

Possibilities of Materiality: Application of a Peircean Model of the Sign for Building New Brands

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Abstract: In contemporary marketing practice, semiotics is often considered to be a useful set of tools employed only in certain moments of the brand-building process. One of the reasons for this is that models rooted in dyadic understanding of a sign serve to narrow the role of applied semioticians to that of the expert, supporting a linear transfer of meaning from culture to products and services. This article proposes a framework that regards a semiotician, rather, as a key figure—a figure that I refer to as “the brand facilitator”—in the process of creating a new brand. The approach I present is based on the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce and his idea of the sign as a cooperation between three subjects—the object, the representamen and the interpretant—with the object, namely the Dynamical Object, being the starting point for a non-linear, rhizomatic process of brand-becoming or the creation of a new brand. The article offers a detailed explanation of steps needed to complete each of the three main stages of the inquiry, including a material research phase, a cultural research phase and a phase of expressive anchoring. The theoretical framework is supported by a case study, thoroughly describing a process of creating a brand of vegetable pastes introduced in 2017 on the Polish market.

Keywords: semiotics, brand, Peirce, marketing, Dynamical Object

Introduction

Although semiotics in marketing has been around for more than half a century, in most countries it is still considered an emerging, not yet well-established and institutionalized, paradigm in the market research sector. Multiple marketing professionals have

acknowledged the value of semiotics in the field; however, it is usually not at the core of marketing processes. There are, of course, exceptions; but semioticians are typically engaged primarily to inform the process, provide diagnosis at a certain point, answer questions which were not addressed by other perspectives, and in order to offer inspiration for marketers or creatives when designing identity, communication, retail space and related phenomena. On the whole, semiotics is mostly considered a useful set of tools for topical applications in mainstream marketing but not a comprehensive paradigm for building a brand or a marketing strategy.

In this article I would like to propose a framework that might be applied not only to building brand strategy but also to influencing the perception of a semiotician's role in the process, making him or her more of a brand facilitator rather than simply a research professional. The proposed approach of creating a new brand is based on the model of the sign built by Charles Sanders Peirce, and it also takes advantage of already established research techniques in applied semiotics, combining them into a single process of brand building.

The Role of Semiotics in Marketing

Marketing Semiotics, or the study of meaning in marketing, has had an ongoing influence on the research industry at least since the publication of the renowned article “Symbols for Sale” by Sydney Levy in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1959. And, according to a comprehensive study by Mary Yoko Brannen and colleagues (2004), “Research on meaning in marketing and consumer behavior has flourished internationally over the last two decades” (2004: 62). In their paper, entitled “Pursuing the Meaning of Meaning in the Commercial World”, the authors give a detailed summary of research conducted mostly within the academic field. However, to make the picture more complete, one must also acknowledge developments in applied semiotics—not mentioned in the text—made in the United Kingdom in the '80s and '90s by Virginia Valentine, Monty Alexander and Malcolm Evans, whose methodological innovations—such as codes and RDE analysis (Anderson and Evans 2006) or myth quadrant (Valentine 2001)—directly affected the everyday work of marketing semioticians and also greatly influenced mainstream marketing practice, especially in Europe. Further noteworthy methodological developments, constantly emerging in other parts of the continent as well as both Americas, Asia and Australia strictly within commercial semiotics, broadened the toolbox applied semioticians draw from and, through numerous

case studies, further attracted marketing and brand managers, market researchers and strategists to the field of semiotics.

