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SYMBOLS: AN EFFECTIVE MARKETING COMMUNICATION TOOL IN BRANDING**DR. AJAY SAHNI****HEAD****DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES****BHARATI VIDYAPEETH DEEMED UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT AND RESEARCH
NEW DELHI****ABSTRACT**

This research paper is conceptual and is written on the basis of secondary data. The communication strategies of the brand managers are tuned, to attract their target customers toward their advertising messages by various tools. Symbols and semiotics are one of the emerging areas in this aspect. Symbols are instrumental in depicting the theme of the message in a more creative and innovative way, that leads to brand association in the mind of the customers, which resultantly help in brand equity and loyalty. The culture has wide ramifications when advertisers apply symbols in the designing part of message. This is because of the prevalent norms, values and inferences that symbols represent. Hence, their application helps brand managers to leverage their well planned and researched consumers' psychological perspectives for their brands' positioning. Through this research some classic examples are cited in the form of logos, like that of Amazon, Eight, Pittsburgh, FedEx, that have been very strategically applied and have been able to garner the desired outcomes for these brands. These logos are a classical example of what symbols and semiotics can do in the ongoing competitive brand warfare, where brands are vying for a suitable space in consumers' minds' landscape.

KEYWORDS

brand, communication, empathy, oneness, symbols.

JEL CODE

M3- Marketing and Advertising; M37- Advertising.

INTRODUCTION

This conceptual research paper is based upon secondary research. It highlights the issues and trends prevalent in marketing communications, the most important being symbols that reflect the aspirations of target customers' mindset. Devising an effective advertising message is a challenging task for the brand managers, as they are addressing to a mega target audience. Either they could communicate through well researched and well selected words, phrases and sentences, or through the combination of verbal and non-verbal cues that appeal to the market. This research paper delves into this non-verbal message in the form of symbols that the advertisers entail, so that the resultant message reflects the cultural aspirations of the society with which their target market could connect instantly. For this they resort to all sorts of culturally accepted symbolic inferences, so that the interpretations and denotations are intersected in consumers' mind and they are able to have a sense of oneness with the brands they are advertising and most importantly, the resultant brand position is created in the market.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Number of websites and books, as mentioned in the references are consulted and the contents mentioned on symbols, their interpretation, meanings, significance and related concepts were studied. In all these literary works, it was found, that there is a missing link in connecting the concepts to the practical aspect (s). Secondly, the concepts, theories and correlations are missing. The terms are defined only. Hence, there has been a need to bring these concepts and theories more relevant to the practical aspects of branding and communication strategies.

NEED AND IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

The study fulfill the need for a comprehensive and descriptive research study to collect the concepts, especially the symbolic, signs, and other signposts that advertisers resort to while crafting their marketing communication strategies. Most importantly, the challenging tasks of advertisers and brand creators are immense, owing to the competition, and changing consumers' brand loyalties. Hence, the study of symbols and their relevance in advertising messages serves the need of the industry of bringing under one roof, the aspects, practicalities of communicational related symbol inferences that connect to the target market cultural norms and values. This study is important when viewed from the perspective of brand clutter that consumers mind space is experiencing, owing to competitive offering in the market place and ever increasing disposal income equation of consumers. In this era of information technology, when all the media are very expensive, this study has a very important dimension from the point of view of brand positioning, brand recalling and creating brand equity and corresponding brand association and loyalty. As, the brand managers also appreciate the fact that it is less costly to retain the brand loyal than to create them.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The ever increasing brand clutter in consumers' mind, calls for an innovative brand communication initiatives by the marketers, so that there is an instant connect between the product being branded and its consumers', through emotions and empathy.

OBJECTIVES

This secondary data based, descriptive research study is undertaken with the following objectives:

- (1) To investigate the possible communicative tools that a brand manager can resort to;
- (2) To analyze and select the best possible communication toll, so that there is an optimum resource utilization;
- (3) To strategically come out with advertising messages that connect with target market emotional and empathic perceptions, so that there is an instant association between brand personality, brand image with the corresponding self-personality and self-image of the consumer;
- (4) To study the theories, meanings and conceptual framework of symbols, and their interpretation and denotations with reference to contexts, culturally accepted norms, so that an effective advertising message can be created for brand positioning, repositioning and recalling, all leading towards creation of brand equity.

