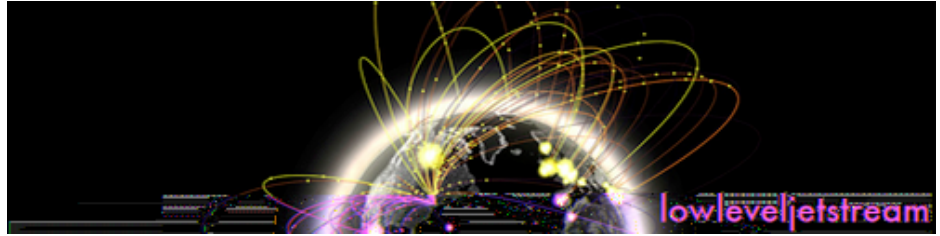


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## Everyday Things: an Anthropologist's take on Consumer Rituals



I've been reaching out to people in the last few weeks who I want to include on lowleveljetstream and below is the first of what I hope will be frequent posts from friends who have great perspectives to share. This post is by Tom Maschio, an anthropologist well known in the ad business. He shares his secret on the close links he has observed between the rituals of religion and consumer rituals. There's lots to take away from this article, especially in the depth of ideas that can be derived from anthropological study. I've challenged Tom to further contributions in the coming months.

This piece will be published soon and Tom would greatly appreciate any suggestions for improvement.

Everyday Things: an Anthropologist's take on Consumer Rituals  
By Tom Maschio

I was originally trained in the anthropology of religion and did my first fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, studying a tribal people's ritual and religious life and trying to understand their sense of the sacred. The work I've carried out the last dozen years or so as a business consultant studying consumer culture has turned out to be not so very different from my previous work. This may give people in both anthropology and advertising pause, but to me, and to other commentators, consumer culture is often a search for meaning, not merely a search for material comfort or fun or pleasure or status or an attempt to satisfy basic necessity. This next thought may also give pause: that the search for meaning is sometimes a search for the sense of the sacred in the everyday – the everyday product, the everyday activity. In categories as varied as pet food, bicycles, credit card use, food, and electronics, the successful product or brand often gives people a sense of what can only be described as the sacred in the everyday. This sense 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. This emotional benefit provides certain brands and products with what Malcolm Gladwell would term "stickiness", or memorability. Likewise, anthropologists who write about the workings and objectives of religious ritual tell us that ritual is one way cultures highlight and make memorable for participants certain values, meanings and feelings. The anthropologist Gilbert Lewis also writes that "the idea of the deeper significance of ordinary things is familiar to those who take part in the study of ritual" (Lewis 1988:30). Ritual places ordinary things within a special field of meaning so that participants will pay attention to them. As Lewis puts it, during a ritual:

"Instead of seeing an object or action in a conventional way we un-gate our vision and search out its special qualities, which have no relevance in the ordinary economy of our perceptual and practical dealings with it, but which by close attention, by some sort of short circuit of thought, may provide an intimation of a mystery" (Lewis 1988:31). In this way ritual creates the sense that the object attended to is something memorable, complex and symbolic of deeper values, and something of a sacred sense attaches to it.

I've often used anthropological theories about religious ritual to help me understand consumer thoughts and feelings about their preferred products and brands. I've tended to view the rituals and routines that consumers create around products and brands as affirmations that these objects are special and deserving of sometimes quite intense attention. For marketers these thoughts intersect with one of the most central questions of the current recession: What can we learn from products and brands that are performing respectably, if not profitably, in the midst of a severe economic downturn? Why do consumers

remain attached to some products and brands and categories and not others in rough economic times, or even in any economic times? In many cases it has to do with this feeling of meaning in the everyday and with the concept of ritual. Put another way, certain brands stand out from others in the same category because they have been particularly successful in allowing consumers to tap into the sense of the sacred in the everyday. And, I believe, more products would be successful if advertisers understood the meanings of the rituals that attach to specific product categories. My overriding objective in writing this piece is to outline an overall approach to the study of consumer culture. I wish to argue that one of the ways that advertising can better understand the emotional benefits of specific product categories and then more crisply articulate these benefits in communications strategies about specific brands is to leverage anthropological theories of ritual. Anthropological definitions of ritual are varied and complex. In general we think of ritual as a performance or theatrical script meant to move an audience emotionally through symbolic language, with the aim of sacralizing objects, activities or aspects of life. Let me illustrate how these ideas apply to the study of consumer culture by discussing the rituals that consumers weave around some product categories: pet care and bicycles. Nothing is seemingly more everyday than feeding your cat or riding your bike.