Brannen et al. (2004: 4), in order to document applications of semiotics in marketing and consumer research, suggest a model of analysis that covers the most important areas of creating meaning in the marketing process. These include:

- Product design aimed at potentializing and actualizing meanings in the object
- Creation of packaging, brand names/logos, advertising, aimed at potentializing and actualizing meanings around the object
- Design of physical retail and acquisition environments, aimed at potentializing and actualizing meanings of being and buying there
- Creation of entertainment ideas, leisure activities, clothing, food and vehicles, and general constructs and processes such as desire, memory, and identity—aimed at actualizing meanings through experiences, ownership and usage

This way of structuring implies a certain interpretation of a marketing process itself, rooted in the original model by Grant McCracken (1986), which Brannen et al. (2004) make use of. According to McCracken, the process is a linear transfer of meaning, starting with advertisers or marketing professionals. Those “marketing gatekeepers” (as Brannen and colleagues refer to them) begin by selecting key cultural meanings (e.g., a certain model of manliness) that are then transferred to products through marketing communication, to finally be appropriated by consumers at the last stage of the process.

This point of view of semiotics applied to marketing imposes certain limits on thinking about its role and usability in the process—limits that are inaccurate, considering actual projects many commercial semioticians engage in around the world. Firstly, it regards culture, cultural categories, and principles as a point of departure for the whole process. It decentralizes the actual offer, product, service, or company, making them passive vehicles, receptive to any arbitrary meanings assigned to them. Secondly, it focuses on design, naming, and advertising agencies as central to brand creation. “Gatekeepers” in this approach are apparently those professions which are predominantly interested in creating representaments—material aspects of a sign—and not those that focus their efforts on meaning (e.g., brand strategists). As a consequence, a marketing process in Brannen and colleagues’ article is regarded as an implementation of meanings through

creative work of representation and omits exploration, strategy building, and establishing meaning itself, which I consider the groundwork for every further marketing process. Finally, in this approach, a semiotician plays a supportive role in the process and is presented simply as a researcher who looks into signs and culture to understand culture and to legitimize certain usage of representamens, or a researcher who creates an analytical context—a background for those who actually create brands.

In my view, this approach puts an overly strong emphasis on the representamen and neglects two other elements of the Peircean model of sign, namely the object and the interpretant. I hope to reshape this viewpoint in which only the meaning is considered to be an area of interest for semioticians, while the representation is left to specialized agencies, and the object is left far behind anyone's interest in a majority of brand building processes. Finally, I would like to argue that semioticians should become brand-sign facilitators who possess tools that can integrate thinking about brand marketing into the brand building process.

Brand as a Sign

Depending on the discipline or the approach, “brand” has numerous definitions which put forward its different aspects. Although meaning is one of the central features of a brand, this aspect is often only vaguely described; and there seems to be no fixed understanding of the idea of a sign and its meaning in the marketing world. Looking through a semiotic lens, I describe a brand in Peircean terms as a sign which, following Andersen (et al. 2007: 60), is “something that stands for something other than itself—that taps into social meaning systems that govern lifestyle, values, beliefs, and the like.” Moreover, this way of defining a sign allows it to be broken into three distinct units, easy to describe, analyze, and understand. To use Peirce's own words, those units are as follows:

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have called the *ground* of the representamen. (c.1897: CP 2.228)

In what follows I will translate these terms into a language which marketers are more familiar with in trying to make this article useful for

both applied semioticians as well as branding professionals, in hopes of bridging the gap between both disciplines.

An object can be defined as a product in the broad sense of the term—as something offered to the consumer. It could be an object, a service, or rather a certain aspect, such as the value of ingredients, the experience of usage, a specific taste, or the origin of materials that create the ground of the representamen.

Interpretant is an interpretation or a perceptual response to a sign. Santos (2012: 97), who attempts to translate semiotic terms to marketing language, calls it a brand image that “materialises in the mind of different audiences.”

Finally, a representamen is an element of brand identity—the visual, linguistic, and audial elements, as well as those related to taste or touch, which make the brand recognizable. They can be called expressive elements, which mediate between a certain aspect of the product-object (ground of the representamen) and its image-interpretant (created in the mind of the consumer).