HYPOTHESIS

The application of symbols in advertising creates the required bridge between the target market and the brand communicators through the cultural connotation, accepted norms, and help create the well researched and identified brand positioning in the market. These will happen due to the instant correlation that the target market derive vis-à-vis their inherited values, cultural and societal interpretations that the symbols are associate with. This non-verbal communication is faster and more effective, as it straightway propels the emotional quotient of the target market that will subsequently lead to better brand association.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted on the basis of secondary data that would have been collected for some other related field. The research is descriptive and qualitative and explores the definitions, theories and concepts related to symbols, their inferences, the cultural connotations that symbols represent, and the resultant emotional triggers, that these symbols lead to and the target market's behaviour towards the anticipated outcome of marketers, from the point of views of brand recall, loyalty and association.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Advertising is a form of mass communication. The word communication is derived from the Latin word communis, which means "common." Communication then can be thought of as the process of establishing a commonness or oneness of thought between a sender/advertiser and a receiver/consumer. There must be a commonness of thought developed between advertiser and consumer if communication is to occur. The successful advertiser is the one who can establish that commonness or oneness between their company and its consumers via an effective advertising message.

Developing that oneness of thought between an advertiser and a consumer is extremely difficult because of the nature of mass communication. There are two basic forms of communication--mass and interpersonal. Both share the same basic purpose. However, several unique characteristics of mass communication make it quite different from interpersonal or face-to-face communication. For example, mass communication is indirect because it uses some technical vehicle like a television network or newspaper to connect the source with the receivers/consumers. To complicate matters, the receivers/consumers are removed from the source in time, space, or both. Since the sender/advertiser is virtually separated from its receiver/consumer because of a technical vehicle like TV or radio, there is no possibility for immediate feedback from the receiver/consumer.

A symbol is defined in various ways as per various dictionaries. Some important and relevant definitions are:

- (1) A symbol is "a mark or character used as a conventional representation of an object, function, or process, e.g. a character that represents a particular musical note that a musician or an instrument player understands. This is basically due to accepted norms and rules and processes that are passed on. It is an understanding that a particular symbol has to be interpreted as to carry that particular playing of an instrumental between a composer and instrument player. Hence a symbols is to be understood as pact between these two and other instrument players in the orchestra that help compose a beautiful symphony.
- (2) Another inference that can be drawn thing that represents or stands for something else, especially a material object representing something abstract. "TATA" symbolizes trust, ROLLS ROYCE symbolizes royalty. Similarly, a shape or sign is used to represent something such as an organization, e.g. a Red Cross symbolizes Red Cross Organization.
- (3) A symbol is a sign, shape, or object that is used to represent something else: *A heart shape is the symbol of love. The wheel in the Indian flag is a symbol of peace.*
- (4) A symbols is something that is used to represent a quality or idea: Water, a symbol of life, Sky stands for openness, infinity, letter, or sign used in mathematics, music, physics, chemistry, they all have some signs, structures as being accepted as per the structured systems that are accepted per se. The symbol for oxygen is O.

Even an object can be taken as a representation or a symbol of something else if it seems to represent it because it is connected with it in a lot of people's minds: *The private jet is a symbol of wealth.*

In the field of advertising and marketing communications, especially brand name, packaging, logo, design typography branding is one of the key pillars of a company's identity. There is a lot of thought, philosophy, research work that is included in these. This is directly or indirectly related to psychology, perceptions, especially the emotional; and empathic connotations with the consumers' mindsets.

To substantiate this fact following are the details of some logos that are classic examples of this aspect of brand management. Another emerging and scientific area related to use of symbolism in marketing is brand semiotics that takes its roots from symbols only.

