

MRS Conference 2007

Semiotics, what now, my love?

Virginia Valentine

Prelude

A Short History of Conference Semiotics in 24 years and 12 awards

Semiotics had its first Conference outing in 1983 when Wendy Gordon and I gave a TRB company presentation introducing the Trigger technique of stimulus material.

Trigger stimuli were essentially collage boards, based on what you might call a fledgling semiotic analysis. The market codes, the cultural context – they were all there represented in collage (later mood) boards. As indeed was the theory of notness: if we had a board for ‘*clean*’ we’d have an opposite one for ‘*dirty*’; *kind* would be defined in its difference from *harsh* or *nasty* and so on. And behind it all, we explained, was the fundamental semiotic premise that consumers are constructed in the meeting point between communications and culture and research stimuli is therefore the representation of that meeting point. The 1983 audience was at best, bemused but polite; at worst, sceptical and scornful – and most states in between.

In the intervening years, though, papers on or about semiotics and semiotic understanding of the issues that confront Market Research have notched up an impressive number of 12 Conference awards.

There are two semioticians numbered amongst the Fellows of the society. The 2007 Research Buyers Guide lists semiotics as a research service with 40 agencies laying claim to include it in their offer. The AQR glossary backs this up. ‘Semiotics was introduced into commercial qualitative research in the UK in the 1980’s and now has wide application and acceptance.’

So far, so very good.

The MRS offers a 2-day Advanced Semiotics training module. ESOMAR have included a chapter on semiotics in their forthcoming handbook of MR techniques as well as running heavily subscribed workshops, now extending into 2-day events. Procter and Gamble, no less, are developing a ‘semiotic capacity’ with agency Space Doctors.

Indeed, outside academia, Market Research and its outcrops of planning and brand consultancy provide one of the few industries people can actually make a living by peddling semiotics.

So far, so excellent.

And yet....

Check out the recruitment pages of Research magazine. No ads state '*knowledge of semiotics would be an advantage*', whereas they would absolutely stipulate qual or quant. Look at the job titles in research agencies, Head of Insight a gogo. But Head of culture? Head of semiotics?

And ethnography is growing at twice the speed. 80 ethnographic agencies listed.

What's going on? Why, after 24 years hasn't this Conference-lauded 'best new thinking' been adopted into the mainstream of Market Research?

It might be due to limits in its mainstream-ness. But the central tenet of the theory, as well as its adoption by a mammoth like P&G, argue against that. Consumers and culture are inseparable halves of a whole. To understand the one you have to know how the other works.

No, in my view, it is because semiotics has encountered barriers it just hasn't been able to break down but, if it is to contribute fully to the industry adopted as its commercial home, it must identify those Jericho walls – and sound the semiotic trumpets till they come tumbling down.

Which is where this paper really starts.

Part 1. The 'Walls'

There are dozens of metaphors one could use for the barriers preventing semiotics becoming mainstream MR. (Roget has around 3 pages of them.) The important thing is that, as Lakoff and Johnson have it, 'metaphor is a mechanism for creating new meanings and new realities'. In other words it's a profound aid to coming at any problem in a creative and lateral way. So in that sense, Jericho's Walls are simply a startpoint for thinking about the make-up and structure of the resistance. Armed with that understanding, we can then devise our own version of the trumpets and the mighty shout.

My hypotheses

In my original submission for this paper, I hypothesised two possibilities.

That we still need to educate people in what semiotics is and what it can do for market development. Linked to that thought, it could very well be a question of our own semiotics creating more barriers than they break down: do we obfuscate rather than educate (That's been reverberating about for years, but is it still a valid wall?)

Resistance could be endemic to an industry that constantly procrastinates about rethinking its attitude to new and different ways of approaching what we know and how we know it by an award system that insists on boxing the 'best' thinking into the 'new' bracket. If it's that 'new', maybe you don't have to take it on board, *just yet*.

Checking them out : three questions.....

To try to understand the nature of the resistance, and also to check my own hypotheses, I emailed three questions to some leading industry figures whom I had known over the years as semiotic supporters, sympathisers, users, practitioners, buyers — and passionate carers about the development of genuinely insightful Market Research.

I have thanked those who gave so generously of their time and their wisdom at the end of the paper.

The questions.

1. What has semiotics truly brought to market research and all its input into the marketing universe it serves? Andy Dexter called it *bringing a new dimension to the world of market research*? Is he right?
2. Given that it is a 'new dimension' why hasn't it become a taken-for-granted method for the majority of projects: ie *'we'll do a bout of sem, a round of qual and then go on to the quant'*?
3. What's the one big issue it needs to address to put that right?

And the answers

What has semiotics truly brought to Market Research?

- A completely different way of understanding a problem or issue that helps re-frame thinking and development
- An understanding that brand communication consists of multiple and layered messages that are not consciously absorbed by human beings. There is meaning and message in the 'how' not only the 'what' of any and every communication
- Guidance about the most fertile area for the future .
- An entirely new way of thinking...a sort of "out of the box" approach that often leads one to think differently, counter-intuitively, and surprisingly. .It leads one to think afterwards "Of Course!!"
- What they all say they want nowadays, but mostly don't really pursue; "real insight".
- Raising fundamental questions omitted from the normal market research dialogue, it examines the incoherent and paradoxical nature of much of human behaviour.
- It takes us outside the box of consumercentrism. . It recognises that consumer behaviour must be understood in its socio-cultural framework..
- It recognised that what is absent from the text is as revealing as what is present
- In a world dominated by brands, semiotics is the best research tool we have for understanding brand symbolism and what the brand communicates.
- Brands communicate deeper meaning through signs, symbols and codes. It has been slowly accepted that there are certain patterns in the way people derive significance and meaning from brands that influence their very mindsets and the way they lead their lives and make choices.
- It gets into that hidden, unguarded, informal space of the brand that consumers find pretty difficult to articulate. As such, it's the best way to make sure that a brand develops in a way that is true to itself and the culture within which it lives

- Gives you a broader perspective – emotionally based values, set in the all-important context of cultural values
- It brings a completely new angle into assessing creative work and locating it in its cultural context
- It brings more insight. Deeper insight. Better insight
- A way of going beyond the 'consumer view' of the world - the usual way in which communications are evaluated, a framework that joins the consumer view to the cultural 'zeitgeist'. The other 180 degrees to consumer research
- An understanding of the building blocks of communication.
- Consistency of analysis of communications - not just your latest group discussion findings. Analysis of input to communications--rather than output which is how consumer research operates.
- The issue of communications is framed in three dimensions - content, contact and context. Semiotics has helped us to develop insights into understanding the communications context, and instructs our communications planning
- A tool for executing the product and marketing mix, truly in line with the brand positioning and a tool for checking this development at all stages
- Allows you to anticipate cultural changes that will shape consumer response
- Independent semiotic analysis can provide a catalyst for change by challenging the culture of an organisation

Greg Rowland also gave me this 'answer' from a client of his.