The above description of identity-representamen, product-object, and image-interpretant serve to define brand as a sign in Peircean terms. This definition is certainly useful in supporting research and analytical work or competitive analysis employed to address various marketing objectives. However, it falls short when it comes to providing a paradigm for the whole brand-building process. The limits of its productivity are quickly reached, and the role of the semiotician in the project comes to an end even before it gets started. The reason for this is the static form of the brand-sign model. It is a final goal of the whole brand-building process, but it does not allow one to look at a brand in its becoming. For the static model to become dynamic and more functional, the nature of each of these three domains, and how they actually become one in a sign through semiosis, needs to be understood.

Brand-Sign Becoming

For Peirce, semiosis is an “action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects”; and, in addition to establishing relations between different signs, it also establishes relations within a single sign, creating a kind of balance between the object, the interpretant and the representamen (c.1905: CP 5.484). From those “three subjects”, it is the object that determines the representamen and mediately determines the

interpretant (Peirce 1908: CP 8.343); and therefore its role is crucial in establishing the sign—or brand-sign in this case.

Peirce recognizes two types of object: The Immediate Object, the object “as represented in the sign”, and the Dynamical Object, “Which, from the nature of things, the Sign *cannot* express, which it can only *indicate* and leave the interpreter to find out by *collateral experience*” (i.1897–1909: CP 8.314). The former is somehow already “petrified” by the sign and is dependent from its representamen, whereas the latter is the object before it is defined or delimited, comprised of multiplicities striving for emergence. The central purpose of the process of the brand-sign becoming that I propose in this paper is to create the Immediate Object from the Dynamical Object. In my view, this procedure is ruled by rhizomatic logic.

Rhizome is a notion introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their (1980) seminal work *Mille Plateaux*. It is a type of structure that escapes hierarchical organization, comprised of unbiased multiplicity of qualities that in any point “can be connected to anything other” (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 7). As a result, different *assemblages*—combinations of varying semiotic chains—can come forth. As the authors put it, “The notion of unity (*unité*) appears only when there is a power takeover in the multiplicity by the signifier” (representamen in Peirce terms), and that “power takeover” is the moment when multiplicity of the Dynamical Object becomes the *assemblage*—the Immediate Object represented in the sign (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 8).

Now, the first step in the process of brand-sign becoming requires a regression to the multiplicity of a Dynamical Object, but further steps involve “a cooperation of three subjects”, therefore we need to consider the interpretant and the representamen in their multiplicities as well. For semiotic actions to take place, one needs to consider all three multiplicities determined by the Peircean model of sign. Those multiplicities are as follows:

- Multiplicity of the Dynamical Object: a material domain
- Multiplicity of the Interpretants in culture: a discursive domain
- Multiplicity of expressive forms, or possible representamens, in culture: an expressive or aesthetic domain

Cooperation of specific elements from each multiplicity can create a variety of *assemblages*, and that is when numerous signs can emerge. To

uncover this process of becoming a sign, let's consider each one of these multiplicities separately.

The multiplicity of the material domain includes all material aspects of the Dynamical Object, that is, not only attributes of the object in itself, limited by a certain form, but also the network it is subject to (e.g., production) or its influence on users or the environment (e.g., pleasure). One also has to look at a given object beyond its being the Immediate Object—already having a certain hierarchical construction of its attributes—and look at the Dynamical Object, as if it has multiple potentialities yet to discover. Some examples of such potentialities may include a certain method of production, a product's origin, its contents, specific ingredients, its colors, taste, and experiences that are results of its consumption. In general terms, these are all factual truths about the product that can be uncovered via thorough inquiry. In the following step, these form *assemblages* with different discourses.

Interpretants belong to a discursive domain. They are a multiplicity of discourses within cultural texts. In this article I consider discourse a linguistic phenomenon that has the ability to impart meaning to chosen aspects of the material domain of the Dynamical Object. In a brand-sign building process, which I will explain later in more detail, it has a capacity to give an interpretative facet to a chosen truth about an object, transforming the Dynamical Object into numerous possible Immediate Objects. We are all surrounded by discourses. Some of them are specific only to very small groups of people, but others are common to larger communities forming distinctive *Umwelts*. “Umwelt”, as defined by Kull (1998), is a “semiotic world of organism”, a kind of bubble we find ourselves in that allows us to understand the physical world around us. An example provided by the creator of the concept of Umwelt, Jakob von Uexküll, clearly explains its influence on our perception.