(1) THE FEDEX LOGO



The white space between the 'E' and the 'X' forms a perfect arrow, suggesting a company that is progressive and moving forward and looking ahead. It's subtle, and very effective, while the arrow moving towards right side is culturally accepted norm that it signifies development and growth.



On either side of the tree, the faces of a gorilla and lion appear in white. In many of these examples of hidden symbolism, the 'secondary' imagery is often found by looking at the 'negative space' of the logo. These two complement the connect, a bridge that is drawn between the marketer and the market through this psychographic perception oriented communication through symbols or semiotics.



In this clever design, each letter is made up of a certain part of the number '8'. The second image helps visualize this wonderful design that is so unique that brand association is at once drawn.



The arrow from 'A' to 'Z' in the Amazon logo, signifies the complete on line shopping experience, while "A" is symbolic of beginning i.e. start, whereas "Z" connotes the end, a completion of. This symbol depicts that a customer will have one stop solution to all the on line shopping concerns, and that the Group operates on 360 degree level philosophy. The second semiotic is in the form of a smiley after joining A and Z, that projects a nice, satisfied and comfortable experience with Amazon.

According to anthropologists, the cultural symbolism of advertising and advertising figures is connected to the deep-seated ideals that people invest in goods. Hence logos, trademarks, brand name or celebrities used in marketing communications and brand management connotes the cultural values, ideals and socially accepted norms, and help consumers associate these through the symbols, which are now becoming an emerging areas by marketers and is termed as brand semiotics.

USE OF SYMBOLS IN ADVERTISING: A BRIEF HISTORY

Application of cultural symbols in advertising can be traced back to the 19th century when the first celebrity endorsements began to appear. Henry Ward Beecher, the preacher in the U.S.A. was the one who represented and endorsed "Pears" soap in the 1880s. The Company had thought to correlate the divinity symbols through this endorsement. Further notable contributions in this field were from Writers such as Judith Williamson and Matthew McAllister. They inferred that through this system of celebrity endorsement, the consumers will relate, and connect with the benefits of product to the character and personality of the celebrity. The flip side of this had been that consumers would also associate the not so appreciable qualities of the celebrity to that of the product that was being endorsed. The most successful and unique symbol ever in the history is that of Coca-Cola, to an extent that the French language has developed a new word for this beverage, although this being a proper noun. It is called as Coca in French. This brand has developed powerful brand equity globally, and the Company has been successful in making its forays in different markets, especially in India by imbibing the deep cultural values and symbols, and has been very successful. In India, as per its research initiatives, the drink has been positioned as a family drink. It is shown always as a drink that will be shared with family, friends, and cricket, the three most symbolic representations of deepest rooted cultural ethos of Indian society. Due to this, all its advertisements revolve around these three themes only. This helps its target market associate and correlate and as a result the Company is able to maintain optimum brand recall, equity and differentiation.

Apart from making deeper inroads in the domestic countries, the American majors like, Walt Disney Co.'s Mickey Mouse and McDonald's Corporation, Pepsi Co Inc. have been symbolically associated with the spread of American culture, values, systems and way of life.

When a communication is written from the point of view of an advertisement, there is a sentence, and, a sentence is a complete expression of a single thought. It makes complete sense and follows certain rules of grammar". The word expression is noteworthy here. The term expression denotes that there is a thought pattern that is put forth through a sentences, and, when this thought pattern is extensively and intensely researched according to the consumers' likes and dislikes, and some visuals, design elements, typography constructs are added with the colour sense and lay out plan, an advertisement is created, that corresponds to the market expectations. Hence, all the elements of colour, design, symbols, language, and within the language, the words, clauses, punctuation marks, verbs, and phrases, all put together form a communication structure. The symbols in the form of various cultural connotations and denotations act as a bridge between the sender and receiver in a short span of time. A symbol is a combination of ideas, reflections, inferences and values that makes the message flow quickly and instantly with the overall impact that triggers the emotional frame of mind

Similarly, the punctuation marks, like comma, full stop, exclamation marks etc. are symbols / check points/sign post for the readers of any written communication, and help to bring the clarity of thought of the writer, and helps the reader to extract and connect with the thought pattern of the writer and derive the maximum benefit from the message that the advertiser aims to express in his target readers' psychological perceptions and empathic connect. The use of full stop helps the copy writer to facilitate the reader towards the longest pause and separation. A comma makes the target customer go for the shortest pause etc. A semi-colon is an indicator given by the advertiser to the reader that he is expected to have a shorter pause than the full stop but longer than the comma. A colon indicates the longer pause than the semi-colon. Hence, these punctuation marks are a sort of symbols that make an empathic connect possible between the advertiser and his target readers/customers/consumers.