“I used to think that all the answers were locked in the heads of consumers, you showed me that the consumers are themselves locked in a wider cultural context and you helped us to convert the context into meaningful and rich source of inspiration. When de-coded by you, the context starts to sparkle with ideas and inspiration. Your thoughts and ideas inspire the teams at the beginning of the projects and then travel through it, right to the execution of it”

I shall mine the responses to all three questions for ideas on devising our new Jericho-busting trumpet – but, as a semiotician, what strikes me first about these answers is the discourse.

A discourse of intelligent discussion

Semiotics looks to discourse (the way the language constructs thinking) as a guide to the driving forces behind the words themselves.

In this instance, the discourse is quite striking. It isn't really the language of market research (yes, I know that 'insight' crops up once or twice, but that, in itself is a shorthand for something much wider and deeper) and it certainly isn't the language of semiotic theory.

In the main the formal structures (the discourse mechanics) are those of intelligent discussion around models of thinking about commercial communications. It is Radio 4, broadsheet, BBC 4, Management Journalism language. It is redolent of the syntax and vocabulary of Melvyn Bragg's *In Our Time*. a kind of popular culture Big Talk (1), the respondents are highly informed yet relaxed and comfortable.

Now look at the discourse of the main answer to the second question

Why hasn't it become a taken-for-granted core method?

- That wanky French stuff nobody can understand but everybody waves around so they look clever and trendy at the same time.
- It is still difficult to explain to clients or rather they often seem unable to grasp even simplified explanations.
- The language is not easy to understand e.g. discourse, codes, etc. There are many semiotic practitioners around now who use complex language, complex charts or write in gobbledegook especially some of the papers/reports I have read. Of course there are others who are brilliant but not enough I fear!
- Hard to get one's mind round initially. Because there is no easy way to learn to do it. Because you can't explain it easily in a presentation.
- Because it requires "thinking" and it is difficult to allow others into the process
- Hard to do, threatening, the realm of specialists, hard to get properly paid for without the metric of number of groups conducted, foreign, difficult to validate. In other words almost everything that is antithetical to the average market researcher
- It's hard to define what it is (it's very touchy-feely quality) and it's unfamiliar, sounds a bit daunting, can be perceived as either a bit 'intellectual' or a bit 'brand/competitor copy review'or just weird
- I think clients are scared of the level of 'interpretation' involved in semiotics and the 'guru' status of its practitioners
- Is it because semiotics is seen as "hard" Is it Semiotics seen as the realm of a few "gurus" ... steeped in supposedly abstruse theory? Is it because it uses a language of its own – e.g. "signifiers"?
- Semiotics' reputation as an esoteric, complex, highly academic discipline still seems to be a problem
- The other sticking point seems to be the lingo. Even a whiff of a paradigm shift and my lot start glazing over
- Not really understood - and it feels as if you have to understand a complicated theory to get it
- Needs an expert to explain it
- Semiotics has found it difficult to explain itself
- It is a bit too wacky for many clients and research agencies, more used - even in the chi chi world of qualitative research and ethnography - to primary research moderators than cultural meaning consultants

It doesn't take a semiotician to count up the number of times, the peeved, almost childlike words 'hard', 'difficult', 'not easy', 'daunting' occur. Nor to be aware of a resentment against 'gurus', 'interpretation', complex language, gobbledegook, 'intellectual', 'esoteric' 'clever' and other 'wacky', 'wanky' pretensions. The discourse is much more emotionally irritated and hostile than the measured, thoughtful very adult responses to question one. TA might almost call it a not-OK state.

In effect, the discourse of the answers to question 1 is cool and thoughtful. The second discourse is hot and emotional.

The implications seem very clear. Enthusiastic rational acceptance of the power of semiotics is being subverted and undermined by emotional response to its 'difficulty' and mystique. So that's easy then. To create a more receptive emotional climate, we just simplify and demystify.

Or do we?

Faced with the formal challenges of 'hard', 'not easy', 'difficult' and the irritation with 'guru' and its attendant mist of mystique, the inclination, and the prevailing argument, has been to turn to the polar opposite, to attempt, formally, to 'simplify', to 'demystify'. (Yet another of those papers did just that – Rachel Lawes' Demystifying Semiotics answered 'some key questions' in an impeccably clear, well-written and coherent way. (2))

However, I believe there is strong evidence that the taken-for-granted belief in the need for simplification and demystification has been misconceived. Worse than that, it may well have compounded the problem.

What's wrong with simplification?

Firstly, on the level of theory, 'easy' does not make 'difficult' go away. If you describe something as 'simplified' or 'demystified', the opposite (complex, opaque, mystifying) is always lurking behind as a repressed 'other'. In effect, then there is a constant unconscious ding-dong of meaning and understanding in people's minds, which doesn't get you anywhere. You cannot move on from the push-me-pull-you between 'difficult' and 'easy' semiotics. If it's 'easy' have you got the really good stuff: if it's got no mystique, why is it different?

Secondly, and it follows on from this, if you get semiotic theory down to something so simple 'anybody can understand it', they can't see why **anybody** can't **do** it

- If they do understand it they then think it's so obvious that they could do it themselves with their creative agencies e.g. design company, ad agency
- There may perhaps be a bit of 'black box' in there, something a bit special, but essentially, it's not rocket science, and at a push, most people could do whatever it is (so the thinking goes)

Thirdly, and this came out as another major issue in the questionnaire responses, simplification can finish up with a disappointingly bland version of semiotic analysis which does not seem to be very different from other kinds of findings.

- One of the challenges is the variable quality and richness of semiotic analysis delivered across the industry
- Problems have been exacerbated by 'bad semiotics'
- I looked at the findings and I thought 'this is just basic common-sense'. I'm no semiotician, but I could have done that

Simplification in action

There's an interesting example of the problems with simplification in a 1980s Conference paper entitled Defining Female Attractiveness: A Semiotic Approach. The paper's stated aim was to explore the usefulness of semiotics for analysing qualitative

research data, using male and female responses to female imagery in press advertising and editorial. The introduction declared, with much heavy sarcasm, that *'we will attempt to demystify (semiotics) 'murky waters' and explain its central propositions in language we should all be able understand'*.

How well the paper achieved this 'attempt' is not relevant here: more important for understanding the dangers of this course of action is the 'new model of semiotics' put forward as a demonstration of this simplification.

"The model we therefore propose, and will demonstrate is a somewhat more egalitarian semiotics where the groundwork for the interpretation of signs is carried out by real people in the real world rather than by a single guru-like analysis".

Here is a sample of 'the groundwork for interpretation' as carried out by real people in the real world

"The most successful female images were those that women could identify with and that men could relate to. The women liked best those that seemed almost attainable and were reflections of their idealised selves; they were drawn to the ones where they could just about imagine that on a good day.....they could just about look like that.

The men expressed this need for realism as 'realistically attainable'. They most preferred images of women that were familiar and approachable. They did not relate to haughty 'model' types but were more drawn to those they could imagine meeting at a party and who might possibly accept an invitation to go out with them".

Unsurprisingly, from this 'groundwork', the concluding interpretation ran thus:

At a practical level, we believe that we have established some guidelines on pitfalls to be avoided when showing women in fashion and beauty advertising. Images that suggest masculine traits or blatant sexuality should be avoided: femininity and subtle eroticism are preferred.

