benefits provided. Brand equity, therefore, is essentially what drives buyers to purchase the brand as opposed to buying other brands.

In brand management, there are various types of brands which can be used in brand communication (Belch and Belch 2003, Jobber 2003). An 'economy brand' in brand communication refers to a brand targeted to a high-priced elasticity demand market segment. Another type of brand is the 'fighting brand', which is a brand created specifically to counter a competitive threat. For example, West African Milk Company (WAMCO) created Peak Choco to compete with Cowbell chocolate. A third type of brand is referred to as 'family branding'. This type of brand is usually used when there are several related products. This is the main reason why you can easily find this type of branding in multi-product companies. For example, LG is the name of a company that manufactures electronic products. It uses its name for all its products. However, we should note that there are also companies that prefer to give their products different brand names. This is referred to as 'individual branding'.

There are various kinds of strategies used to reach target markets (Bovee and Arens 1992, Belch and Belch 2003). These strategies are usually determined by the nature of the brand in its life cycle, that is, introduction, growth, maturity and decline stages (Bovee and Arens 1992, Jobber 2003, Jefkins 1998). One of the major brand strategies adopted by brand specialists and advertising experts is the generic strategy. The generic strategy is best employed when the brand is a leader in the category or when an increase in product category sales would benefit the brand. This approach forgoes claims of superiority or brand differences in favour of promoting the category.

On the other hand, co-branding is a common brand strategy in which two or more brands work together to market their products. For example, Unilevers' franchise, popularly known as Mr. Biggs, used co-branding with Coca-Cola in 2009.

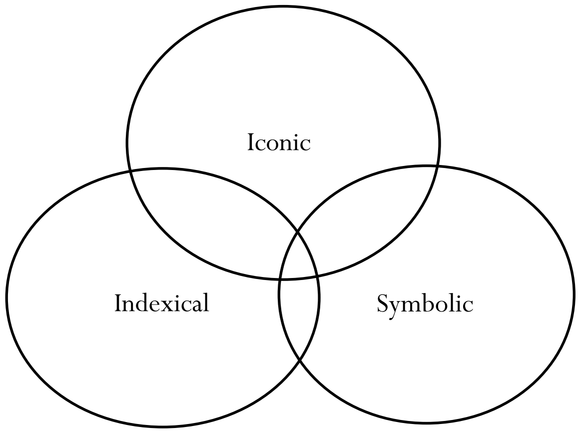
Using 'brand characters' is another common brand strategy used in advertising and promotion. Brand characters refer to the use of characters or personalities to promote and reflect a particular brand. For example, Michael Power was a brand character for Guinness Nigeria between 1998 and 2002 in Nigeria. Fido Dido was a brand character for Seven-Up. Another important brand strategy is the resonance approach, which uses experiences with which consumers can identify on an emotional level and then places the product within the experiential context (Belch and Belch 2003).

The Concept of Semiotics

The term semiotics (also referred to as "semiology") derives from the Greek word semeion meaning "sign". It is also known as the "study of signs". Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), a Swiss linguist, gave the subject its name when he first taught the course in general linguistics at Geneva University (Fiske 1990). Another key figure in the early development of semiotics was the American Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). He constructed a triangular model to illustrate the relationship he termed "sign-object-interpretant". According to Peirce's model, a sign is anything from which meaning is generated. Saussure, however, proposed a different dyadic model. He saw the sign as a physical object with meaning which consists of a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the material vehicle for the sign, while the signified can be understood as the mental concept it represents, which is common to all members of the same culture who share the same language (Fiske 1990). In essence, semiotics is the study of sign action (semiosis). As such, it is a purely human phenomenon. All life forms engage in semiosis because they all use signs. However, only humans engage in inquiry into semiosis. Deely (1990: 5) thus observes that "[a]t the heart of semiotics is the realization that the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs". Importantly, signs have three aspects: iconic, indexical, and symbolic (Eco 1979, Deely 2001). The interpretive aspect of a sign may emphasise any one aspect of the sign, so that a sign may be considered primarily an icon, primarily an index, or primarily a symbol. Thus, the association of the concept "deer" or "food" with tracks in the wood by some third party is symbolic, even though the relationship of the deer to the tracks is indexical and one may consider the indexical aspect of the sign the important relationship if one is tracking the animal. These aspects of the sign are further illustrated in Figure 4.1.