FINDINGS

The research led to some striking results. It was discovered that advertisers are in the process of resorting to usage of symbols in print media owing to the escalating cost of this media. Secondly, due to clutter in advertising space, they want to be different and stand out from the crowd. For this usage of symbols is an effective tool for brand managers. Symbols are easily identified, and due to instant connectivity with the consumers' psychological perceptions, symbols serve to create the required synonymy between the products and brand i.e. the benefits through the advertised features that the brand creators are mentioning through the advertisement. Since the underlined component is cultural, the symbols are successful in positioning, and repositioning the brands vis-à-vis the competitors' thanks to the excellent graphical, designs elements, colour schemes and tones, along with the requisite typography, font size, that all gel with the overall layout and design structure of an advertisement. The moment consumers see the symbols, the underlying cultural connotation that is deeply ingrained in their minds lead to denotation and interpretations, and helps the target market shop for the brands and leads to brand loyalty.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Since there is a gap of immediate feedback, regarding the effect of communication message in the form of advertisement by the target reader or a customer, the task of advertisers and brand managers becomes all the more challenging. This has led to mushrooming of the concept of brand semiotics that takes its cues from symbols, but it is more focused towards the brand recall, brand equity and brand position. Moreover, due to increase in advertisement cost outlays, the brand communicators are required to derive optimum outcomes, which is easier said than done.

Since advertising is a one way form of communication, and advertisers and brand creators are not aware whether their advertisement has really appealed to the market as conceived, it calls for an effective combination of both art and science while creating an advertisement communication, and here the role of symbols and semiotics is noteworthy, as it enables the communication lead to instant empathetic association between the product, advertiser, consumers, and cultural inferences. The challenge for advertisers and brand managers is to create this bridge, the coherence and oneness, and this is done through proper selection of words and phrase, verbal and non-verbal clues. Sometimes, a particular word is difficult for the reader or target customer to understand. Here, the symbols evoke that contextual credibility through which the readers are able to extract the right meaning by inferring the contextual meaning. Mention may be made about Marlboro cigarettes, a classical example of advertising in the history of brands and marketing communications. Initially, the Company had the challenge of overcoming the wrong image of the product as a feminine one. With the depiction of cowboy as a symbolic interface, the brand was able to leverage the masculine appeal, as cowboy is synonymous with masculinity and adventurous spirit. Hence lending symbolic credibility to brand is helpful in the creation of right brand value, brand association and brand concept according to the corresponding self value, self association and self concept of the target consumer, provided the symbols are depicted according to the cultural contexts with the right mix of other components of advertisement communicational aspects of advertising and establishing a commonness of thought with the audience.

LIMITATIONS

This research paper is not without limitations. Primary research could have been entailed, so that issues and challenges reflected through this study could have been reflected more factually. Secondly, due to limitation of time and resources, the study could have been made more empirical as well. But, the study would contribute towards the emerging area of brand semiotics that also studies the signs, symbols and their interpretations systematically and factually.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Since the marketing warfare is getting intense day by day and consumer is no more a king, but an emperor, this study of symbols as an effective instrument for playing the brand managers' tune of brand equity. Further research can be conducted in this area, and, the field of brand semiotics is another emerging area, where this study can be further investigated through primary data collection for the purpose of quantitative analysis, so that factual and experiential dimensions could also be added on to this research study. In this digital marketing era, the research study on symbols and semiotics can further make the communication strategy of brands more distinctive and appealing to create the much required mind space in target markets' mind for sustenance.

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