Uexküll (1934: 383) describes the case of an oak tree, which for different subjects with varying *Umwelts* plays a different role. For an old forester, living in a rational world of forest management, the tree is just cords of wood, which he can measure, count, assess their worth, etc. Nevertheless, he cannot see a scary, demonic face in the knobby bark, one that looks like it belongs to a living creature, perhaps a goblin or troll, which is completely visible for a young girl, with her imagination filled with fables and magical stories she has read. This example explicitly shows how the Dynamical Object—an oak tree with multiple potentialities—becomes two distinct Immediate Objects for subjects with varying *Umwelts*.

In the same manner each of us is influenced by a fair number of cultural texts, which differ according to our social status, age, occupation, gender, etc., and affect our understanding of the environment. Those cultural texts establish a common ground of interpretation of reality for intersecting groups of people. Consequently, we, as semioticians and researchers, can access those Umwelts through texts.

Finally, an expressive domain is a multiplicity of aesthetic forms—visual, verbal, auidial, or sensorial. This domain consists of icons, indexes, and symbols as well as styles and conventions. This domain is a repository of possible forms, which can—in a final sign—mediate between a particular material aspect and its interpretation, allowing access to understanding an object in a certain way. Here again, culture is an archive of such forms, giving us almost a limitless spectrum of inquiry. However, properly designed and oriented research along with aesthetic knowledge allows the inquiry to be effective and to finalize the process of brand-sign becoming.

Brand Building Process

This kind of approach and set of theoretical assumptions allows for the uncovering of relations and the creation of *assemblages* which are innovative and not obvious, but also rooted in the materiality of the product and culture, serving to frame an actionable structure for the brand-building process. To explain how the above can be put into practice, I would like to describe an actual case study from a portfolio of *Touchideas*, a company I work with as a cultural insight and strategy consultant, which we have worked on together with the marketing team of *ZT Kruszwica*. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the company for the ability to work on this extremely interesting project as well as for allowing me to describe the case. The process that I will go through will be presented in a synthetic form to make it more comprehensible and focused, providing details that were essential for establishing the final brand.

The starting point of this project was the moment when the Client—*ZT Kruszwica*—came to *Touchideas* with a product—a vegetable paste closed in a transparent jar—in four different variants: mixed chickpeas with nigella seeds and ground pepper; dried tomatoes and cranberry; grilled aubergine with basil and pumpkin nuts; and zucchini with curry and sunflower seeds. We, as a strategic consulting and brand design agency, were asked to come up with a positioning, a name, and a brand

design. We began with an attempt to understand what kind of product we were given to work with.

Material Research

At that time, there was no fixed market category that would enable us to create some kind of basis for the definition of this product. Therefore, the first stage that we needed to complete was a material inquiry into the product itself that could reveal as many features of this vegetable substance as possible. We needed to look at the substance we were given as the Dynamical Object to find its multiplicities, build a long list of attributes, and then identify potentialities within the product, which might, on the one hand, become a cornerstone of the brand, and on the other, be specific and unique to the product.

In order to build a reliable brand, a brand that consumers trust over the long-term, it is extremely important to establish it based on distinguishable facts. Renowned strategy consultant David Taylor attests that “behind most great brands there is a great product, and today more than ever consumers are looking for brands built on authentic truths” (Taylor 2006: 77). This statement stands in strong contrast with McCracken’s (1986) point of view, which emphasizes cultural meanings as a starting point for the marketing process. In McCracken’s approach the product itself becomes a passive vehicle receptive to whatever meanings are being imputed to it. Taylor describes this kind of attitude as an obsession with emotional branding and treats it as a blemish of contemporary marketing. According to Taylor (2006: 79–80), excluding a product from one’s thinking about a brand results in the product being vulnerable to attacks and in losing its competitive edge very fast. That is why the material aspect of a product is an essential element of a brand-sign, although it is often taken for granted when it comes to exploration.