Semiotics is, therefore, a theoretical approach to communication which aims to establish widely applicable principals for the study of anything which stands for something else in some respect or capacity (Deely 2001). Signs can take the form of words, images, sounds or objects. Every medium used, whether television, radio or magazine advertisement, is constrained by the various channels that it

Figure 4.1: Aspects of the sign



uses. For instance, even in the medium of language, words fail in attempting to represent certain experiences. Different media provide different frameworks for representing experience, but all media are semiotic systems (Eco 1976).

Sign and Meaning in Semiotics Theories

Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) is regarded as one of the earliest seminal works which conceptualised semiotics into a theoretical model. Eco's approach regards the meaning of signals or signs as independent of the objects (i.e. things or events) to which they refer. He rejects the notion that iconic signs must be likenesses of their objects (Scott 2004). In his critique of Eco, A. Scott (2004: 1) explains:

> Eco's argument that the meaning of signals or signs is not necessarily determined by whether they refer to actual objects … [posits] that the existence of objects to which signals or signs may correspond is not a necessary condition for their signification.

As Scott observes (2004: 2):

> Eco criticizes the notion that a typology of signs may clarify the nature of sign function, arguing instead that any typology of signs may fail to explain how different kinds of signs may share the same modes of production. Eco thus argues that the correct approach to developing a unified semiotic theory should not be to propose a typology of signs but should be to provide a method of investigating

> how sign-vehicles may function as signs and to provide a means of understanding how sign-vehicles may be produced and interpreted. According to Eco, a general semiotic theory should include not only a theory of how codes may establish rules for systems of signification but a theory of how signs may be produced and interpreted.

A theory of codes may, therefore, clarify aspects of signification, while a theory of sign-production may clarify aspects of communication. Eco defines "signification" as the semiotic event whereby a sign stands for something, while he defines "communication" as the transmission of information from a source to a destination. Communication is made possible by the existence of a code, or by a system of signification. Without a code or system of signification, there is no set of rules to determine how the expression of signs is to be correlated with their content. The use of a code or system of signification in order to correlate the expression and content of signs may be necessary in order to establish any form of communication (Scott 2004).

Scott (2004: 1) adds that, according to Eco, a complete theory of sign-production requires three elements:

> [A] theory of sign-production should include not only a theory of communication but a theory of "mentions" (i.e. referring acts) and a theory of communicational acts. A theory of communication may explain how information may be transmitted from a source (or content-continuum) through a channel (or expression-continuum) to a destination. A theory of "mentions" may explain how signs may be used for naming things and for making statements about actual situations. A theory of communicational acts may explain how a sender may transmit verbal or non-verbal messages to an addressee.

Eco insists that there is a "referential fallacy" in classical theories of semiotics. This is the false assumption that the meaning of a sign-vehicle is determined by its referent (i.e. by the object to which the sign-vehicle refers), as well as an "extensional fallacy", which is the false assumption that the meaning of a sign-vehicle is determined by its extension (i.e. by the class of objects to which the sign-vehicle refers). According to Eco, both the referential fallacy and the extensional fallacy may distort a theory of codes by promoting the false assumption that the object of a sign, or the class of objects to which the sign refers, is a necessary condition for the sign's meaning or signification (Scott 2004).

Eco also argues that the content and not the referent of a sign is the location of the sign's meaning. The meaning of a sign is a cultural unit, in that the meaning of every sign is culturally defined. A cultural unit may be defined as a semantic unit (i.e. a content unit or "sememe"), in that it may be analysed into its elementary semantic components (i.e. its "semes" or semantic markers). A cultural unit may also be defined as a syntactic unit (i.e. an expression unit or “lexeme”), in that it may be analysed into its elementary syntactic components (i.e. its syntactic markers) (Scott 2004).

