

Foreword: The Semiotic Shape of Customer Experience

The timing of the translation of this provocative collection of essays by France's foremost semiotician of marketing could not be more auspicious for English language readers, who have been primed for over two decades by like-minded inquirers into things symbolic. By almost all accounts the 'new' economy that is unfolding all around us, in cyberspace and in real life, is an *experience* economy. To apprehend and exploit an experience economy, marketers must thoroughly understand the generation, negotiation and transformation of meaning as these very processes manifest themselves in the lives of consumers. In the current moment of qualitative consumer research, when nuanced interpretation and extended case studies of everyday life emerge as the gold standard for managerial relevance, this mandate touches academics and practitioners alike. The reflections of Jean-Marie Floch braid these issues of insight, nuance and relevance together into filaments that we in turn will want to weave into our own web of experiential inquiry.

To understand *homo economicus* we need to look beyond metaphors of the individual as a rational calculator or information processor, or rather behind them. Much of the recent research into the production of consumption has persuasively demonstrated that consumers are taxonomic members of *homo faber*. That is, consumers *make* things, or more accurately for our present purpose, they *remake* things. Consumers are active coproducers of their own experience. They take the stuff of marketplace behaviour – products, services, advertisements, retail outlets and anything else the marketer introduces into their environment – and use it to cocreate in conjunction with the marketer's offerings. They animate the world of goods with meanings in a way that practitioners are just beginning to appreciate. Floch's contribution to our understanding of the consumer's propensity to cocreate the marketing experience is literary at base. He recognizes that, as a species, our primal taxonomic roots lie in the practice of storytelling. The consumer is a prototypical representative of *homo narrans*. Consumers story their worlds. Meaning resides in texts.

Analysts who would plumb consumer behaviour must learn to read those texts that embody meaning. These texts are what Floch calls 'signifying occurrences', and he reads them in lived experience: in public transit usage, in banking and pharmaceutical advertising, in the design of hypermarkets, logos and automobiles. In parsing these texts, Floch reveals the deep structures of meaning that organize our experience. He uses a semiotic method, characterized by empirical rigour and interpretive texture – a method that he illustrates effectively, guided by a philosophy of emergent, reflexive nature resembling a 'theory in use' – to unpack the narrative schemas and strategies of buyers and sellers. I hope readers will cheer as he drives yet another semiotic nail into the coffin of the concept of consumer miscomprehension.

Floch explores the ecology of meaning in a multimodal fashion. Observation of behaviour as it unfolds, close reading of advertisements, structural analyses of sites and symbols, and consideration of cultural context all figure in his interpretation. His conversational style brokers concepts effectively, while he provides denser theoretical interludes for those seeking deeper illumination. He manages to speak quite fluently in theoretical, practical and pedagogical voices, which will help accelerate the flow of semiotic sensibility through businesses and business schools alike.

Qualitative consumer researchers have long maintained that marketing is fundamentally the shaping of experience. Experience design is both the hallmark and the engine of the new economy. Understanding the meaning upon which experience is predicated has to be the principal challenge facing strategists, whether they are practitioners or professors. The ecology of meaning is a system grounded in intersubjectivity, communication being the medium in which the system is suspended. From a semiotic perspective, marketing *is* communication. Jean-Marie Floch has provided us with a blueprint for marketing in this new millennium. I invite the reader to apply the semiotic square to any set of micronarratives comprising his or her preferred grand text – any subunits of any of the Ps will suffice – to see just how practical a good theory can be. Semiotics is a much-welcomed addition to our tool kit and our toy box.

JOHN F. SHERRY, JR

Preface: 'By Leaps and Bounds'

This book discusses 'everyday things' such as cars, the metro, banks, hypermarkets, the act of reading, liver problems even fits of depression. Moreover it talks about them in practical terms. When considering the metro, as in the second chapter, the focus falls not so much on the city, urbanization or the 'here and nowness' of things, but on facts and gestures relating to travellers, on the various methods they use to pass through the turnstiles, navigate the corridors then take their place on the platform to await their train. Likewise, with regard to advertising, specific campaigns are examined for themselves and not just as representatives of advertising in general. Campaigns comparable to those pursued in the past on behalf of Manpower, Lustucru, Eram, or 'Super Glue 3' are analyzed in order to define the major advertising philosophies developed by Ogilvy, Feldman, Séguéla and Michel, among others.

Realities as different as the ones mentioned above, however, can only be discussed by approaching them from the same point of view (unless, of course, everything is considered fair game, which, in effect, would lead to no discussion at all). Throughout this book a concerted effort has been made to approach them from the single point of view of their relationship to meaning and signification. With that as our point of departure, along with a deaf ear to the siren call of the gurus' privileging discourse, we need only to open the toolbox used to analyze meaning and signification and begin the task of stating clearly what we mean by them. Thus the reader should proceed through the following pages by 'leaps and bounds' in accordance with Montaigne's oft quoted expression, moving from the concrete to the abstract and then back again. The analysis of the concept of clarity, which was chosen as the key concept for Crédit du Nord's overall message, led us, for example, to a consideration of two, traditionally opposed aesthetics – the classical and the baroque. Then, in that same chapter, a presentation of the 'narrative schema' opened out into an investigatory methodology of the meaning effects produced by logos and their layouts.

We have conceived and written this book in such a way that the reader can, on the first reading, skip the theoretical pages if so inclined.

Semiotics, Marketing and Communication

Beneath the Signs, the Strategies

Jean-Marie Floch

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