Taylor (2006: 90) argues that for a brand to become successful, it has to be founded on a “brand truth”. He suggests numerous areas of inquiry to uncover such truths. Namely:

- Product ingredients: What they are and how they work (e.g., *Knorr Vie*: ½ daily fruit and vegetable servings in a shot)
- Product form: Distinguishing characteristics, such as color, texture, thickness (e.g., *Heinz* ketchup thickness)
- Manufacturing: Unique aspects of how the product is made (e.g., *Pret a Manger*: fresh each day)

People:	Distinguishing features of front-line staff (e.g., <i>First Direct Bank</i> : real people not a call center)
Consistency:	More consistent and reliable service (e.g., <i>Amazon</i> , <i>Ocado</i> home shopping)
Sensory experience:	In-use sensations (e.g., coffee aroma on breaking a seal in <i>Nescafé</i> coffee)
Users:	Past users who can add credibility (e.g., <i>Max Factor</i> : make-up of make-up artists)
History:	When was the brand created, where, and by whom? (e.g., <i>Levi's</i> since 1879)
Founders:	The personality and principles of brand founders (e.g., <i>Ben & Jerry's</i>)
Values:	A cause the company campaigns for (e.g., <i>Tesco</i> fighting against “rip-off Britain”).

In branding practice, information of this kind can and should be obtained from various sources to acquire data, representing a number of perspectives on a product.

First of all, one can start collecting data straight from the source, namely the producer. The client is actually the first body we deal with as a consulting company. Normally we commence our inquiry by talking to brand managers, but it is worth reaching a little deeper and conducting interviews with people responsible for the development and the actual production of a product. NPD experts, food engineers, dieticians working on a recipe (in the case of a food product) are good examples of people to start with, but company owners and people working directly by the production line might be also be valuable sources of knowledge. It is worth asking them not only about the technical aspects of the product, but also their experiences and personal views on where the key value of the product is located, what makes it noteworthy and what makes the product unique and significant for them.

The second important data sources are experts in a specific field connected to the product, as well as leading and extreme consumers. Recruiting a group of people who have a special attitude towards a category or product might bring revealing conclusions about certain aspects of the object. This group is especially conscious and sensitive when it comes to the product of their interest. They expect more than regular consumers, but also have knowledge of similar products or those with similar

attributes. This, in fact, makes them also very aware of emerging features that can become notable in the future and gives researchers a glimpse into upcoming expectations.

The third important group is made up of potential consumers themselves. It is best to apply a number of ethnographic techniques when gathering information from them. For example, it might be beneficial to ask people to test the product and write a photo-journal about their experiences and impressions, use a shadowing method, a joint observation with on-site interviews or simply an in-depth interview about their feelings and opinions about the product. It is also worth taking time to immerse oneself personally in the product and the category to better understand it, feel it, and make reflexive auto-observational notes from any self-encounter.

In the case of the project we had worked on, we approached the products as Dynamical Objects, putting aside our beliefs about the object itself. This allowed us to put together a long list of material aspects of the vegetable products based on individual interviews with experts, lead-users who were given a product beforehand, and auto-immersion.

A few examples of our interviewees were:

- A restaurant owner who tested the product together with the restaurant's chefs
- Individuals highly engaged in cooking, and preservatives enthusiasts, who participated in cooking workshops or organized samplings of their dishes for friends and family
- People interested in gastronomy, frequent restaurant goers, foodies ready to travel to explore the best flavors and examples of original, local meals

We did not forget about people within the *ZT Kruszwica* company—including recipe creators, brand managers, and sales managers—to whom we asked questions about their inspirations, intentions, knowledge, and experience with the vegetable paste.