A major semiotic theory that emphasises the importance of communication in promoting brands is Roland Barthes’ theory of semiotics. This theory is rooted in the fact that every sign comes from a signifier and a signified and has a meaning; there is no such thing as an empty meaning (Barthes 1977). Barthes explains that signs are interpreted by individuals, each interpretation being influenced by that person’s experiences and background. According to Barthes, messages, therefore, are constituted in two ways: through denotation (the literal meaning and reference of the sign) and connotation (the meanings suggested or implied by the sign). Krawsczyn (2010) notes that this theory requires communicators to delve beneath the surface of superficial communications to locate the true meaning of a message. Thus, semiotics helps one to acquire a better understanding of both people and communication processes. With regard to brand management, semiotics enables individuals, groups and organisations to reflect their identity as well as their values to the world. It helps companies to promote their equity base and project an image to a target audience in the manner they wish it to be perceived and remembered.

Advertising, Semiotics and Strategic Brand Management

Semiotics is now regarded as the cornerstone of brand equity management. This is because symbolic communication is tied to all forms of brand communication i.e. advertising, packaging and brand logo (Oswald 2007). Semiotics, among other things, plays a major role in catching the attention of the intended target market. The placement of certain images, text, colours, and other signs are key to the overall success of any advert.

Strategic brand management is premeditated, deliberate and tactical brand management using sophisticated and sometimes complicated, but classy and mature, methods to create a lasting and positive image of a product in the minds of the major markets. Strategic brand management is a complicated kind of product packaging which basically aims to create a superior product placement and, thus, carve a niche for the brand in the market. It is a holistic kind of brand management, hence our argument that semiotics could play a major role in particular advertisements that help build and manage brands.

The use of semiotics varies with the kind of product being advertised, but, among similar products, the overall theme of the adverts seems to stay the same with few exceptions. For example, many automobile adverts stress a feeling of freedom or excitement by using images that present the vehicle as more rugged or versatile than other vehicles. Alcohol adverts insinuate that you will be more popular on the party scene and will have more fun if you drink a certain brand.

Many brand strategy researchers have come to recognise the importance of brand communication in building and sustaining brand equity (Aaker 1991, Rice and Trout 2001, Oswald 2007). Brand communication can be achieved through a complex matrix of signifying elements, including material, structural, conventional, contextual and performance dimensions (Oswald 2007). The logo of "Mr. Biggs" is a good example. It strategically contains the following:

- Material – It is a visual icon.
- Structural – The golden arches and colour scheme, with the brand name superimposed on the arches in white.
- Conventional – The golden arches, the colour scheme and the brand name consistently signify the brand.

The matrix of these signifying elements suggests that communication serves to create, maintain and transform meaning (Bantz 1993, Sri Ranjan 2010). Advertising can serve in this context to facilitate the communication of signs and symbols to create and transform meaning. In addition, the effectiveness of advertised messages in developing a brand in the mind of a consumer depend on the symbolic interpretation of the advertised message. The sign, object and interpretant (or interpretation) must be manipulated in such a way that the receiver immediately recognises a product or brand and receives a specific meaning and, thus, a message. This is especially applicable to products aimed at a young market (Chandler 1997).

Sri Ranjan (2010) notes the power of verbal, audio and visual signs and observes that advertising, therefore, can serve as a powerful tool for building awareness, positive associations and long-term customer loyalty. McCracken (1996) states that consumers interpret advertised messages as a way of understanding their environment and themselves. This helps them to become the arbitrators of advertising meaning. He explains that advertised messages can be seen as a symbolic resource which brings new ideas and better versions of old ideas in order to advance marketing projects as well as to coordinate and manipulate individuals and society. In other words, signs, advertising and communication are three inseparable concepts for understanding consumer behaviour. Advertised messages construct, form and manipulate the perceptions and behaviours of consumers and the larger society. Thus, advertising experts usually do the following:

- Read the text.
- Read the culture, i.e. what is relevant to the product.
- Make connections between the two.