Eat your heart out, Calvin Klein.

You see, it is all too easy for simplification to become simplistic. Or, to put the problem another way:

- It comes down to this: you can learn to be an OK qual quite quickly. You can learn to do groups and debrief with a basic level of efficiency in a few weeks. But the people that do something great with consumer findings are the true treasures. The difference with semiotics is that there's no quick route to a fuller understanding of the theoretical landscape from Althusser to Zizek and all points in between. So there's no average semiotics. There's just great stuff or crap stuff.
- Phenomenally high order intellectual skills and considerable experience and wisdom are required to operate as a semiotician.

- Semiotics - very labour intensive, scarcity of sufficiently skilled practitioners, not yet adequately commercialized (in the sense of suppliers in sufficient numbers applying the methodology in a sufficiently transparent, accessible and actionable way).
- There aren't enough of you! Whilst there are probably 500 qual research agencies out there, with big enough headcounts to make availability a non-issue, this isn't the case with semioticians. There are maybe 5-10 (?) *credible* practitioners I might be able to contact to work on a brief. (my italics)
- There just aren't that many practicing semioticians around - they haven't reached that kind of critical mass.

In other words, all 'simplification' really does is to put into stark relief the gap between the good semioticians with the skills to 'apply the methodology in a sufficiently transparent, accessible and actionable way' – and the others.

What it does **not** do is to put in place some mechanism to bridge that gap and work towards a 'critical mass' of semiotic practice, not necessarily dependent on mastering the 'difficult', the 'daunting' and the 'abstruse' landscape of theory, but capable of delivering a powerful, radical contribution to research.

And I do not, for a moment, believe simplification will deal with the problem of a not-OK emotional resistance. It will just replace it with a different kind of anger and frustration at getting the crap end of the lollipop.

A 'variable quality and richness' – semiotics on agency websites

The variability in the delivery of semiotics across the industry is borne out by a semiotic overview of the websites of agencies claiming this area of expertise in their Guide entry. I looked at most of them and I found three main coding systems describing their semiotic offer – and how it adds value to their work.

1. Codes of authority. The few well-known and well-qualified semiotic agencies for whom semiotics and its theoretical precepts are their *raison d'être* and the start-point of all their activity and recommendations state this unequivocally. They use the language/s of knowledge and authority and it is clear from the confidence of their discourse and the scope of their activities that they are applying a deep understanding of the theoretical terrain '*to inspire and stretch marketing thinking*' (Space Doctors).

Interestingly the language is very similar to the responses to my first question, joined-up, intelligent semiotic and marketing thinking, with a nice healthy splash of inspiration. This is the core of the semiotic community and I'm sure I have no need to name them here. But there really are not many of them.

2. Codes of holism. At a second level, there were one or two agencies, not primarily semiotics specialists, who nevertheless explained its use intelligently and soundly in terms of a holistic approach to consumers.

Semiotic analysis can pinpoint where a brand has been and, more importantly, where it can go. It examines the cultural spaces occupied by the brand in question compared to its competitors, and forms of popular culture related to

the brand sector. Above all, it allows the research to move from simplistic evaluation of data to a more holistic insight of consumer culture. (H2Partners)

This ‘holism’ category also included a couple of agencies who had reframed semiotics on their websites as ‘metaphors’ or ‘secondary data’ and had actually dropped the s. word itself. These reframers, although they showed grasp of the discipline and its value, are also instances of the tip of a much larger iceberg: the code of silence.

3. A code of silence. The prevailing code is a deafening silence about what semiotics is and does and why agencies feel they ought to add to their areas of expertise. Of the majority who include semiotics in The Guide, references to its use on their websites are either buried or virtually absent from descriptions of methodology or credentials. At the most extreme, about half do not mention it all. Most of the rest gloss over it en passant, with no context, no place in the scheme of their research thinking and clearly little real grasp of what it is and can do.

*Utilising psychology techniques such as semiotic analysis and NLP.
Training in new methods like ethnography, cultural methods and semiotics*

In the midst of the silence, however, I found this honest (and endearingly cheerful) explanation of the silence. Agency Drummond Madell introduces Simon Braier as .

The only one in the office who knows about semiotics. Will happily tell you about it.

The subtext is this - if you know about semiotics, you can ‘happily’ talk about it. If you don’t know about it, you are unable to find the language to discuss it. Which, in theory of notness, makes you ‘unhappy’ or ‘cross’ or ‘not-OK’.

And that, I think is the real challenge.

If we do not bridge the gap between the, necessarily, complex fuller understanding of the theoretical landscape needed to become a genuine practicing semiotician and the dangerous (much, much murkier) waters of over-simplification we will never produce *enough* effective, valuable, different, out-of-the-box, counter-intuitive analysis to reach critical mass.

Conversely, however, if we can develop and train good semiotic research operatives, not full-blown semioticians but empowered semiotic *researchers* we will have enough of them out there talking happily and confidently about it to make one hell of a trumpet blast.

And then those walls had better look out.

The Trumpets

What follows now is work in progress, an outline of a possible ‘what now?’ to expand the semiotic project exponentially to the point of critical mass.

First let’s recap: there is serious acknowledgement and admiration for the power and values of semiotics from people who really know of what they speak – coupled with

an intense frustration at the complexity of the theory that created the values and the power! To optimise the one we must do something about the other, without compromising, and ultimately destroying it.

It is also clear that the high profile, high-pitched noise that semiotics has made in the industry (what Andy Dexter is calling ‘share of voice and of recognition’) has come from the few practitioners for whom theory has been an inspiration and a thrilling entry point to MR. They are the same few agencies who can write and speak so comfortably about the subject. The rest, however, is silence, even from agencies who have ‘managed to rustle up from somewhere their own offer in the area’ (3)

Using the development of qualitative research as a model, Dexter hypothesises

(1)(semiotics) is working on roughly the same timescale as qual, which would imply that its usage will peak and flatten off in the next decade. (2)semiotics is building up a head of steam even more slowly, just biding its time (3) there will be a massive unforeseen acceleration in its status and market share in the next 10 years. (The Charm of Magpies, to be published, Conference 2007)

1 and 2 are outside the scope (and, indeed the spirit) of this paper. 3 is nearer my mark, except that, in the spirit of Jericho, we can’t wait for the ‘unforeseen acceleration’. We should, conversely, foresee what it can be and actively make it happen.

Making it happen – a first step commitment to training

I’ve stated above that the critical mass for semiotic acceleration will only be achieved if we can find a way to train empowered semiotic research operatives. That seems obvious, but it begs two important questions.

Firstly, the logistics and dynamics of training: who sponsors it, how does it happen?. Secondly, what do you train these semiotic researchers *in*?

Training. 1) The Logistics – a role for the MRS?

Within the industry the MRS has a clearly defined structure, process and remit for training and sponsoring best practice. It should therefore be at the forefront in the professional development of best practice in semiotic research. It is lamentable that there are no MRS qualifications in the subject, especially as semiotics has finally been listed as a research service.

That pre-supposes working out in detail what people can be qualified in other than an academic degree in some form of semiotic-based discipline, but I’m coming to that.