#### Cat Food and Cat Mana

U.S. cat food sales increased 12.3 percent in the six months ending November 2008, with sales increases holding steady toward the end of the year, just when the US economy was really cratering. Sales of cat-care related paraphernalia – kitty condos and such - also increased over the course of the recession. What to make of this when many people were worried about having enough money to keep their homes and buy food for their human families. A series of ethnographic projects I carried out on pet care and peoples' attitudes toward their pets and pet food brands was revealing.

We all understand that the intimate physical interactions between cats and their owners – during petting, playing and grooming – produce feelings of connectedness, peace and security for owners and their cats. Many people feel that cats put them in touch with their own animal nature, enabling them to experience simple animal contentment, such as when their cats sit on their laps purring. But beyond this, cats fascinate their owners because they seemed to possess some uncanny, exotic, magical quality. Though my respondents were not familiar with the idea, I would say that they perceived that their cats possessed mana. In the anthropological record of diverse cultures, mana is a religious concept that represents the principles of efficacy and power. And people do often describe their cats as extraordinary, efficacious animals, possessed of capabilities that provide a window into the natural world. For instance, cats appear preternaturally athletic to cat lovers. They also seem to

possess amazing and mysterious sensory abilities and even aesthetic qualities. Their beauty somehow indicates their discerning nature. One of the pet owner's most important concerns is nurturing cat mana through the choice of the right pet food. They want their cats to really act like cats, which means exhibiting mana. This is one of the ways that owners experienced a sense of wonderment, or sacredness, in the everyday. Driving cat food sales is a powerful consumer need to cultivate cat mana and to see it exhibited in cat play and other behaviors. Eternal enigmas

Owners feel a real species distance between cats and themselves. Unlike dogs, whose internal states are thought to be much more easily read, cat behavior provides only teasing indications and ambiguous signs of a mysterious nature that owners struggle to interpret. It is this desire to make contact and to divine cat nature that drives human/cat interaction, and in some very interesting ways. Owners' value the presence of this enigmatic creature within their homes, especially noting cats behavioral interactions with domestic spaces. A sense of the sacred in the home

Many cat loving owners speak of the symbolic link between the nature of cats and the nature of home. Cats introduce a world of physicality, play, amusement, spectacle and sentiment into the home. Paradoxically, having a pet cat is one of a number of ways that people seek to humanize the home. Cats make a house feel lived in. They do this by investing something of themselves in it when they take possession of our domestic spaces. A favorite sleeping place in a bookcase, a particular nook or cranny of the house, a preferred room or bed or chair, and the cat's daily visiting of these special places enhance the owner's sense of hominess. Often the cat owner will embellish these spots with toys, scratching posts, personalized pillows or little beds. As an anthropologist of religion who has studied the meaning of sacred places in religious practice, I view these commercial embellishments as shrines to essential cat nature. In this way owners are symbolically expressing the idea that their cats are sanctifying their homes, weaving a sacred hominess into everyday experience, enabling them to experience domesticity more vibrantly and richly. The Ritual

The shrines that cat owners build to their cats become the stage on which cats then perform, and cat owners interpret cat behavior as if it were a ritual performance. A cat's daily rounds through the house, its feeding and play behavior, have a repetitive and ritualistic quality that owners find highly satisfying. It is as if by engaging in its daily routines the cat renews the sense of domesticity and sacredness in the everyday. Owners feel they are participating in this ritual by furthering its performance. As one respondent put it: "I want to provide a sense of security and contentment to our cat. Cats like to be in control of their environments. I feel amusement in their cat places and I feel pride that they I have cared for them enough so that they have taken ownership."

When cats came to possess the domestic realm in these ways, owners feel themselves to be closer to their cats and to have made a real connection with them. Symbols, the Sense of the Sacred and Brand Rituals

I have done this sort of exercise in ferreting out the sacred meaning of the everyday product or service in almost every project I have worked on. As I have done so I have continually made use of the concept of ritual. It is a truism at this point to note that consumers create rituals and routines around products and brands. From an anthropologist's perspective, the brand ritual is a type of cultural performance (as a play is a performance) through which consumers express meanings and sentiments, not only about the brand itself but about larger cultural issues. In the study of cats and cat food brands, as consumers talked about cat food brands and other cat care products, they expressed ideas about domesticity, the nature of a sacred animal, and their understanding of mana (all well established topics in anthropology by the way)

To provide another example in another category – high - end bicycle brands – I found that riders were expressing ideas about competitiveness, energy, play, discipline, freedom and beauty, as they purchased, raced, trained on, customized and repaired their bicycles. These ideas often 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 how riders wish to think of their own, actual physical bodies – strong, light but fit, and trained to a fine edge.

