

RESEARCH



QUALITATIVE SEMIOTICS FOR CX

We're fascinated by the potential of qualitative semiotics, and Chris Barnham's article does a really good job of explaining what it is, how it works, and how you can use it to explore the way consumers build their images of brands. In this short article, I want to look at how that same approach might be used when thinking about the way meaning is created in the customer experience.

A world of meaning

“Man lives in a world of meaning”

– George Herbert Mead

Semiotics is a tool you can use with customer insight to help you interpret why customers are thinking and feeling the way they do, and therefore to help you design experiences that work better for everyone. We live in a world of meaning, and I'll argue that we have to understand how that meaning is created and communicated in order to design effectively.

Semiotics is often taken to be something that is focused on consumer markets, particularly FMCG, but actually it's important in business to business markets as well, and in the public sector. Semiotics comes into play whenever we're trying to understand how meaning is communicated.

Semiotics, from my perspective, is about studying how we communicate meaning to each other, and "meaning" is the crucial word. It's a word that's central to culture, to design thinking, storytelling, and customer experience. Semiotics helps you understand meaning.

Meaning in Customer Experience

What has all this got to do with customers? It's a skeleton key that unlocks a whole load



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of other aspects of the customer experience that can otherwise seem quite mysterious. Let's start with our most used quote:

“Perception is reality”

– Tom Peters

Taking a semiotic approach to the customer experience makes this hard-won truism immediately obvious. Reality, for the customer, is their interpretation of what they see, the meaning they derive from it. Another way of thinking about it might be “reality is perception” – all any of us knows about the world around us is based on the work our brains do to extract meaning from the signals pouring in through our senses.

Semiotics also helps to explain the idea of the "total customer experience", and why small details can have such a profound effect on the emotional experience for the customer. When you understand that every little clue in the environment, every choice of word, or image, or typeface, conveys meaning, then it begins to make a lot more sense why process maps have so little to do with what customers actually experience.

Using Semiotics in Customer Experience

With so much to consider, where do you start? The most important point is that what you say, and even what you intend, is only part of what influences how the customer feels about you. There are thousands of small moments in your relationship with customers that should be examined with this meaning-making lens to see how they might

be working from the other side.

In order to get all the details right, you need to put together a clear sense of the experiences you want to create with an understanding of customers that will help you to know how to do it. It's something that is at the heart of "design thinking", and I think taking a semiotic view of the customer experience goes hand in hand with good service design thinking.

One famous piece of research, described in Gerald Zaltman's book "How Customers Think", found that removing the clock from a waiting room wall made a big difference to customer satisfaction with the waiting time, because it took away a subconscious cue that was making customers feel that the wait time was longer than it really was.

This is a great example of something which customers would never ask for. So how do you spot things like this? Well the first step is to go to where the experience is happening, and you might happen to think of it. But more systematically, the answer is to analyse the environment with a semiotic eye.

What signs are operating here? What concepts may those signs trigger? What potential layers of meaning do they have?

You need to talk to customers to understand this, but talking to them isn't enough. If customer insight, particularly qualitative insight, is going to be of any value at all we have to do this type of interpretation, and it's helpful to work within a framework to give us structure (what Wendy Gordon calls "mindframes").

To get communication and customer experiences to work as well as possible, you need to understand the meaning that is currently being created for customers, and how and why that's happening.

By analysing meaning, qualitative semiotics can help you understand and improve the customer experience.

Our free webinar on Semiotics & CX is available at <https://www.tlresearch.com/webinar-semiotics-cx/>