

Baileys: one of the leading brands of the newly merged GuinnessUDV empire. Guinness is using semiotics to 'decode' rival beer brands' advertising



Cracking the code

Using semiotics to analyse competitors' ads has helped Guinness gain more insight into its marketplace. Michael Harvey and Malcolm Evans explain how their client/ supplier partnership developed a 'Decoding Kit'

In 1998 Guinness created a new process to develop brand propositions. This process required an understanding of four key elements in order to create the best proposition for the brand anywhere in the world:

- marketing objectives, to ensure the proposition was 'fit for purpose'
- consumer needs and motivations, to ensure the proposition was motivating
- product attributes/perceptions, to ensure a credible proposition
- knowledge of competitive advertising propositions, to ensure a distinctive proposition.

There was nothing earth shattering here, just good practice rigorously applied. But Guinness discovered that while it invariably knew a great deal about the first three elements, it rarely knew much about competitive propositions. What was needed was an instant, affordable way for Guinness marketers anywhere in the world to

understand all competitors' positionings (as projected by advertising) from a consumer perspective at exactly the point in the process when a new Guinness proposition was being prepared. A tough brief for any agency! In the event it was the Decoder team, Added Value's semiotic specialists, which came up with the most promising ideas for a solution.

Central to the brief was a challenge to take semiotic thinking another step on from theory and the academy into the world of practical marketing, not only by demonstrating its power in decoding competitive advertising but also by doing this in a transparent and accessible way. The analysis would model a tool that Guinness marketing and planning teams could then go on to use for themselves to continuously update their knowledge base on competitive advertising.

The international language of beer Decoder was tasked with devising a clear process to allow Guinness marketers anywhere in the world (after a brief period of training) to work out exactly what proposition consumers were likely to be taking out of a brand's advertising – as a major step on the way to understanding the brand's overall positioning from the consumer point of view.

To start creating this Competitor Advertising Decoding Kit, key beer brands' advertising was sourced from six representative markets worldwide – Cameroon, Germany, Malaysia, Spain, UK and US – and analysed by semiotologists with expert knowledge of these markets.

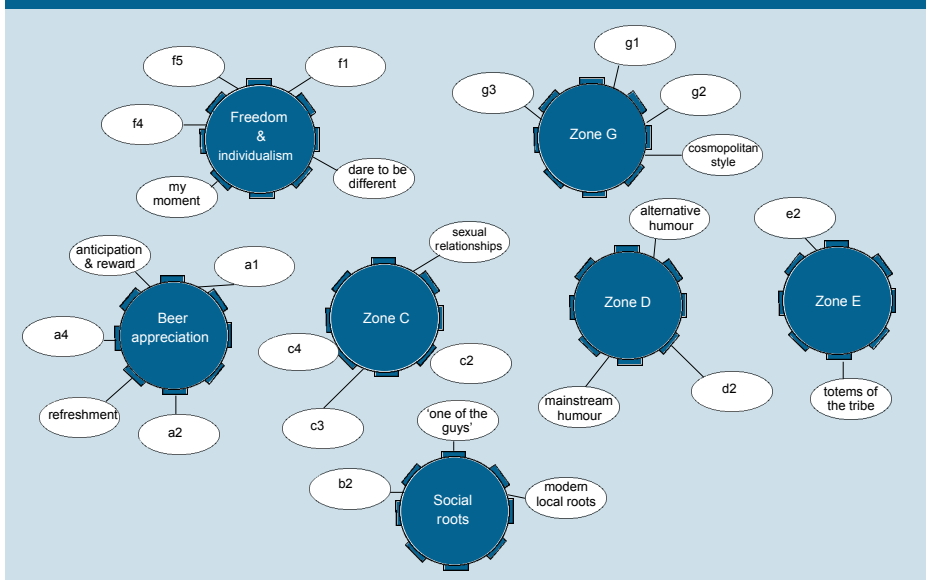
After analysing the relevant TV reel and print ads, each analyst mapped out the codes (unwritten rules) of beer advertising characteristic of his/her market. A good example of a beer code

is Refreshment – a cluster of verbal, visual and sound cues (eg backlit golden liquid, bubbles, condensation drops, the pssst! sound of a bottle or can opening, hot sun, intense physical activity, thirsty people, glugging etc) all held together by a core idea. The next step was to analyse advertising for the major brands in terms of codes deployed, codes challenged or explicitly broken, and the overall profile of codes used by each brand – residual (dated advertising styles and conventions), dominant (middle-of-the-road for today), or emergent (dynamic, innovative). Then the country analyst made a hypothetical assessment of core consumer take-out from each brand’s advertising before translating this into the language of advertising propositions – incorporating the relative weighting in the ads of three key benefit sources: Product Attributes (What?); User Imagery (Who?); and Consumer Need (Why?).

The final step was to map the brands’ advertising propositions along axes spontaneously suggested by the category codes coming out of the analysis – the conceptual and emotional ‘world’ of beer advertising in that particular market. Chart 1, below shows some summary outputs for two key UK brands.