The result of the whole inquiry was a multiplicity of material aspects of the paste defined in terms of the Dynamical Object, a comprehensive list of its features paired with photos presenting occasions and usage ideas, emphasizing its most important details. Here is an excerpt from this list:

- Variety of 6 variants
- Full of vegetables

- Mashed vegetables with chunks
- Grilled and roasted vegetables
- Basic, well known vegetables
- Vegetables preserved in jars
- Original spices: e.g., nigella seeds
- Plant ingredients only
- Form of pastes, spreads
- Chickpea base
- Variety of colors
- Encourages experimentation
- Makes traditional dishes (e.g., dumplings) more original

Some positions on the list are very similar, as we tried to look at every aspect of the product from a variety of perspectives: e.g., the unusual flavors of vegetables vs. basic, well-known vegetables. It is important to register all the nuances of a seemingly simple object, because each one of them could be a material starting point—an element of the rhizome which can create an *assemblage* with a certain discourse and eventually lead to a culturally rooted sign-brand. To avoid market failure, you can also discard information that is not at all competitive or is easy to imitate. This way your material base will only be comprised of aspects that hold potential for establishing a strong competitive edge for the future brand.

Cultural Research

Now that we had created our material basis and looked at the paste as a Dynamical Object, crowded with a multiplicity of product truths, we could start to investigate corresponding discourses that could create various *assemblages*—meaningful, culturally relevant substances. Although the method of discourse analysis is similar to regular discourse analysis as employed in applied marketing semiotics, the inquiry is oriented differently. At this stage a researcher does not have one cultural concept to look into (e.g., home) but a multiplicity of material aspects of a product—the Dynamical Object—that he or she must follow; therefore, the inquiry needs to be multi-layered.

A starting point is a list of meaning—impoverished material aspects that have been generated at the first stage. Now a semiotician needs to take

a deep-dive into the multiplicity of cultural texts, looking for potential culturally grounded interpretations that could cooperate with the physical features of the product. The purpose is to uncover discourses which could “embellish” product truths with meaningful interpretations. Once more referring to Uexküll’s article, we aim to uncover a demon in the knobby bark of an oak tree.

Now, how to approach this task? In my everyday practice, I arrange all of the selected product truths of the Dynamical Object on a large wall or board, keeping a substantial distance between each of them. All of those aspects will determine an orientation of the search for relevant discourses. Then one needs to collect a corpus of texts related to the product category. In the case study discussed here, those were food and cooking magazines, books, blogs, films, TV programs, *YouTube* channels, etc. If working on a different product, e.g., male cosmetics, one would probably need to look into male magazines, books and articles about masculinity, male- and masculinity-themed programs, channels, films, etc.

Having this corpus of materials ready, the only thing that is left is to take a deep-dive into multiplicity of texts, looking for discourses which could create *assemblages* of the materiality and meaning. This is not an easy task to complete, as one needs to find connections between entities different in kind. This requires not only thorough and close reading but also a lot of affect-driven intuition and vigilance. The former approach is very time consuming, and time is always in deficit when it comes to commercial projects. Therefore, the latter approach works better as it requires scan-reading of texts and stopping when finding a discourse which might be relevant to any of the material aspects or product truths listed earlier. After finding such a discourse, one should verify its cultural relevance by examining its reoccurrence in the corpus. If the discourse meets the above conditions, you place it on the wall, next to a corresponding material aspect. This way one can create a comprehensive map of meaningful product truths—starting points for defining Immediate Objects—although some product truths may be left without potential interpretations. This may be a result of the low cultural potential of a certain aspect or, in a worse case, a superficial search.

For example, if one of the important truths of a client’s offering is a broad range of products, one should aim at finding texts that discuss such concepts as variety, diversity, and difference. This way, moving from text to text, discourse to discourse, one can establish which of the discourses emerges repeatedly and could become an interpretation of the variety of product variants. Another source of relevant discourses could be regular

people living within culture or discourse creators such as bloggers, journalists, writers and academics.