Training could also be co-ordinated across the sessions in which semiotics currently features. There’s a 2-day Advanced Training module on Semiotics itself and it forms part of Advanced Qualitative Thinking. In my experience, the two sessions are put together separately. That seems daft. Then there is the issue of training literature. ESOMAR already includes a chapter on semiotics in its forthcoming Market Research Handbook. The MRS has strong ties with WARC. It could use them to encourage the

commissioning and production of a guide, dedicated to training in this area. Which brings us to the second question embedded in that loaded little word – training.

Training in what?

We are not talking here about a handbook of semiotics. As Greg Rowland pointed out earlier, there is no short cut to covering this theoretical terrain. And there are already bucketloads of books on the subject. Correlatively, we are not looking to produce semioticians, but to produce semiotically aware researchers who are competent in what Monty Alexander (to whom I owe the idea) and I are calling not ‘semiotics’ but Semiotic Techniques.

Training 2) Semiotic Techniques.

What are they and what will make them a) different from what is available now and b) robust and valid as a training mechanism.

Different from what’s available now. Semiotic Techniques will be *built* on semiotic theory, but will not require the encyclopaedic knowledge that ‘semiotics’ does in order to use them. They will, however, require proper understanding of the cultural forces that drive consumers – and they will demand a learning curve in how to apply them. It just won’t be so steep.

Semiotic Techniques should jump off from theory in the way that qualitative ‘Projective’ and ‘Enabling’ techniques have done. They can thus provide a grounded analysis of the holistic socio-cultural context – and a guide to the workings of communications.

This will make them robust and valid as a training mechanism for semiotic researchers.

The aim of Semiotic Techniques is to formalise (and, yes, standardise) a level of semiotic research with which both practitioners and buyers can be comfortable – but which will deliver a genuinely different kind of findings from consumer research. For a start we could use the answers on the contribution of semiotics, quoted in the beginning of this paper, to see if they really are delivering against those benchmarks.

Let me just remind you of one or two of these deliverables.

- *A completely different way of understanding a problem or issue that helps re-frame thinking and development* (Wendy Gordon, Acacia Avenue)
- *An entirely new way of thinking...a sort of "out of the box" approach that often leads one to think differently, counter-intuitively, and surprisingly. .It leads one to think afterwards "Of Course!!"* (John Samuels)
- *It gets into that hidden, unguarded, informal space of the brand that consumers find pretty difficult to articulate.* (Claire Bodger, Leapfrog)
- *Allows you to anticipate cultural changes that will shape consumer response* (Adrienne Yentis, Unilever)

Note. I must make it clear here that I am absolutely not talking now about reinventing semiotics for the fine practitioners who have vanguarded the development of the semiotic approach and whose reputation is, rightly, based on their credibility and experience. If anything I say is useful to these semioticians, then I'm delighted, but I'm really not aiming at them

Nor, am I proposing some kind of dumbed-down 'average' semiotics. I hope I've dealt sufficiently with the dangers of simplification in this area.

No, my focus is to provide techniques for researchers (and planners and clients) who clearly want a proper semiotic toolbox — equipped with tools that are truly fit for purpose — in the same way as they might have a qual or quant toolbox. They just don't have either the time or the inclination to cover the huge (and, yes, difficult) semiotic theoretical terrain. I have met these people over and over again at ESOMAR and MRS workshops and I know they hunger for something like this.

I would hope that this toolbox comes with its own communications kit — enabling both parties in the research process to engage with the use of Semiotic Techniques and to understand the value of their output in the same seamless way they do with consumer qualitative studies.

Above all, I want to see some form of semiotics developed that operates in a post-theoretical research framework, but which stays true to the analytical approach, the uniqueness of the findings and the sparkle of the resultant ideas (albeit on a smaller, less ambitious scale).

Below, then, is a Semiotic Technique scheme for discussion. It is not set in stone. It's not set in anything, but I hope it provides food for thought and for the action that will propel semiotics if not immediately into the mainstream of MR, then, at least into some form of accelerated development towards that state.

The historical precedent

There is an inescapable parallel between the development of semiotics in MR and that of qualitative research.

Both were developed in response to realisation within the marketing industry that existing epistemologies and practices could not provide the fullest understanding of consumer decisions — or, indeed, consumption itself.

It was inevitable that at a certain point in the evolution of the idea of applying positivist social science principles to business problem solving we would arrive at a point where it was realised that operating in tight methodological silos would not provide the broader contextual understanding needed to make sense of evermore complex commercial problems and issues. So, the door was opened for semiotics to claim its rightful place in the nobility of how we understand things (David Smith, DVL Smith Group)

All along there was a parallel body of evidence and thought that this might not actually be the whole story: that the evidence we gathered as researchers from people's answers and accounts didn't anywhere near fully explain their behaviour, nor the influences on their mindsets, perceptions and interactions with brands and the symbols of consumer culture (Simon Lidington, The Insight Exchange)

And both met with considerable resistance along the way, quite a long way along the way. Gerald de Groot's famous alliterative broadside 'New, Noxious or Nebulous' was fired at the 1987 MRS Conference, when qualitative agencies had certainly already achieved 'critical mass'.

The resistance to semiotics is, of course, a given of this paper.

What interests me mostly, however, is the fact that both semiotics and qual have their genesis in a rigorous theory: Mike Imms' 1999 paper on the 'roots and theoretical bases of qualitative market research in the UK' covers this most thoroughly.

The difference, however, is this. Semiotics is perceptually still located within its hostile theoretical parameters. Qualitative research, on the other hand, has transformed itself into good old 'qual' by developing user-friendly models, which do originally spring from theory but are now part of research popular culture.

As Stephen Hawking noted, in conversation with John Humphrys

A good theory is one that explains a wide range of observations on the basis of an elegant model and makes definite predictions for new measurements.
Stephen Hawking, Today programme

The speech bubble- an elegant model

The speech bubble plays this out this elegance perfectly.

It signifies the *raison d'être* of the whole qual project and, not coincidentally, of planning, giving marketing the true voice of the consumer

I think clients still look to research as a science, and see the words that come from consumers mouths as somewhat 'pure' and representative of truth

And certainly it offers 'definite predictions for new dimensions'. What else is an 'insight'?

Symbolically, it also enacts the process of the group discussion or depth interview. It is both metaphor for the 'truth' ascribed to consumer voices and metonymy in that it stands in for the whole process of qualitative research itself.

The speech bubble makes concrete all the abstract psychological theories of motivation and behaviour that underpin the qualitative enterprise.

In the industry, it is the model of thinking behind the concept of ‘consumer insight’, always at its most powerful when expressed as a ‘truth’ dropped from the lips of the consumer herself.

And there is certainly argument for the notion that ethnography is more acceptable a new methodology than semiotics because it is closer to ‘listening to/watching’ people talking.

Not ‘speech’ but ‘language

While I am not suggesting, at least not in this paper, ideas for a *symbol* that would work in the same way, there is an important, if lateral, connection to be made between speech and language.

Communications also have a ‘voice’, they ‘speak’, but they do it in a different ‘language’ from the human spoken word.

