Semiotics, Marketing and Communication
Beneath the Signs, the Strategies
written by Jean-Marie Floch, with a foreword by John Sherry,
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Semiotics is the theory of signs and meanings. Semiotics teaches, what signs are and explains, why everything one understood results in signs. Signs mark something and distinguish it from something unmarked. Marketing deals with a constructed reality of symbols created by the consumer. One primary purpose of marketing is therefore to manage, match, mark, and communicate objects of meanings. Thus, following the foreword of Sherry, one of the main questions that arise in marketing is how meanings are generated, negotiated, and transformed within the experience economy. Answering this question should provide a deeper understanding of consumer behavior and target the creation and communication of ideas, products, and services to the market.

Having this in mind, “Semiotics, Marketing and Communication. Beneath the Signs, the Strategies” is a comprehensive and critical treatise of theoretical and practical issues in marketing semiotics. It is a really useful and inspiring guide for academic and professional marketers, interested in linking goods with meanings.

Jean-Marie Floch is considered as an authority on the application of semiotics to marketing and communication. He was professor at the Institut d’Études Politique de Paris and also worked as a consultant, always being interested in applying his theories to a wide range of industries. Jean-Marie Floch died in 2001.

The book’s content is thoroughly researched and applied. It is presented in seven chapters. The first five chapters were originally published in Sémioticque, marketing et communication (1990), chapter six in the International Journal of Research in Marketing, vol. 4 (1988), and chapter seven in Identités visuelles (1995), translated in Visual Identities (2000).

Floch opens in chapter one with his theoretical point of view on semiotics. Out of his perspective, everything that has or could possibly have a meaning is a research object within semiotics, e.g. written text, film, a logo or human behavior. To distinguish semiotics from similar approaches, Floch introduces the three main basic principles of semiotics: First, “...the realm of meaning for semiotics is intelligible”. (p. 2), that is to say it is applied to applied real life situations. Second, the immanence principle describes semiotics as a discipline of form. Semioticians examine the invariants in production and apprehension of meanings by analyzing signs. These are always embedded in contexts through which they derive their value. The level upon which the invariants are found is the form. Hence, signs are only a starting point for research into underlying forms. The third and final principle states that semiotics is entirely structural. In Floch’s words “… all efforts shall focus on differentiating and hierarchizing the various levels on which the invariants of communication of a social practices might be found”. (p. 4).

In the following chapters, Floch offers practical insights into ongoing applied semiotics, but remarks that this is not a demonstration of applied semiotics, because semiotics is always an ongoing process. Hereby, Floch focuses on two types of objects of meaning: the commercial messages of brands and behaviors, and conducts and etiquettes, which are both really important for the service industries.

In chapter two, Floch presents a case study, in which he develops a behavioral typology of the Paris Transit Authority’s (RATP) railway users. The main goal of RATP is to increase revenues to expand services by a comprehensive customer relationship management. Therefore, Floch concentrates on the interactions between metro passengers and employees working for the Paris Transit Authority (RATP). The objectives are to understand the different kinds of interactions as well as how these are viewed by the passengers. Utilizing semiotics, Floch understands the journey of the railway passengers as a structured text. It has an entry and an exit, can be divided into different stages, and can be considered as a series of events that are finalized. “To approach a journey as a text, is to postulate that it ultimately has a meaning”, (p. 16). By documenting and analyzing journeys, Floch identifies four types of passengers: surveyors, daydreamers, strollers, and pros. As theoretical constructs, those types are related to each other and represent a set of behaviors that any observer might recognize. Having discovered that, Floch shows, that each traveler within the same type characterizes the experience of the journey in similar ways, while it is very different to another type of passengers. Thus, Floch is able to deduce implications for improving the marketing communications of RATP for each category.

Chapter three presents another case study that deals with defining a visual recognition for Crédit du Nord. Hereby, semiotics is used to explore and exploit
a global communication strategy in the financial sector. The goal is to clarify the key concept in all commercial communications of Crédit du Nord and to strengthen the clarity of the messages. Floch shows, that all messages that a customer perceives and links to the bank are understood and arranged in relation to a narrative schema that “...facilitates telling the story of the bank”, (p. 48). Based on this analysis, Floch develops a new logo for the bank that transfers customer’s perception to the selected idea of clarity.

In chapter four, Floch offers a study of press advertisements promoting psychotropic drugs. This study concentrates on visual elements in advertisements. A discourse of pharmaceutical companies, gleaned from their scientific brochures and printed materials for medical practitioners is analyzed. The objectives of the study are to assess the overall use of discourse in the sector “... in relation to the visuals that were adopted and explain their encoding, the presence and impact of which all advertisers and agencies perceived more or less intuitively”, (p. 74). Furthermore, it is important to identify sources and types of mismatching meaning between pharmaceutical discourse and medical practitioners. Floch therefore utilizes narrative analysis as well as content analysis and compares the results. In chapter five, Floch examines automotive advertising and consumer value systems. With this case study, Floch shows, that semiotics is also suitable for marketing-mix studies. He does not only concentrate on a meaning produced, but also on the positioning of a brand and consumer’s expectations. Furthermore, Floch states that semiotics also contributes to a better understanding between designers, advertisers, and manufacturers by recognizing pertinent features that adds value to a product by its design.

Chapter six shows the contributions of structural semiotics to the design of a hypermarket. Semiotics was used to analyze customers’ preferences by a discourse analysis. In this context, he examines representations and expectations of what the hypermarket should provide. This makes it easier to identify the values, customers ascribed to hypermarkets, as well as their associations to different types of layouts or atmospheres. The implications of the analysis are used to define the general conception and design of the hypermarket. Specifically, Floch gives clear recommendations to lighting, zoning, or marking.

In chapter seven, Floch examines the IBM logo and compares it to the logo of Apple. He states that a visual identity like a logo is defined in terms of difference and continuity. Difference means, “...recognition and proper positioning of a commercial enterprise and ... an expression of the company’s specificity”, (p. 165). Continuity testifies the “...ongoing industrial, economic and social values of a company”, (p. 165). The objective of the visual identity is to represent the expressive traits of the company and the consistency of content that “…ensure the expression of the company’s ‘texture’... and...make it possible to recount its ‘mission’”, (p. 165). By utilizing semiotics, Floch examines history, structure, color, forms, and messages of the different logos. Furthermore, he devotes himself to the question, how semiotic parameters can produce a visual identity. Floch summarizes his findings with a citation of Lévi-Strauss: “A mask is not primarily what it represents, but what it transforms - that is to say, what it chooses not to represent. Like the myth, the mask denies as much as it affirms. It is made not only of what it says or believes it says, but also of what it excludes”, (p. 194).

To conclude, “Semiotics, Marketing and Communication. Beneath the Signs, the Strategies” is a comprehensive textbook for those that are either interested in marketing semiotics, or are in search for new inspiring methods to improve marketing communication. Both have been exposed to fundamental theoretical concepts and principles in semiotics as well as applicable case studies. The book is based on a well-developed theory that supports the author’s objective, and presents applicable practical problems that are analyzed in detail. Although Floch lines up different and very interesting case studies, he does not integrate them into theoretical background that he delivers in chapter one. As a consequence, the reader may feel theoretically lost. The style of writing is clear and motivating. Sometimes the reader will ask whether it is necessary to utilize semiotics to reach a conclusion that could be reached easier. Practitioners will find this book a comprehensive resource for detailed information. Additional notes and a list of selected bibliography of semiotics at the end further enhance the book’s value.

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