Like a dramatic play a brand ritual usually 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 own physical bodies. Riders are continually customizing their bicycles to fit their own particular body types, to suit the type of race they were preparing for, and to be concordant with the sort of training routine they were practicing. As they do this they are also remaking their bodies. I took this process to be the cyclist's brand ritual (as he usually felt he could carry it off with his preferred bicycle brand) and went about decoding it as I would any other ritual performance.

One other aspect of ritual is its formality, especially when compared to routines. In actual religious ritual there is often a certain rigidity or formality of gesture, as well as formal decorations, singing, the use of special costumes, masks, and special smells like incense, all of which alert participants that they have entered a special performance arena. Certainly the elaborate costumes of the cyclist and all his specialized, repetitive training rituals have a formality and ceremonialism to them.

The ultimate purpose of the cyclist's brand ritual is to hallow the activity that he is engaging in (bicycle riding and racing) through the 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. I do mean everyday, as the training regimes of competitive riders are nothing if not regular and disciplined. 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. For the cyclist this is a sense of transcendence and freedom that riding and racing delivers, once one is trained up and ready to compete. For the cat owner it is the sense of wonderment at sharing one's home with a sacred, mana-filled animal, and the enhanced sense of domesticity that their cats allow them to experience.

Discussion My take on why consumer products and brands can become "sticky", memorable, in the recession and in other times, then involves understanding a seeming paradox. This is that a sense of the sacred, more than simply a sense of meaning, can be derived from the most ordinary things – that product category or brand rituals are often about the hallowing of some life arena and activity. Can it be that consumer culture is sometimes a façade for what can only be called religious impulses, or a screen upon which those impulses are projected? Thinking of the swath of seemingly profane consumer categories that I have subjected to anthropological analysis – cat foods and bicycles, cars, credit cards, toothpaste, underarm deodorant, skin moisturizers, feminine hygiene products, car parts (one could go on and on) – such a thought gives pause. But "the deeper significance of ordinary things is familiar to those who take part in the study of ritual" (Lewis 1988:30). Certainly it is familiar to me. Many of the religious objects I studied in New Guinea seemed at first glance no more promising candidates for ritual treatment. In one ritual I've written on, a female initiation rite, the ritual objects were areca nut, lime, small clam shells, common plants of various sorts, pig tusk ornaments, dogs' teeth, cassowary quill necklaces, and grass skirts (Maschio 1994:105-139; 1995:131-161). It's what people do with these common things, both here and elsewhere, that give them their particular meaning, regardless of what the things are in and of themselves. And, more often than not people are weaving them into ritual performances.

Of course I've never used the word sacred, or the phrase religious ritual in any of my business reports and presentations. But these phrases and ideas have often informed my thinking. This has been my secret.

Interesting that in the bicycle project the account planner I worked with leveraged the idea of the competitive cyclist's ritual, which included the notion that cyclists are in a constant state of physical refinement and personal transformation and see biking as a way to access new experiences, but like me eschewed any seemingly over-the-top references to "sacred experience". Rather, the planner and his agency stressed the thoughtful, purposeful elements of the cyclist's ritual – the fact that the cyclist perceived his ritual of alignment to be the cultivation of an intellectual skill. They then sought to portray brand attributes in these intellectualist terms, portraying the brand as a thoughtful

brand that innovates on its own time frame, just as riders develop a thoughtful training program through their ritual of alignment. Their presentations secured them this brand account.

The innovation company I worked with on cat foods and cat care assimilated the idea of mana to the idea of super foods, stressing the nutritional power and efficacy of new cat food product offerings. Also, the idea of mana filled cat nature was given a nod in communication strategies with the phrase, "super cats" – super foods for super cats. This was all tied in to the sacred domestic symbolism of cats via a notion of parallel play - the idea that owners perceive cat nature to reveal itself as they watch cat play and cat routines go forward in domestic settings. The brand thus was portrayed as nurturing true cat nature. ©

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