Brands have a language, so do ads and packs, retail outlets and websites, And within this over-arching idea, we can find dozens of different languages making up the whole utterance: the language/s of colour, form, music, genre, narrative, metaphor. These languages constitute what we all now understand as ‘the codes of communication’.

For the first time, with semiotics, we were looking not just at consumers but at language and it seemed to me that this capability had the potential to reframe the whole business of understanding consumers and bringing innovation
(Evans and Maggio-Muller, Op Cit)

Brand communication consists of multiple and layered messages that are not consciously absorbed by human beings. There is meaning and message in the ‘how’ not only the ‘what’ of any and every communication (email response)

And therein lies the whole rationale for semiotics and for these developing Semiotic Techniques. Consumers can tell you *what* a communication means, you need Semiotic Techniques to understand *how* that meaning is being produced.

But this is not a paper about the rationale for semiotics. Been there, done that, got all the T shirts (although I think it does no harm to restate the fundamental principles). It is, however, a paper about making the ‘how’ of meaning a core MR methodology

How communications make meaning – the basic elements

Encoded Language/s
Cultural Context
Metaphor
Narrative
Myth

This list should be used as a theoretical starter-pack for developing what I would say are the fundamental, *sine qua non* of Semiotic Techniques. I know you cannot do the

job without them and I believe you could do a highly professional, exciting and surprisingly insightful job with them

So the starter-pack of Techniques becomes:

Language Decoding
Cultural Context Interrogation
Metaphor Mining
Narrative Analysis
Myth-Making

In the interests of transparency and accessibility, I suggest we create a vocabulary for these techniques standardised throughout the industry. In that way we can nurture comfort through familiarity and eschew mystique. Rob Thomas makes the point that ‘more and more marketers who’ve tried semiotics are comfortable with talking about ‘codes’ etc’.

So the more we all use the same names for these techniques (those above will serve for this paper) the more comfortable both sides of the research parties will be. Again, a precedent in qualitative research: Group Discussions, or Focus Groups, have become ‘groups’; Depth Interviews have become ‘depths’ – and everyone knows what is being talked about. Taking control of language is in itself a mechanic for empowerment. The raw anger of the replies to my question 2 was an indication of a sense of disempowerment.

So I would argue strongly familiarity engenders control. The language of the Semiotic Technique vocabulary mustn’t be arcane. I think we’ve learnt that lesson.

There was a certain amount of intoxication with theory. And why not? It was exciting to be able to mention Kant when discussing Beauty, or Propp’s narrative functions to discuss an ad.

But the names should be technically accurate (as Group Discussion is) and, more importantly, constant.

Standardisation. Bog, no – practice, yes

I am coming to believe Semiotic Techniques offer an opportunity for standardisation that does not exist in full semiotics (and maybe nor should it) which could give us a way forward into transparency and sharing.

It is, however, important to hammer home the critical difference between bog-standard and ‘standard practice’.

There is a tendency in some semiotic MR which one could describe as ‘bog-standard’ in the same way one could describe some qualitative research. Just reportage, without analysis or interpretation. Anyone, for instance, could look at the bottled water category and note that the packs tend to be transparent and the colour blue.

It is the recognition that what is going on are *language/s of transparency and 'blueness' referencing particular cultural meanings, related to the symbolism of 'water' in society* that lifts the semiotic analysis out of the standard bog.

Reading the language plays out like this. The majority of the packs use the same of codes of transparency and that particular hue of blue (even Evian's pink is in the same register). There is also a predominate use of water origin-symbols in the ground or under mountains, with their overtones of ancient sacred sites. The way all the languages hang together on the same cultural frame makes them into a code of mystical purity¹.

It should therefore be 'standard practice' in Semiotic Techniques to first of all look for patterns of different languages across any body of communications, and connect them **as a whole** to the cultural contexts that create their meanings.

I'll return to the idea of standard practice, which is central to the development of Semiotic Techniques, but there is one further point on standardisation in general that should be made here.

I do not believe one can 'standardise' the *ability* of semiotic researchers any more than any other kind. There will be people who will be more adept at using Semiotic Techniques than others and some for whom these are ways of maximising something they might have encountered in an academic framework. There will be those who are more creative in taking the findings on to recommendations and others who become deeply interested in the subject and want to go on and learn more so they can join the band of semioticians. Semiotic Techniques will throw up 'true treasures' just as consumer research does.

But for the start, standard practice, to a set of agreed and rigorous objectives will give us an accountability lacking across the full semiotic arena at the moment, and, particularly amongst the 'rustlers up of some version of the area'.

Setting the parameters for standard practice in Semiotic Techniques

1. Project design

Designing a semiotic project is, in the first instance a practical issue. The techniques, indeed, the whole methodological thrust, presupposes a corpus of communications for analysis. That is the core of the design and it has to be formalised. Again, qualitative research gives us a good model in the Group format.

A Group Discussion, irrespective of the skill or style with which it is moderated and subsequently interpreted, or, indeed, whether it's called a Focus or Discussion 'Group' has a pretty regular format, what the incomparable Gill Ereaut called 'the widget' structure.

¹ A good description of languages hanging together as codes can be found in 'Decoding Competitive Propositions: a semiotic alternative to traditional advertising research', Evans/Harvey, MRS Conference 2001

- A normative number of 6-8 respondents
- A clear framework for gathering those respondents together (the sample structure)

Semiotic Techniques could well adapt this format.

A project should have

- A normative number of ads, packs, retail outlets etc to analyse
- A clear framework for gathering those materials together

I don't think we can prescribe exactly the *number* of ads, packs, retail outlets, websites etc to be analysed. It will depend on the project. We can, however, lay down a quite precise framework for the *kind* of materials the corpus will comprise.

This framework is the 'context' of communications and culture in which products, brands and services live. 'Context', if you like, is the semiotic technique version of 'the sample'.

'*Who do we want to talk to*' becomes '*what do we want to look at*'.

What are contexts?

Monty Alexander's paper Codes and Contexts (MRS Conference 2000) gives a detailed description of contexts and their importance to decoding communications, here's an (edited) extract to make the point about the mechanics of semiotic project design.

Our perceptions of any brand or product are focused or modified by all the contexts that include it or impinge on it in any way

Let's suppose we were analysing, for example, Famous Grouse whisky. Which would we identify as providing its main contextualising influences?

Famous Grouse itself

As much as possible of Famous Grouse advertising and packaging

Key competitors

Advertising/packaging of those key competitors

Spirits sector

Samples of relevant articles from the drinks trade press, special industry features/commentators from the national press, etc

Popular culture

Sample relevant extracts from TV soaps, documentaries, tabloid press; observation in pubs, off-licences, supermarkets, etc

This model holds good whatever the focus of the analysis

Packaging analysis contexts

- *For new pack development*, contexts would include the brand, the old pack, the new pack ideas and close competition
- *For line extension* the contexts would comprise all the above, plus packs from the putative new product area.

It's important in both situations to widen the context to include the current brand and competitive advertising. You won't see the fit unless you do.

