

Automotive Design Process

The consuming culture

Using semiotic and cultural analysis techniques to anticipate future trends and align automotive design can help serve deep consumer needs.

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Across the world and in every product sector, companies have been increasingly focussed on being market oriented or consumer-centric. Everybody is chasing the trend, trying to ferret out the next big thing and scrambling for every potential point of differentiation.

And, who could argue against designing products that are inspired from people's needs and are responsive to their capabilities? Even better, if the product is perceived as being cool, iconic and desirable in a completely emotional way that transcends more rational factors.

But, there are nagging questions lurking under the surface. Sometimes, what consumers say they want isn't what they actually purchase. Or, companies end up with piles of market research data cramming offices, but with no clear idea of what to do with it.

That's where culture comes into the equation. Consumption by its very definition is transient, destructive and includes the act of buying, eating, spending and using up. But the cultural meaning of that consumption remains ready for us to study, analyse and make use of it as we innovate.

The semiotic toolkit

Semiotics is the art and science of studying signs and symbols and is generally used by linguists, philosophers, anthropologists, media theorists, psychoanalysts and designers.

Traditional research methods start with the assumption that by digging deep into individual lives, it is possible to extract the behaviours, attitudes, needs and desires that our product needs to address to create value.

Semioticians flip the problem around by understanding that consumer ideas, beliefs, attitudes and perceptions come from the surrounding culture. By studying the artefacts of that culture (like media, advertising, objects, conversation, art, graffiti and blogs), rather than the consumers of that culture, semioticians offer a different perspective on how products acquire value and worth in the marketplace.

When we use semiotics and related theories in our design process at PDD, we generally talk about two things: discourses and codes.

A discourse is a type of cultural conversation—a mode in which people think and talk about the issue at hand. Discourses help us understand what types of cultural currency are at play and how people are constructing their identities via products and consumption. Mapping discourses show us what our products should be saying in the marketplace to be meaningful and differentiated from the competition. Then, we move onto the question of how to say it through the product's design.

In semiotic terms, a sign is anything - a gesture, a wink, an object, a mathematical equation - that stands for something other than itself. String of signs creates

what we call a code. Codes are the things we understand as messages. For example, while looking at a chair, people don't just see a place to sit down, they also make assumptions about who owns it, how it's used, and value or worth that the chair represents. Some of those associations are historic while others are contemporary.

In product design, the types of codes we are most interested in are those expressed by combinations of form, material, colour, and gesture. Designers use codes to make their products more understandable and desirable to the market. So, even before we put pen on paper and generate concepts, we identify and analyse the codes to focus on our efforts.

That previously invisible assumption about what makes something "contemporary feminine" chocolate or "approachable yet safe" petrol pumps is now explicit. Semioticians can tell you the proportion of stainless steel to black to change the perception of an object from "scientific" to "professional" or how to connote "clean and dirty" for infection control in hospitals through the selection of colour and material.

Culture and car

No one would argue the effect the car has had on our culture. However, to take a semiotic view we need to turn things on their head—by looking at the effects of culture on the car. The car is a reflection of the culture that surrounds it, the culture that gave birth to it.

For example, why have American and European cars followed such distinctive design trajectories?

During 1950s, cars in America looked positively flamboyant, baroque or gothic to modern eye—the elevation of style over any other consideration. Put in the context of post-war production they are emblematic of a nation expressing indomitable triumph.

Europe had lost much of its distribution infrastructure and access to its sources of raw materials during World War II. The US by contrast was intact and could afford extravagance without conscience. Not to mention differences of cultural morale, as some nations were victors while others bore the responsibility for the war. European cars emphasised roundness, connoting engineering and design prowess, but also a sense of cocooning – the shell holding more compact engineering, an active reduction of cultural footprint. This is in complete contrast to US cars at that time.

Some critics might argue that over-reliance on semiotic thinking strangles breakthrough innovation and is always destined to create what the consumer expects rather than what it cannot even imagine. However, we've found that semiotic frameworks prove to be an integral piece to our trends work, spotting potential areas for ownable creativity in between the mapped landscapes.

Meta-trends may tell you that the world is becoming more global, demographic trends may tell that the western consumer is getting older and the micro-trends may tell about the under-served niche markets.

But these trends don't help you to figure out what forms and finishes are going to signify luxury to your increasingly global audience, what identity the senior citizen of the next decade wants to project with their car, or the auditory characteristic of a car door that resonates with “impressionable elites” versus “unisexuals”.

Semiotics help to achieve this extra level of translation in two ways.

Looking forward through culture

Semiotics is a tool that inverts our research assumptions focussing on culture and consumption rather than consumers. This presents an interesting challenge to the automotive industry. For any other industry we work with, you're not chasing the consumer of today, but the consumer of five, ten, and fifteen years in the future. This is where trends come into the picture.

So what is a trend, anyway? Some might say it's a recognisable pattern... the “data is trending” in a certain way.... Often, it's described as a mass behaviour or situation...the “trendy” waves that we either get caught up in or completely miss from our particular cultural viewpoint. Most often, in our business, a trend is something more than a possibility but less than a certainty—a scenario of the future that our clients need to consider, plan for, and intercept to their business advantage.

Mass behaviors in consumption, location and interaction with the world are observable and forecastable at many different scales. These are some of the constants in the change that underpin and direct geo-political shift. They come in different sizes: macro, midi and micro trends. The ageing population of the developed economies is a macro trend. Midi trends include phenomenon like nationally-driven trends in food consumption which mutate from place to place, like a global game of consumption telephone. And right now, there is a great interest in micro trends—these being rich areas of difference that throw up new models or market opportunities: niche social groups like vegan children or the left-handed.

When we start considering not how the world around us will change but how our consumer's most basic desires will change, we are in the territory of cultural change. As we have seen legislative, political, technological and demographic changes are necessarily inter-related, but cultural change lags behind them all because it alone is dependent on a messy mix of mass human experience.

First, it helps connect the more transient aspects of consumer culture with the deeper values that culture represents. The latest fashion fads for teenagers may change faster than what an average parent can fund comfortably, but the values and identities teenagers are trying to project through their fashion remain constant for decades, if not centuries.

Secondly, semiotics is very good at identifying the cyclical aspects of culture. Codes are always changing—lapsing and emerging, but they usually come back around again. Think of consumer electronics—white to black to silver to colour and back again to black. The trick comprehends the pace

of change and the subtle variation that makes codes fresh and relevant the second, third or fourth time around, and where to take them next.

Conclusion

The physical world, its tangible objects and material qualities signify and symbolise a wealth of value and meaning that we consume expertly and intuitively. But that meaning doesn't need to stay invisible like ghosts walking amongst us. Using a few simple tools at the appropriate time in the process, these meanings can be analysed, decoded and translated directly into our innovation and design processes. ▶

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