

Marketing in Food, Hospitality, Tourism and Events

A Critical Approach

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The Semiotics of Experience

■ Introduction

This chapter examines how signs and sign systems, are utilised in marketing to give meaning and award value(s) to tourism, hospitality, events and food (THEF) products, activities and experiences. It also seeks to portray the dominant semiotic codes and signifiers presently operative in each of these sectors. This chapter will draw to a close with a critical examination of the power effects of these representation systems and practices. The meaning production process, which has its roots in the structural linguistic science and philosophy of semiotics is recognised as an integral and fundamental constituent of marketing practice (e.g. McCracken 1986; Mick *et al.* 2004; Mick and Oswald 2006; Oswald 2012). It is integral to the marketing communication process, the meaning of products and brands, the design and configuration of servicescapes and retail environment and, market segmentation and positioning more generally. By examining the semiotic structure that constitutes the various forms of marketing practice, objects and materials that are located and utilised within our sectors, it is possible to identify a semiotic language, or code, that is used by marketers and frames marketing practice. These meanings are intended to be read and understood by the consumer and other marketplace stakeholders for the purpose of achieving numerous marketing goals and ends. What is more, it is also considered to be essential to the understand-

ing of specific consumption practices within the THEF sectors and consumer behaviour generally. This is based upon the premise that consumers exist within a semiotic system of signs, they resultantly become integral nodes within this system and, are compelled into thinking and behaving symbolically. That is they symbolically interact in the world socially and experientially, they interact with symbolic products, engage in symbolic activities and engage in symbolic experiences.

■ Semiotics and the significance of signs

Semiotics is very simply the study of signs and systems of representation.

Signs are *simply* anything that stands for something (its object/*referent*), to somebody (interpreter), in some respect (its context, *i.e. in an advert, label, package, servicescape or retail environment*).

(Mick 1986: 198, emphasis added)

Therefore, as consumers or citizens we are all amateur semioticians. We are surrounded by signs from the moment we awaken in the morning until we go to bed at night, signs essentially make the world intelligible and meaningful to us, they tell us when we can cross the road, which door to use and how we can exit a building. In the main we all understand the meaning of these sorts of signs, this is possible because we read, interpret and comprehend them. Comprehension in this case is made possible from belonging to a shared cultural context and system of meaning that frames and directs our reading and understanding. In the literature this context is sometimes referred to as the code (e.g. Alexander 2000; McCracken and Roth 1989; Holt and Cameron 2010) or a cultural template (Thompson and Arsel 2004). Essentially these codes or templates provide an interpretive or organising framework through which signs make sense and, things in the world come to have personal and social significance. A good example of this is to think about a