Retail analysis contexts

- Representative outlets for the brand; competitive brand outlets; peripheral brands (Peripheral brands will differ according to the retail area. For instance, food supermarkets also operate now in the context of eating out. Furniture retail lives in the context of homecraft; drugstores in the context of beauty salons...and so on.)
- Own brand packaging will also provide a context, as will advertising for the main brand and close competition.

Category analysis contexts

Let's take the confectionery category, looking at prevailing codes to try to highlight NPD opportunities. In this instance, the contexts will comprise:

- Leading confectionery brands in the sub-category (boxed chocolates, children's confectionery, countlines etc) advertising, packaging, websites
- Other confectionery categories
- 'Share of purse' competition – snacks, soft drinks, magazines, ice creams, yoghurts
- Popular cultural treatments of confectionery, treats, non-essential foods
- The healthy/non-health cultural debate

Brand contexts

- Brand communications: ads, packs, POS, website
- the same for the closest competition;
- an overview of other important brands in the category
- merchandising in major retail outlets for the brand
- examples of how popular culture treats the category – a dip into non-marketing media: eg broadcast and print editorial; the category on the net; songs, jokes.

This design format makes two key points about standardising without 'dumbing-down'.

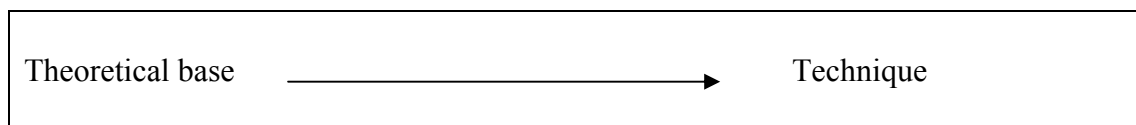
Context is not an arbitrary framework for setting up the materials to be analysed. It is soundly grounded in semiotic theory. And yet it can be understood in a commonsensical way.

Theory has to be an integral part of all Semiotic Techniques. We cannot lose sight of theory altogether, even if we create techniques that jump off from its complex and labyrinthine ways of thinking. As Imms says of qual's basis in 'theories of human behaviour and motivation (that) orientate enquiry and form the basis of analysis and interpretation'

Without some such conceptual framework for analysis, findings can be little more than 'reportage' (Op Cit)

2. Standardising ‘Semiotic Techniques’ – jumping off from theory.

A basic format



An actual example – The Progression of the Codes

I’ve chosen this as an example of how semiotics techniques can ‘jump off’ from theory without losing the integrity of the thinking that inspired them because, of all the outputs of semiotics over the past 20-odd years, this model seems to have been widely accepted as a ‘truth’ above all others. It is the Residual, Dominant, Emergent Codes model adapted by Semiotic Solutions from the work of the great culturalist, Raymond Williams. Let me borrow here from another of Alexander’s papers in which he sets out the premise.

Residual codes are those now past or passing their sell-by dates. One might also say residual codes, Ambassador, are often the subject of irony.

Dominant codes are those now in full flow(eg mobile phones, iPods, reality TV)

Emergent codes are the ones just beginning to make themselves felt; but particularly important in that they include tomorrow’s candidates for the dominant role . Climate Consciousness is in the emergent, trying to be dominant, bracket and the simple life is perhaps another. (As Above, So Below, MRS Conference, 2003)

Now, I know this isn’t a new concept. I’m not aiming for ‘newness’, but to understand what of the *current* semiotic output can be most successfully adapted for teachable, valuable, insight-delivering Semiotic Techniques. (It may well be, indeed, hopefully it will be, that someone else will take up the baton and run with it, producing new techniques out of new interpretations of theory, but that is not the aim of this paper)

In that sense, then, it’s worth looking at why the progression of the codes has been so universally accepted and seems to have transcended its theoretical foundation.

Predictability – a semiotic point of difference

There is no question that looking for the most fertile ground for future development has become more and more important for marketing and brand owners. It’s also undoubtedly true consumers are not futurologists. Why should they be? It is not their job. But what consumers cannot do, semiotics can.

I do not want to rehearse the whole protocol of analysing historically here, but it deserves a few lines. It is certainly an important Semiotic Technique and one which should be legislated for in any major project. The practicalities are easy to lay out, they just require a bit of effort to achieve.

Going back to the design model, let us factor in historical analysis:

The (historical) Brand contexts

-Brand communications: ads, packs, POS, website

-the same for the closest competition

Brand communications and closest competition to include historical examples, going back at least 5 years

Most clients have archives, most ad agencies have historical reels. The archive houses will sell historical stuff. And the History of Advertising Trust has a library of historical materials.

The big picture – the one the consumer doesn't see

Monty makes the point that tracing the progression of codes in products and brands can highlight shifts in culture that will influence trends and fashions. The development of feminine shapes of cars is indicative of a feminisation throughout culture, for instance. In the paper on 'Female Attractiveness' referred to earlier, the authors pointed out 'the major surprise finding' was an unexpected congruence between men and women in their attitudes to female imagery. Had they applied the code progression technique, they might have identified this as the emergence of feminisation.

Cultural trends, however, do not operate in isolation. Lawes and Alexander both show how emergent codes in one sector can show up in another; correspondences which indicate a genuine shift in attitudes, values and beliefs.

People, particularly in a research situation, do not see this big picture, at least until it has become dominant. The opportunity to leverage emergent trends by applying code progression techniques can therefore be lost.

The code progression – a British School of Semiotics?

Semiotician Alex Gordon has suggested that the analysis of code progression 'has become the acknowledged heart of the British School (of semiotics)' (5).

While I wouldn't altogether agree with Gordon, I do think his assertion gives us some indication of just why the UK research community seem to be able to accept the code progression so easily. The British privileging of empiricism over intellectualism is a well-known national trait. The code progressions are a verifiable, empirically observable phenomenon. And they are a concrete example of the fact that there are codes in the first place.

Moreover, the concept of code progression plays to a commonsense view of the world enshrined in popular culture. The times, as Bob Dylan has it, they are a-changing and fings are never what they used to be. Laddishness waxes and wanes, Jamie changes the cooking codes from stir, simmer and emulsify to slurp, bung and whoosh and Woman's Weekly gives way to Hello.

Interestingly the most difficult of the elements of code progression to explain and deal with are the dominant. That is, of course, because they are most deeply hidden in cultural assumptions. (*That's not a code, that's what is!*) Residual codes can be seen to be out of tune with prevailing cultural thought. You can hear it in the language. 'Gas-guzzling' 4x4's are possibly getting ready for residualisation. Emergent codes are clearly a surprising new way of looking at a product or service. Dominant codes have to be decoded with a greater, more forensic battery of Semiotic Techniques.

