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EMOTION AND CONSUMER RITUALS

By Thomas Maschio

I originally trained in the anthropology of religion and did my first fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, studying a Melanesian people's sense of the sacred. My work as a business consultant studying consumer culture has turned out to be not very different. This may give people in both anthropology and advertising pause, but to me, and to other commentators, consumer culture is a search, not only for comfort, pleasure or status, but also for meaning. In many and varied categories the successful product or brand often gives people an experience that can best be described as quasi-religious. This is a strong emotional benefit for consumers, the creation and evocation of which is an important objective of the rituals and routines that surround product usage. Evoking this sense provides certain brands and products with what Malcolm Gladwell would term "stickiness", or memorability, in the same way that one of the effects of religious ritual is to make memorable for participants certain values, meanings and feelings. I've tended to view the rituals and routines that consumers create around brands as affirmations that these objects are special and deserving of sometimes quite intense attention.

A PROJECT ON HIGH END BICYCLE BRANDS

I found riders were expressing ideas about competitiveness, energy, play, discipline, freedom and beauty, as they purchased, raced, trained on, and customized their bicycles. These ideas generally weren't expressed directly but were encoded in symbols. Thus, design elements of a bicycle came to symbolize energy, lightness, and strength. On a deeper level, the frame of the preferred bicycle brand served as a metaphor for the rider's own, actual physical body—strong, light but fit, and trained to a fine edge.

Like a dramatic play, a brand ritual has an overall theme or message. In the bicycle ethnography I arrived at the theme of "alignment"—riders attempting to align bicycle design into a close fit with their bodies. Riders were continually customizing their bicycles to fit their body types, to suit the types of races they were preparing for, and to be concordant with the sorts of training routine they were practicing. As they did this they were also remaking their bodies. I took this process to be part of the cyclist's brand ritual (as he usually felt he could carry it off only with his preferred bicycle brand) and went about decoding it as I would any other ritual performance.

The ultimate purpose of the competitive cyclist's brand ritual is to hallow the activity that he is engaging in (riding and racing) by means of his bicycle brand. This is how he creates and elaborates a sense of the sacred in his everyday and seemingly completely secular, banal training activity. The brand ritual, like a religious ritual, has an ultimate emotional objective for the participant that he, or she, wishes to experience again and again. The cyclist seeks the sense of transcendence and freedom that riding and racing delivers. The advertising account planner I worked with drew on these ideas to portray the brand as one that innovates on its own time frame, just as riders develop a thoughtful training program through their ritual of alignment. Their presentations won them the account.

DISCUSSION

Of course I've never used the words sacred or religious ritual in any of my business reports. But these phrases and ideas have often informed my thinking. I've also drawn on writings in the anthropology of art and on the symbolic dimensions of space and time to help clients in projects as diverse as marketing museums, or understanding the appropriate design elements of décor, menu and architecture in a brand of chain restaurants. Ideas drawn from the vast anthropological literature on gift giving and on communication codes have inspired some of my reports on texting and on mobile communication brands. Theories of gender and practice have informed reports on "men's brands", such as full size trucks, and on "woman's brands" such as washing machines, and so it has gone. I am always searching anthropological theory and the ethnographic record for, hopefully, creative, analogies and metaphors to apply to ethnographic case studies of consumer behavior.

Thomas Maschio is a cultural anthropologist who has worked as a business consultant for the past fifteen years. More information about his anthropological practice can be found at www.maschioconsulting.com.

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