With some help from projective interviewing methods, regular consumers, when exposed to a product and a list of product truths, can express their interpretation of certain aspects of a product. You can expect to receive interpretations rooted in very individual experiences; nevertheless, most people, being interviewed by an unfamiliar researcher, will re-actualize cultural discourses, common to people of certain *Umwelts*. However, it is best to carry out a cultural validation of each discourse afterwards, to be certain that meanings ascribed to a certain material aspect the Dynamical Object—product truth—are culturally relevant and that they re-actualize dominant or emergent culture.

Interviewing experts is also very useful, especially when it comes to identifying emerging discourses. Nonetheless, it does not require engaging projective methods, as an expert interviewee can easily attribute discourses to material features of the product.

Going back to the case being discussed, our team has built a catalogue of such materiality-oriented discourses, which became the underpinning for concepts of different Immediate Objects and of a future brand. To give an example, one of the product truths—vegetables preserved in a jar—was very coherent with a discourse—strong at the time—that treated preservatives as a comfort food, associated with home, rooted in a sentiment of jars with vegetables prepared often in the countryside by mothers and grandmothers, giving a feeling of hominess, warmth, and care but also of the highest quality of real food, containing no preservatives, as opposed to mass-produced cans or jars full of artificial ingredients. Another example was a widely appreciated discourse regarding the quest for original flavors of the East, which elevated a combination of vegetables and spices in a form of a paste to an authenticity of *Balkan* food culture.

After creating concepts that incorporated both product truth and discourse, we went through the evaluation process with prospective consumers to verify a relevance and potential for the emotional engagement of concepts.

The discourse that we eventually ended up with was one that engaged a joy of creative cooking and artistic-like experimentation in the kitchen. It added a powerful interpretation to such truths about the product like its original combination of flavors and its well thought composition of vegetables and spices, so we decided to put those as defining attributes of the now clearly emerging Immediate Object. It was also strongly rooted in experiences people expressed while using the product, described as

encouraging experimentation in the kitchen and inventing new ways of preparing well known dishes.

Expressive Anchoring

The final stage of the process is aimed at creating a representamen for the brand-sign—an expressive sign that would be able to combine a product's material aspect and its interpretation. This step is analogous to creating brand identity in a regular branding project; however, one has to start with diverging creative thinking from such typical elements as logo, brand world, and packaging design and think about icons, indexes, symbols, and overall conventions instead. That way one can take a broader perspective and look for expressions that will reoccur in a brand's communication and will become a brand's identity in the future. One would rather look for representamens that can be perceived by different senses, and, as a result, end up with such identity elements as color, shape, sound composition, visual style, hand gesture, distinctive smell or flavor, or any other sign that could be recognized by one of the human senses and linked to a product and its interpretation. Examples of such expressive anchors could be such signs as the golden arches of *McDonald's* restaurants, the gesture and sound of a *KitKat* breaking in two, the style of *Pampers Premium Care's* photos, where the bare skin of a baby and its mother always touch one another, and *Dove's* white droplet.

Nevertheless, creating a logo or an overall brand design, should not define the direction of creative thinking at the beginning of this step. All identity elements should rise out of this broad viewpoint. One should first and foremost focus on establishing expressive anchors—representamens, that will become recognizable and will mediate between the material and the discursive, creating a perceivable sign of the Immediate Object.

At this stage it is best to collaborate with creatives specialized in required fields—art directors, designers, musicians, perfume creators, writers, actors, scenographers, etc. The choice of a specific team should depend on one's resources and project goals. The synergy that comes from the combined effort of a semiotician and a creative may be very effective. During shared sessions, again ruled by a rhizomatic logic, that allows one to look for connections between meaningful materiality and multiplicity of expressive forms—one can brainstorm, sketch-storm and prototype to find foundational solutions for a development stage.