Nonetheless, the progression of the codes provides an excellent illustration of theory metamorphosing into semiotic technique

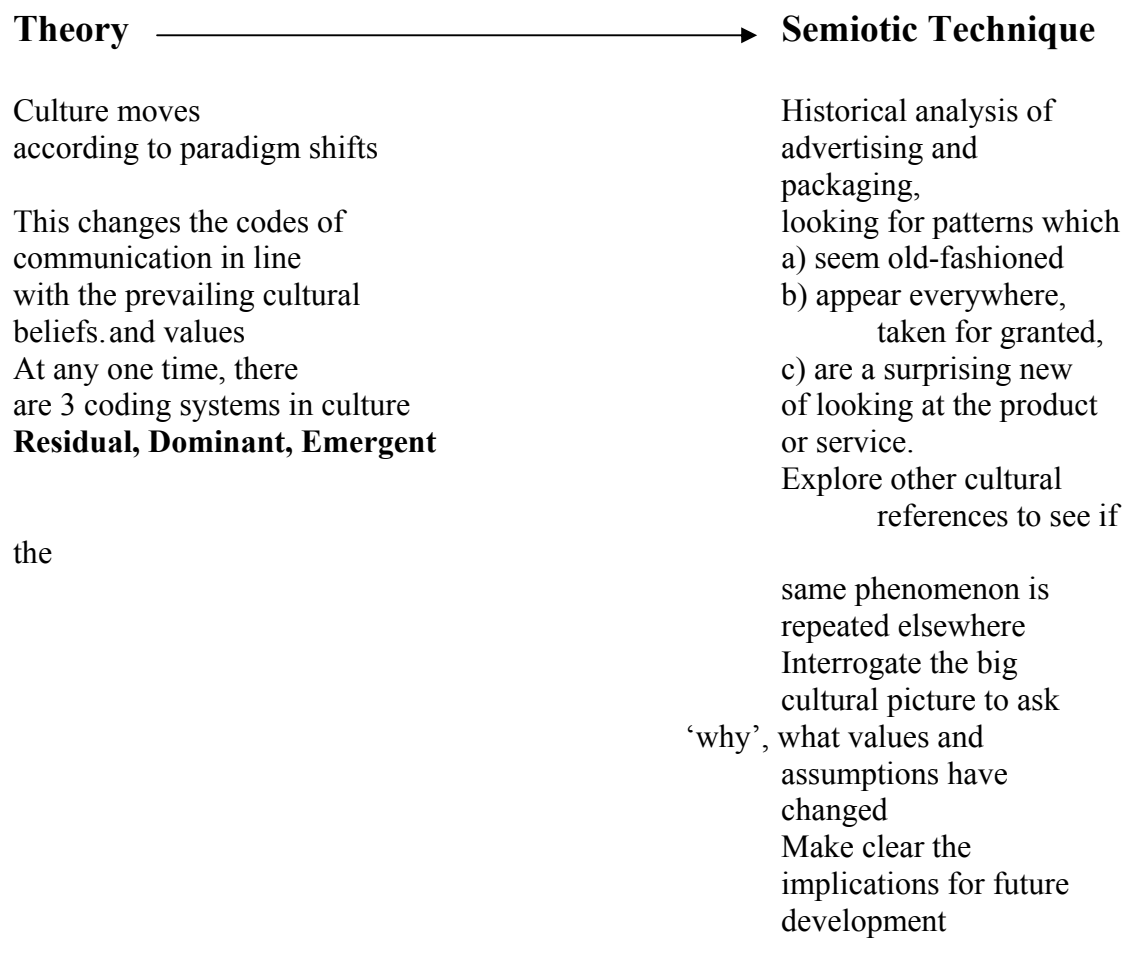
It's accessible, apparently empirical, theoretically sound – and each phase of coding can be decoded by interrogating the cultural context. Look at this example from Rachel Lawes paper 'Demystifying Semiotics'.

*Firstly, gold is not the reliable sign for luxury that it once was. It is gradually becoming **lapsed**. Take biscuits. In the world of biscuits gold communicates luxury in a quite downmarket way. Mass market 'luxury' products use very bright, shiny gold on their packaging and the biscuits themselves are likely to be covered in very thick chocolate, or have extra jam inside or whatever. There's a theme going on here, to do with excess and abundance. Bright, shiny gold is just one element of that. If you look at biscuits that are very upmarket there's a contrasting theme of understatement and restraint. Really upmarket biscuits are much more likely to be half-dipped in chocolate than thickly coated, and they are currently being packaged in quite unexpected materials such as corrugated cardboard in subdued, natural colours.*

Lawes looked at 'gold' as part of a wider coding system of the product excess that characterises contemporary mass consumption, not simply of biscuits, but of the whole modern food and snack offer. A cultural code of mass 'have-ability', hidden in bright shiny gold and thick chocolate. You can work out for yourself what assumptions are buried in the contrasting code of upmarket understatement. But, if she hadn't looked across the whole biscuit context historically and seen how the codes of *upmarket* luxury biscuits were changing she wouldn't have picked up on its effect on the assumptions of the flashy gold *downmarket* packs and their conspicuously consumed contents.

Code change also reveals the correspondences across sectors: corrugated cardboard or simple, 'natural' materials are not simply a feature of upmarket biscuits, they also appear in cosmetics and fashion. This indicates a bigger shift of values throughout culture (cf Alexander, As Above, So Below, MRS Conference 2003)

In diagrammatic form then, The Code Progression Technique looks like this



This rigour must inform the creation of all Semiotic Techniques, ie: the theoretical ground must be clear and its transformation into technique easy to understand.

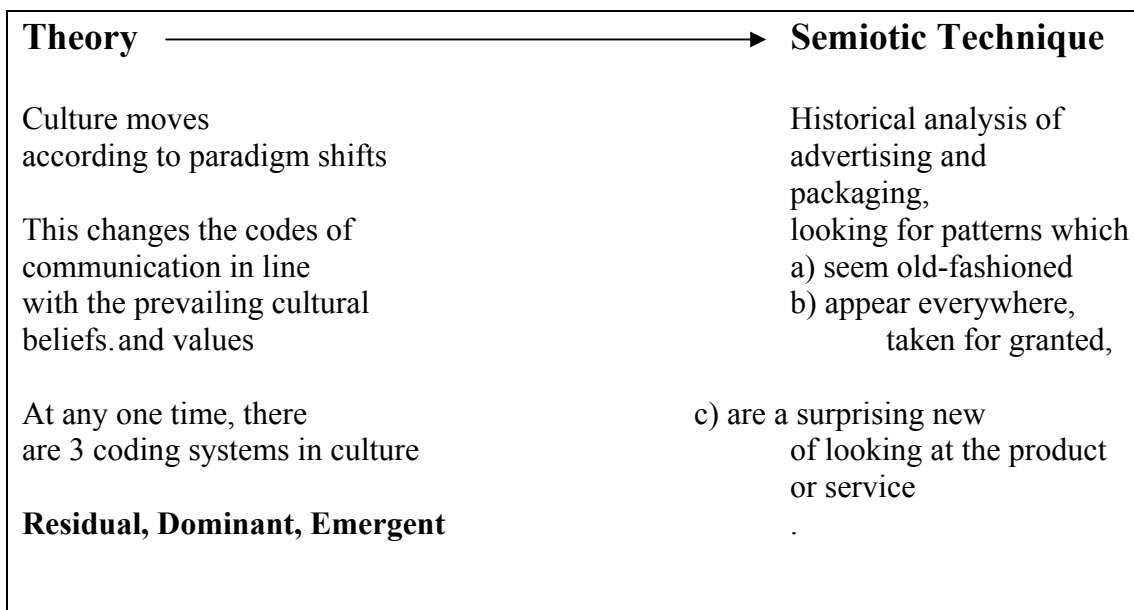
For several reasons:

1. Clients can be assured they are getting robust semiotic interpretation
2. The prevailing language is of the Technique NOT the theory, but the theory underpins the Technique
3. There is a transparency to the analytical process
4. No technique can be taught on any kind of accredited course without a sound theoretical basis
5. Candidates could be examined on the underlying theory for achieving qualifications

1 is a result of the guiding principle of a standardised theory-into-technique. 2 is result of developing a standard vocabulary that is accurate but accessible, both of which I’ve already discussed. 3 is in the paradigm of 1 and 2.

