

Metaphor, Anthropological Insight, and the Advertiser's Art of Persuasion

The art of persuasion demands the use of powerful metaphors—metaphors that express fresh insight into the relationship between the consumer and the product. However, persuasiveness has a more mundane aspect as well. This is the necessity for incorporation. The advertiser needs to lead the consumer to a desire to incorporate the metaphor he has made of a product into the consumer's life-way. The advertiser uses metaphor to persuade the consumer that the product meets the needs of some aspect of his life-way. If the metaphoric advertising message succeeds in making its point, it sells the product while it builds an identity for the product or brand. The advertiser is a maker, a manufacturer of meaning, as is an artist. Both must be masters of metaphor before they can be considered successful.

Aristotle said that to be a masterful maker of metaphor is one of the surest signs of genius, for it indicates an ability to see the similarities in seemingly dissimilar things. What this means is that the metaphor maker perceives powerful systematic connections between phenomena that had not been perceived before. A successful metaphor gives us that ah-ha feeling. It strikes someone as expressing a novel way of looking at things; it seems a flash of insight.

Cultural anthropology can help advertisers become more powerful makers, and masters, of metaphor. We say this because the most effective anthropology, and the most effective marketing anthropology, attempts to ferret out systematic connections between cultural phenomena, such as consumer products on the one hand, and the overall cultural system on the other. In laying bare these connections for the advertiser, anthropology provides him or her with a host of possible analogies and metaphors to use in communications strategies. Cultural anthropology is especially effective in illuminating how consumers themselves understand the nature of products through metaphors of the consumers' own making. Successful advertising sometimes requires that the advertiser recognize how consumers metaphorically associate products with certain ideas and values. By using the consumer's own metaphor, the advertiser is tapping into a rich set of meanings surrounding needs and emotions. The advertiser can then build communications strategies around these metaphoric associations and in the process refine and dramatize them.

This sounds somewhat high-fallutin'. Let's put forward a concrete example of what we mean.

In one of our research projects our brief was to uncover the consumer's relationship to car parts—spark plugs, engine valves, etc. The advertiser was particularly interested in charting out the varying degrees of emotional investment that different market segments have in these products. But, we were warned, the phrase "car parts" often evokes a wry smile in consumers. The category seemed "low involvement". The advertisers were searching for a hook, a way to associate the product line and brand with a compelling message. They needed to push the process of incorporation forward. They needed to have the consumer incorporate some compelling meaning about the brand into their own

Lives. They needed a powerful metaphor. However, people were already creating this metaphor. The process of incorporation was already going forward in the culture at large. The research found out precisely how.

We found our metaphor when we considered this product line's relationship to male and female gender roles. In our interviews we noticed that car parts played a rather important part in the life stories of many of our male respondents. Working and middle class men frequently had a fascination with muscle cars and muscle car parts in their youth. Though many had outgrown such interests long ago, they retained a feeling that car parts are part of the masculine domain of expertise. Many continued to take pride in this expertise. The knowledge of car parts had become one of many markers of male identity for them.

As men mature, they take on different social roles and develop different aspects of their gender identities. This affects their relationship to products in rather dramatic ways. As regards car parts, young men's enthusiasm for muscle cars, and for parts that added speed and power to cars, reflected their need to display physical prowess and "cool". For many young male respondents car parts and cars themselves were but thinly veiled metaphors for, and advertisements of, sexuality. Older, family men have by and large lost such concerns and no longer felt the need to advertise themselves sexually in this way. They, in contrast, are interested in car parts being durable and dependable, rather than simply powerful. We perceived how these respondents had begun to view the product category in terms of their own social role of family protector. In fact, many of our more middle-aged male respondents took a good deal of emotional satisfaction from placing a mantle of protection over their family by overseeing the maintenance of the family car or fleet of cars. The real emotional hook for this market segment was the idea of protection. Men felt they were exercising the male role of protector through the overseeing of car repairs and the like. The trick then was to associate the product with this aspect of the male role.

The advertising campaign was based on a metaphoric sentence: "Brand X car parts equal male concern and protectiveness." The advertising imagery flowed from this metaphoric sentence. Further, the metaphor was already in the culture—it was already in the consumer's mind. The advertising sharpened the image, but did not create it out of thin air. Consumers were already searching for a product benefit of "protection" when they purchased specific car part brands, and were associating preferred brands with this value. The advertising took the further step of explicitly linking this product benefit to an image of the male as protector. The product was thus portrayed as the consumer's ally—helping him to realize the value of "protection". Thus did Campbell-Ewald come up with a new advertising campaign for AC Delco car parts?

It is of course the job of advertising creatives to come up with specific metaphoric scripts that condense a host of metaphoric meanings and messages within their compass, and then convey these meanings to the consumer. It is not an exaggeration to say that creatives are commercial image poets. Some commercials have the quality of a haiku poem. They condense meaning through sharp, economical metaphoric imagery. Sometimes, the most economical imagery results in the most effective advertising message.

To stay with the example of car parts, Michelin's famous Baby Campaign comes to mind as an example of the successful use of metaphor. There is no natural connection between a baby in diapers and a Michelin tire. Normally the two are not associated. But, as we said, metaphor brings together two seemingly unrelated domains of meaning to convey the message. In this instance the campaign unconsciously or intuitively associated the Michelin tire with "masculine protectiveness". The ruggedness and strength (normally male symbolic attributes) of the Michelin tire were symbolically put in the service of the domestic realm. The tire was metaphorically portrayed as the protector of children, and by the principle of metaphoric extension, of the women who drove babies around as they went about their domestic chores and, indeed, of the whole realm of family. The baby symbolized children, women, and family; the tire symbolized father, masculine protectiveness and a quality of masculine strength that is ennobled by being put in the service of the family. The consumer experienced a flash of recognition and got the message immediately. This in turn contributed to Michelin's commercial success.

Anthropological research is useful because it lays bare a host of metaphoric possibilities for creatives. It provides them with a variety of analogies, and information to think with. It can also show which metaphors make sense culturally. In short, it can help advertisers become "Masters of Metaphor".

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