The merger of all the national data gave the Decoder team and Guinness, first of all, a verbal and visual snapshot of the cultural meaning of beer globally (defined against wine and spirits) part of the basic ‘cultural software’ any alien landing on planet earth would need to get hold of to become a functioning member of consumer society. More critically, for the Decoding Kit that eventually evolved from this research, the combined analysis gave us a map of the international language of beer – the full repertoire of global beer advertising codes. The international language of beer, the Decoder analysts

2. Global beer code map



The international language of beer. Each section is a set of signifiers held together by a core idea

concluded, can ultimately be focused down into Refreshment plus 25 other key communication codes. The 26 codes map out into seven clusters. Something like this map should, with minor variations, be arrived at by any team of semiologists who set out to analyse a good sample of worldwide beer advertising. Some parts of the map are revealed in chart 2, above.

The codes towards the left and the bottom of the map express the drinker/product relationship and social roots – where the drinker feels a sense of origin and belonging. The codes to the right capture characteristically beer oriented images of bonding, sociability and humour. Towards the top of the map are outer- and inner-directed expressions of aspiration, a sense of where I want to be going (rather than where I’m coming from). Each of the codes coming out of the semiotic

analysis, as in the case of Refreshment, is a set of signifiers or communication cues held together by a core idea – see chart 3, opposite, for some other examples.

At this point both agency and client felt that we had a good grasp, in an international context, of how beer advertising communicates and the underlying propositions competitor brands are conveying to consumers. The main challenge, however, still lay ahead – how to repackage what the Decoder team has learned about beer advertising and about their own analytical processes into a tool that Guinness people worldwide could now go on to use for themselves in decoding competitive propositions.

The competitor advertising decoding kit

Guinness marketers use this tool when developing a new advertising proposition for a Guinness brand, at which time an understanding of competitive advertising propositions is critical or when a competitor launches a new campaign; to understand their new proposition and the implications for Guinness brands. It is also used as part of the annual planning cycle, when Guinness local market teams review all competitive advertising.

The system works by guiding teams of two or three people through an analysis of current campaigns for competitive brands. Each local market team, ideally, includes one marketer/consumer planner experienced in the beer market, another who is more in touch with young adult culture, and a third person who is a non-marketer – eg, a sales person more in touch with the trade environment. The team is taken through a two-stage process:

1. Semiotic analysis of UK beer advertising

CARLINGBLACK LABEL

Key codes: Heritage/roots, beer enjoyment, irreverent masculinity sporting achievement

Brand specific execution:

Nationalism; ‘Rule Britannia’ (Dambusters, union jacks, ‘best selling beer in Britain’); strength (4.1%); tabloid attitude; Carling Premiership

Proposition source: Why: belonging; What: strength;

Who: Lad user

Substantiators: Brewed to 4.1%; football sponsorship; patriotism; popularity

Advertising proposition: My Carling confirms me as one of the lads

STELLAARTOIS

Key codes: Parody, humour heritage, beer enjoyment

Brand specific execution:

French language, music; cinematic references; idyllic France; ‘reassuringly expensive’.

Proposition source: What: Best ingredients equals best beer. Who: discerning drinker. Why: personal indulgence

Substantiators: Premium. ‘Reassuringly expensive’.

Advertising proposition: Stella Artois is the ultimate reward

Stage 1: consumer take-out analysis
 The key breakthrough in moving ahead from the original groundwork here was in understanding that interpretation (which experts do spontaneously, firing on all cylinders at once) needs to be broken down into component parts.

Here the Guinness team members work individually, each looking at examples of current advertising for two or three competitive brands. The objective at this stage is to think deeply about the advertising and pay attention to detail, blocking the temptation to jump to conclusions too soon, also suspending any specialist marketing knowledge and going 'through the looking glass' to adopt the consumer's point of view.

At this stage the system first prompts the user to think separately about executional details along 12 different dimensions of the advertising – including the people (celebrities, consumer types, who they are meant to appeal to, what they tell us about the brand), genre (realism, fantasy, surrealism, abstraction), music (styles of music used and their associations in popular culture), colours (which ones predominate, what they are communicating). The aim here is to take the time to deconstruct a

brand's advertising, to dig into all its richness and become conscious of a palette of creative stimuli that may, in many cases, be working on consumers below the level of consciousness. Having deconstructed the advertising for a particular brand, the next stage of guided analysis is to arrange the material gathered from the ads in a hierarchy and funnel it all down to the essentials – the key ideas and feelings being communicated, for example, the implied target and the area in which key brand benefits, on a preliminary assessment, appear to be operating.

At this point in the process the user will view the ads for this brand again, review the preliminary hypotheses on consumer take-out and enter a phase of assisted interpretation using the Code Cards supplied as part of the Decoding Kit. The key breakthrough in moving on from the original groundwork here was to transform and streamline the original International Language of Beer Advertising into a more user-friendly tool. This is a pack of themed cards designed and produced by the BrowrKSDP design agency. The cards are something like a cross between Tarot and analytical mini-mood boards, capturing 21 major codes of global beer advertising (slimmed down from the original analysis's 26).