4 and 5 are slightly different. They are a matter of teaching to best practice standards.

If we expand the Codes Progression diagram a little we can see how this works



That obviously isn't meant to be an academic bibliography, more a demonstration of building a semiotic technique training module incorporating some required reading to ensure standard practice embodies a serious level of understanding.

The key point is that, although some reading is strongly suggested, required in any qualification, it would be focused and *contained*. Semiotic researchers really do not have to cover everything from Athusser to Zizik, but they do have to get their heads around the body of work that has **applied** theory to the everyday issues and problems of marketing and market research. And understand it!

After all, everything that has been achieved in semiotics has been through a version of exactly that process. We just haven't yet turned it into 'rules' that can be adopted by other non-semiotic practitioners. Because it is those rules that make a methodology mainstream. You can break rules to go onto the next stage; adapt them for more creativity; become an expert at them and play better than anyone else. But if you ain't got the rules, you ain't got a game that enough people can play. The only proviso I think being they have a talent for it. But that goes for any good research.

Malcolm Evans' and Katja Maggio-Muller's paper on creating a semiotic capability for P&G makes the same point.

The theme behind all this is logic, linearity, trying to make highly intuitive and creative processes accessible as protocols or rules (Op cit)

I think this is the key: anyone can't blithely pitch in and use Semiotic Techniques any more than anyone can 'do' semiotics. There are rules, the Techniques must work to those rules and so, indeed, must the technician. But the protocols can be taught and therefore learned and ultimately, put into practice.

What now?

I came into this project with a question. Why has semiotics, in spite of its ‘share of voice and recognition’ had never made the mainstream as a core MR methodology.

I discovered a paradox.

Some serious acknowledgement and admiration for the power and values of semiotics – coupled with an intense frustration at the complexity of the theory that provides the values and the power!

It was clear that to make it even possible for semiotics to achieve the acceleration to propel it into mainstream, we have to optimise the power, but also do something about the hostility aroused by the theory. Without compromising and ultimately destroying it, of course.

In the light of this I’ve put forward a (tentative) scheme for the development of Semiotic Techniques which can form a standardised methodology. The scheme is the first step in what I hope will be a robust, involving and productive debate on the following suggestions.

- These techniques will be built on semiotic theory but will not require a full knowledge of semiotics to put them into practice nor to commission studies using them.
- They will demand, however, serious attention to the difference between a semiotic approach and other research forms.
- To this end, each technique will be based on a theoretical precept, distilled into grounded practice – they’ll act as modules for training.
- Their aim is to provide a grounded analysis of the socio-cultural context that is the holistic consumer framework – and a guide to the workings of communications
- They must be able to deliver against the powerful benchmarks of semiotics’ contribution to marketing and strategic planning
- The techniques as suggested in this paper will cover:
 - Language Decoding
 - Cultural Context Interrogation (including changing codes)
 - Metaphor Mining
 - Narrative Analysis
 - Myth-Making
- In the interests of transparency, clarity and accessibility, the eventual names for Semiotic Techniques should be standardised.
- The MRS might think about including qualifications in Semiotic Techniques and also become involved in a more focused training scheme
- Semiotic Techniques should also become an acknowledged research service

At this stage I have no conclusions to offer, only the idea of Semiotic Techniques as a way of breaking down the ‘walls’ – overcoming the undoubted resistance to the difficulty of theory threatening to stop semiotics accelerating into a mainstream methodology.

I do, however, have a fervent hope that it won’t stop with the idea.

And I also have this trumpet blast

I came into Semiotic Solutions, knowing very little about semiotics. I learned my semiotics via practical step-by-step techniques I picked up from Ginny: codes first, contexts and their interactive influence. Later I learned about metaphor and myth and paradigm shifts. Eventually the 'toolbox' acquired from these practical techniques (added to my marketing and creative experience) enabled me to consult on a semiotic practitioner level with clients in every sphere of business - and, incidentally to win a Conference Best Paper. (Monty Alexander, Semiotic Solutions)

Acknowledgements

I am truly indebted to the following for the generosity of their response.
Thank you very much

Anna Alu, Tina Berry, Claire Bodger, John Burke, Peter Cooper, Natasha Delliston, Andy Dexter, Paul Edwards, Malcolm Evans, Sally Ford-Hutchinson, Roddy Glen, Wendy Gordon, Mike Imms, Wendy Lanchin, Simon Lidington, Janet Nash, Liz Nelson, Stephen Pickthall, Greg Rowland, John Samuels, David Smith, Michael Thomas, Rob Thomas, Phyllis Vangelder and Adrienne Yentis.

Notes

1. BIG TALK, Small Talk (Alexander M, Burt M, Gower C)
MRS Conference Best Paper 1995
2. De-mystifying Semiotics: some key questions answered (Lawes R)
MRS Conference, Chairman's Award 2002
3. Culture, communications and business: the power of advanced semiotics (Evans M, Maggio-Muller K) *MRS Conference Best Paper 2006*

References

- Alexander Monty, Burt Max, Gower Charlie (1995) *BIG TALK, Small Talk* MRS Conference
Alexander Monty (2000) *Codes and Contexts*, MRS Conference
Alexander Monty (2003) *As Above, So Below*, MRS Conference
De Groot Gerald (1987) *New, Noxious or Nebulous* MRS Conference
Evans, Malcolm and Hervey Michael, *Decoding competitive propositions: a semiotic alternative to traditional advertising research*, IJMR, Vol 43 No 2, 2001
Evans Malcolm and Maggio-Muller Katja, (2006) *Culture, communications and business: the power of advanced semiotics* MRS Conference
Goodyear John (1977) *The Impact of Economic Growth and Recession on Qualitative Research Agencies and the Use of Qualitative Research*, MRS Conference
Gordon Alex, (2003) *Signs and Wonders: the transformative power of international semiotics*. ESOMAR Qualitative Seminar

Imms Mike (1999) *A reassessment of the roots and theoretical basis of qualitative research in the UK*, MRS Conference
Lawes Rachel, *De-mystifying Semiotics: some key questions answered*
IJMR Vol 44, No 3, 2002
Mulholland Heather and Harrison Mark (1988) *Defining Female Attractiveness: A Semiotic Approach*, MRS Conference
Market Research Society, *Research Buyers Guide*, 2006
Williams Raymond (1977) *Marxism and Literature*, OUP, Oxford