There is a cultural system – a common set of assumptions, beliefs and symbols called codes – which marks all the products of the culture: fashion, food, music, advertising, movies, television shows, and so on. The codes are taken for granted and embedded, largely unconsciously, in people's behaviour. Advertising experts drag the unconscious messages being transmitted into consciousness by isolating and identifying the signs to constitute the message (Sri Ranjan 2010).

In Africa, many companies have used semiotics in developing brands that reflect the socio-cultural environment in order to promote consumption. For example, Lovelife, an South African NGO concerned with adolescent reproductive health, made effective use of semiotics in billboards to reduce the rate of HIV infection among adolescents. It promoted sexual health and a healthy lifestyle (Delates 2001). Lovelife currently spends R13 million per annum (close to two million USD) on its billboards and R5 million on mobile outdoor media. The messages of Lovelife billboards have generated considerable discussion within the media and amongst communication experts in South Africa (Delates 2001, Lovelife 2001).

In another study, Lunga (2005) examined the use of semiotics in Stanbic Bank's panAfrican brand campaign. The study revealed that the bank relied on African symbols, images and visuals to reflect the socio-cultural environments of African countries. The campaign succeeded in reproducing and maintaining power relations between South Africa and other African nations.

Conclusion

The business of advertising and brand management is changing rapidly, and so are the methods used to develop and target new markets. The application of semiotics in strategic brand management is an important brand communication tool used to achieve the goal of effective brand management. The use of semiotics in advertising leads to symbiotic exchanges of cultural codes that are both needed by the advertiser and contextualised by the consumers to create meaning. For consumers, these signs are used to create identities and differentiate one market from the other while simultaneously associating consumers with others through their consumption choices and patterns.

Our analysis of the relationship between advertising, semiotics and strategic brand management leads to the following recommendations, which are basically aimed at making the relationship a solid one and therefore increasing patronage of standard products which adopt its use. The recommendations are as follows:

- The use of semiotics in advertising should be carried out with creativity and dexterity. Companies are advised to consult with advertising experts and semiotics professionals in the placement of images, text, colours, and other signs which are key parts of the overall success of an advert, commercial or campaign.
- The use of semiotics in brand communication and advertising will be insignificant unless the strategy reflects the socio-cultural environment of the country. Advertising experts must take into cognisance the importance of culture in developing a brand as well as in the use of semiotics in advertising.
- The use of verbal, audio and visual signs in brand communication can powerfully capture the hearts and minds of consumers. When this is done with creativity, the output is usually productive.
- Manufacturers should further explore the use of semiotics in advertising and strategic brand management because of its capacity to serve as a means of identification to simplify handling or tracing, legally protect unique product features, signal quality level to satisfied customers, endow products with unique associations, produce competitive advantage and increase financial returns.
- Companies should re-strategize by reducing the number of brands they market. This process is known as brand rationalisation. Some companies tend to create more brands and product variations within a brand than economies of scale would support. Sometimes, they will create a specific service or product brand for each market that they target. In the case of product branding, this may be to gain retail shelf space (and reduce the amount of shelf space allocated to competing brands). A company may decide to rationalise their portfolio of brands from time to time to gain production and marketing efficiency or as part of corporate restructuring. Brand rationalisation reduces identification and recognition problems in the market and enhances competitive advantages. Semiotics is highly relevant in this regard.

Globalisation has thrown up the challenge of universal communication media. In spite of this, signs acquire appropriate meanings only within specific cultural conrext. Advertising strategists may adopt similar themes for advertising campaigns worldwide, but the goal of a globally understood and acceptable sign may be a mirage. Rather than standardise advertising messages or signs, advertising adaptation (or "glocalisation") may be a better alternative in situations where advertising localisation is impossible. This will incorporate cultural sensitivity into the use of semiotics in advertising.

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