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3. Global beer language: signifiers for 3 codes

COSMOPOLITAN STYLE	ALTERNATIVE HUMOUR	TOTEMSOFTHE TRIBE
Modern city life Style bars Bright lights, big city Market savvy	Self deprecating humour A twist in the tale	Bonding focal points Dances, music Teams
Western (vs local) clothing and lifestyle Western music and attitude	Irony, cynicism Defining style, clans and sub-cultures	Couples, family Hobbyists
Beautiful people Style Confidence Narcissism	Parody Making fun of mainstream humour and 'serious' genres. Reinterpreting other brands and equities	Workplace and after work Nation & icons Flags Music Humour Funny foreigners
New generation (developed markets) Understatement MTV visual codes New music Irony	Surreal inversions of reality Alternative comedians Send-up of advertising Marketing speak Ad parodies	Looking alike Uniforms Animal allegory Lizards, frogs Regional identity National/regional beer

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As well as enriching the user's broad understanding of the underlying 'language' of beer (images, words, music etc) the Code Cards serve an immediate practical function in understanding likely consumer take-out from specific ads and campaigns.

So the marketer using the Decoding Kit can review the themes printed on the card backs (one theme per card) and when they encounter one that matches something in the preliminary analysis of likely consumer take-out, flip the card in question over to test the interpretation against the communication cues reproduced on front of the card (eg, words, images, music, personalities) that are normally used to communicate this theme.

Conversely a quick scan of the words and images on the front of the cards will allow the user of the system to spot any features of the competitive ads that they have had difficulty interpreting and flip the card over to spot the idea or theme these cues normally communicate.

The review of ads against the Code Cards and subsequent centring/focusing of thoughts on likely consumer take out completes Stage 1 of the analysis. When each member has completed this part of the process for their assigned brands, the whole team gets together in Stage 2 to review the data and work out the likely propositions driving the ads that drive these consumer take-outs.

Stage 2: proposition hypotheses
Here the Stage 1 learning is shared amongst the team, the main messages and consumer take-outs for competitive advertising agreed and these findings translated into advertising propositions for each of the competitors analysed in the market. The Stage 2 process follows key steps for each competitor:

1 Begin to develop the proposition by pulling out the key benefit-driven proposition sources (product attribute, user imagery, human need), revisiting the preliminary work done on this in Stage 1.

- Rank these potential proposition



Michael Harvey, global consumer planning and research director, GuinnessUDV: working with the consultancy Added Value, helped develop a tool for mapping competitor advertising propositions

sources in order to identify the key driver behind the brand's advertising, i.e. the clearest, most motivating consumer benefit (what the brand is doing for the drinker).

- From the detailed analysis of the ads, assess the supports being asserted or demonstrated for this proposition (why should consumers believe it?)
- Draft the likely proposition ('core benefit is...') and supports ('...because...')
- And finally assess the competitive proposition against a checklist of six key success criteria including relevance to target and distinctiveness in the marketplace.

Provisional conclusions

For anyone who has not previously heard of semiotics, Guinness' Competitor Advertising Decoding Kit is a good introduction to a discipline that helps unlock the power of culture and communications in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviour today

Guinness recently briefed a team of UK marketers and planners to decode examples of Japanese beer advertising using the kit and English translations of the language. These were assessed against readings produced locally by a Japanese team. The result was around 80% accuracy in the UK assessment – with the 20% of understanding lost mainly through a failure to recognise the meanings and associations circulating around Japanese celebrities used in the ads.

If semiotics can offer a cost saving

against more conventional forms of research, what emerges here may begin to challenge some conventional semiotic assumptions (eg, that you need to be fully immersed in a language and culture to understand its communications). It all depends, of course, on what's fit for purpose and on the trade-offs between relative certainty on the one hand and cost/speed/convenience on the other

Another informal project currently in hand involves three teams looking at the Whassup? ads to evaluate their significance in terms of consumer insight – a Guinness team using the Decoding Kit; some semiotic experts (who have 'forgotten the rules'), and a mixed team of researchers and marketing people from outside both Guinness and Added Value (using their common sense without access either to the kit or to formal semiotic training). There are no assumptions or pre-judgements about the findings. Whatever comes out will be fed into the development of the Guinness Decoding Kit and the next cycle of applied semiotic thinking within Added Value and BrownKSDPs Decoder methodology

Other possibilities arise from the as yet untapped technological potential of a system like the Guinness Decoding Kit. Its physical design, in its current incarnation, is a key feature contributing to a user-friendliness and emotional warmth that the term 'semiotics' could never convey. Its conceptual content, however (rich in words, sounds, images and perpetually updating along with innovation in advertising codes), points ahead from the semiotics of Tarot, board games and instruction manuals to the world of online and multimedia execution."

This article is extracted from a paper by Michael Harvey of GuinnessUDV and Malcolm Evans of Added Value, presented last month at the MRS 'Research 2001' conference

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