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Tutorial 5

Semiotics: A User's Guide to Seeing Differently

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Semiotic insight powerfully complements ethnographic approaches. Semiotics, the study of signs and cultural meaning, has been gaining ground in the world of commercial research. Semiotics has also been successfully melded together with ethnographic and other cultural approaches, especially in the UK and Europe. This tutorial equipped participants with the tools, techniques and hands-on experience needed to begin their own semiotic research endeavors.

Opening with a grounding in semiotic theory, we then focused on building practical skills through 'live decoding' of a cultural theme. We began by learning how to 'decode' – exploring how a semiotic close read analysis can reveal a deeper understanding of what is really being said. Crucially, we discussed the chasm that often appears between intended meaning and received meaning, especially within brand communication.

We then introduced the idea of codes (themes, or clusters of meaning) which we use to help us make sense of the cultural idea or category we are exploring. In this session, we focused on identifying the codes of energy by looking at a collection of print adverts from a number of different categories. We showed how useful codes are as a tool to help brands understand the intricacies of their communications, and to enable us to see the category differently – from a cultural rather than a consumer lens. We discussed how, using codes, we are able to reveal the big cultural tensions and ideas at play, and the different levels of nuanced expression available to communicate these themes. Brands can use this insight to better understand how they sit within their broader context, and what they could draw on in future brand strategy, communication or activation.

At this point, we introduced the idea of the cultural trajectory – what we refer to as the Residual-Dominant-Emergent framework - which is invaluable for helping provoke conversations about changing meaning, and thus cultural relevance. It raises questions around whether a brand is positively changing, reflecting and responding to emerging cultural ideas. Where or what can we draw from in the 'emergent' space that can help us better deliver against this?

Lastly, we shared some new thinking on sensory semiotics, exploring the role of the senses in communicating and constructing meaning through experience. We ran a 'live sensory decode' in which small groups applied a sensory semiotic read to a number of different energy drinks. This introduced the idea that we can influence meaning, perception and experience by modulating different sensory signifiers, and in doing so raises new possibilities for brands to deliver more distinct and memorable experiences.

By the end of the session participants:

- Understood the background and basic principles of commercial semiotics
- Were able to work with some core models and methodologies and understand how and when they are useful
- Had co-produced a series of codes through practical application of semiotic methods
- Had participated in a holistic sensory brand decode

Cato Hunt has spent the last 15 years helping clients grow their brands by understanding cultural meaning. As Director of Innovation at Space Doctors, Cato leads the way in exploring and developing new ways in which we can understand, create and measure meaning, by drawing from a wide range of disciplines—from the cognitive and behavioural sciences to design theory, anthropology and experience design.

Clem McCulloch is a Project Executive at Space Doctors. He brings a deep interest in philosophy and critical theory applied to the thinking and methodology underpinning commercial semiotics. He is currently working with Cato to develop new hybrid methodologies by drawing from the behavioural sciences.