In the vegetable-paste project, we attempted to complete a few important identity elements for the brand, such as brand name, logotype, style

of visual language, and narrative. While working in groups, we developed representamens that were meant to deliver a certain interpretation of one material aspect of a product. For example, for the *Balkan* concept, which connected a product's form and mix of ingredients with Balkan food, we created a made-up name, using letters specific to foreign Balkan and Slavic countries connoting the Balkans and an iconic graphic sign of a farmer.

Final Brand-Sign

After a series of hot-tests with prospective consumers, we finally came-up with a winning brand-sign concept later developed into a complete brand-sign, with three subjects cooperating harmoniously: i.e., a clearly defined material element, its culturally relevant interpretation, and representamens of different communication functions (brand name, logo, brand design). The product was defined by “brand truth”: a variety of vegetable variants in interesting flavors. This material aspect was promising—highly valued by experts and consumers but also unique in a still developing market category of vegetable pastes.

One particular discourse, which added a culturally relevant interpretation to this product truth, was highly influential at the time of our research. Polish TV was constantly broadcasting cooking programs (e.g., *MasterChef*), *Kuchnia+* (‘Kitchen+’ in English), cookbooks, and cooking celebrities started to appear in various media. In general, cooking had become very popular in mainstream culture. This, in turn, allowed and encouraged regular people to become chefs in their own homes, to try out new recipes, ingredients, spices, and techniques. The discourse of “expressive and creative cooking”, which praised self-made chefs, their involvement and passion for experimenting in their kitchens, became a meaningful basis for a brand image.

Finally, a set of representamens that became the brand's identity was comprised of three central elements: brand name, logo, and brand design. We wanted to find something that would connect the idea of expressive creativeness with various vegetables and spices. A brand name emerged, which was an original, human name that connoted authorship and artistry, with a logo as a signature resembling that of an artist. What is more, the name itself—*Wawrzyniec* (rendered ‘Lawrence’ in English)—is a piece of word-play in the context of Polish vegetable paste, due to its aural iconicity with *warzywa* the Polish word for ‘vegetables’.

To be coherent in terms of meaning and its material reference, the brand design also had to be artistic and expressive. That is why we applied

expressionist-style watercolor paintings of iconic vegetables and ingredients to be used on labels and on every other communication medium across different touch points.

In sum, we created a coherent brand-sign and well-defined Immediate Object showing a coherent relation of three elements, each different in kind:

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| Object: | Material aspect, product truth—a variety of vegetable variants in interesting flavors |
| Interpretant: | Discourse, brand image—expressive and creative cooking |
| Representamen: | Expressive sign-brand identity—the <i>Wawrzyniec</i> brand name, signature style logotype, and expressionist painting-style brand design |

Process Summary

This article's ambitious purpose is to provide applied semioticians with an operative framework for brand building and to better convince marketers that semiotics is not only a practical tool for analysis, which informs a wider branding process, but is also fully capable of leading the whole strategic branding process. I hope it will provide some inspiring insights on how to use our semiotic toolbox to impact a wider marketing community.

To sum up, after going through the whole process in detail, I would like to encapsulate it in a few simple steps, so that it could be a useful guide for all applied semioticians willing to apply this framework in their everyday projects.

1. Identify all material multiplicities—potentialities—within the product (i.e., the Dynamical Object) you are dealing with by conducting material research.
2. Find corresponding discourses that may add meaning to a specific material aspect of a product and create Immediate Objects.
3. Create concepts of “meaningful truths”, by combining both of the above elements, and verifying them with consumers.
4. Look for identity elements—expressions representing truths about the product and its interpretation—that may become representamens.

5. Establish sign concepts that include cooperation between the three subjects and verify them with consumers and a client to choose a winning concept.
6. Design a final sign (being sure to clearly define the object, the interpretant, and the representamen) and develop a brand.

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