Opportunities in multisensory marketing

Understanding the science behind how the senses interact with one another enables marketers to effect positive sensory fusions that improve brand attention and attraction to consumers

Ask consumers to define ‘what is advertising’ and you will inevitably be bombarded with a series of synonyms related to vision: ‘what I see’, ‘TV commercials’, ‘pictures and stories I read on the internet or my mobile’, ‘those billboards that try and grab your attention in the streets and malls’. This is perhaps not surprising given the marketing industry’s past love affair with the sense of sight.

In today’s digital environment, it is conservatively estimated that the average adult is exposed to no fewer than 200 visual advertising messages a day; that’s just over 70,000 a year. Yet most of these optical communiqués will fail to break through the fiercely competitive visual environment and elicit anything more than a cursory few milliseconds of processing by consumers’ brains – insufficient for effective encoding. In short, most visual marketing messages are destined to crash and burn in the buzzing confusion that now characterises our visual world. So why have we found ourselves in this situation and what can be done about it?

Humans are inherently a visually dependent species. Over a third of the human cortex – the brain surface – is dedicated to processing visual information and we tend to rely on our sense of vision to a far greater extent than any other sensory modality. Perhaps that’s why we have focused our attention on visual experiences as the most effective way of communicating with consumers at the expense of our other senses.

In recent years, scientists have begun to understand the way in which the senses interact with one another in the brain to influence our perception of everything, from the food on our plates to the environments in which we live and work. What we now know is that the senses of sound, smell, taste and touch have a far greater influence on our perception than we are conscious of – and yet each provides a unique, currently uncluttered, sensory channel by which to communicate core brand values and product benefits.

Multisensory marketing refers to marketing activity that seeks to engage with consumers across multiple sensory channels in order to influence their perception, judgment and behaviour. By creating novel sensory triggers that typically connect with consumers at a subconscious level, marketers can cut through the morass of explicit (typically visual) advertising messages to provoke more effective positive brand associations in the minds of their consumers. Furthermore, these sensory triggers may result in consumers’ self-generation of desirable brand attributes, both sensory and abstract, rather than those provided explicitly by the advertiser.

The rising interest in multisensory marketing has serious implications for marketers and advertisers alike. Create the right multisensory mix and you can deliver superior experiences for consumers that far outperform any single sensory broadcast alone – providing huge competitive advantage. Changing the visual sheen on towelling can make it ‘feel’ dramatically softer; make packaging ‘loud’ and crisps will ‘taste’ much crunchier and, hence, fresher. Boxes that encase luxury items are expected to close with an indulgent ‘tock’ and not a ‘click’ or ‘cling’ – thus increasing our perception of the value and quality of the product enclosed.

Film producers, too, have long been aware that a film’s soundtrack can make or break a hopeful Hollywood blockbuster. And there’s the rub – effect the wrong cross-sensory combination and the results can be disastrous. So how can you exploit these vital multisensory channels without jeopardising a brand’s relationship with its consumers?

Recently, scientists have uncovered the rules behind multisensory integration, including how to effect positive sensory fusions to gain a competitive edge, but also how to avoid multisensory clashes. It turns out that when two or more sensory events occur at the same time and place, the brain typically categorises them as a single integrated experience. This is highly advantageous in terms of attracting attention because the fusion of different sensory cues increases the detection and discrimination of the event itself. The phenomenon is called ‘super-additivity’ and refers to the fact that the resulting multisensory experience is greater than the sum of the individual sensory parts. It largely explains why audiovisual communications are often more easily encoded, recalled and
understood than solely visual or sound-based messages – providing, that is, the information is also perceived as ‘congruent’. If you have ever watched a foreign movie in which English is dubbed over the soundtrack, you may have noticed that the incongruent lip and mouth movements of the actors is much more difficult to understand what’s being said, even though the soundtrack is in fact perfectly clear. Here, the ‘incongruent’ auditory and visual speech cues clash with one another, resulting in an uncomfortable or irritating experience for the viewer.

Importantly, these same multisensory principles apply across other sensory combinations and have an equally potent impact on preference and liking – as many companies have discovered to their dismay. Imbuing an otherwise popular product with a subjectively incongruent aroma, colour or pack design can decrease consumers’ liking for the product to a rating score well below that obtained for any of the individual sensory components alone.

In the case of a pasta sauce launched by a well-known global FMCG company several years ago, focus group and quantitative data obtained on the product, packaging and pack design each returned a remarkably high score, providing the justification required to proceed to launch. Much to their disbelieve, the product failed to meet anything like the return on investment expected and was pulled from the shelves. A subsequent investigation of what went wrong revealed that despite the positive support attained for each component individually at pre-testing, when respondents were subsequently required to rate the product for the same brand in the visual domain, while playing either French or German music above the wine sales influenced the sale of French or German wines respectively, even though shoppers reported being completely unaware of any music being played over head.

By the early 1990s, brands were developing patented signature tunes designed to enhance the emotional appeal of the brand and evoke more immediate brand recognition when TV sets were on but viewers were in the kitchen brewing tea during ad breaks. Signature tunes also provided the flexibility that advertisers required to create many different campaigns for the same brand in the visual domain, while with multisensory, all the sensory channels are used to tell a brand story. A good case in point was the advertising campaign of the Flower Duet from Delibes’ opera Lakmé as its theme tune in the early 1990s and which was subsequently played across a number of different campaigns. Mobile phone and software companies too were beginning to cash in on the value of sound space. Who can forget the iconic signature tunes being played overhead. In pubs, clubs and bars across the world, brands are exploiting new multisensory technologies that allow aromas to be infused into the air to modulate mood, and sophisticated soundscapes to be crafted in order to enhance the experience of their foods and beverages.斯顿 Blumenthal of The Fat Duck is one of the most creative advocates of this new multisensory mindset. His famous Sound of the Sea dish had diners wearing iPods that played ocean sounds while they consumed succulent seafood, to enhance the overall flavour experience. Diageo is another major investor in sensory marketing, launching apps and multisensory spaces for Guinness, Johnnie Walker and the Singleton. In a recent study aimed at measuring the efficacy of their new sensual approach, the drinks giant found that the enjoyment of whisky could be increased by up to 20% by effecting the right multisensory environment. Other companies are taking the multisensory experience directly to the consumer, in outside spaces, including commuter sites. One high-profile example is E-Trade’s ‘smellvertising’ campaign at bus stops in the UK to promote its Ready Baked Jackets baked potatoes. Huge posters inside the bus shelters were installed with 3D fibreglass jacket potatoes, which, on the press of a button, heated up and emitted the aroma of an oven-cooked potato to delight and entice travel-weary consumers.

A SENSE OF THE FUTURE

As the demand for ever more sophisticated sensory delivery devices grows, we are likely to witness an increase in the involvement of 3D printing in the generation of branded tactile experiences, the augmentation of digital and packaging-based fragrance emission systems and the modification of mobile devices to deliver sensory experiences on the fly. Another area to watch closely is the games industry which is fast advancing fully immersive multisensory virtuality – a capability which is already starting to spilt out into the marketing sector.

Marriott Hotels is one such company currently exploiting this new multisensory virtuality. Using new-gen virtual reality headsets developed by Oculus Rift, guests are able to explore holiday destinations within a virtual environment. As guests navigate through an immaculate rendition of the visual landscape, installed sensors simulate the warmth of the sun on the face, while computerised water atomisers mimic the sensation of sea-spray on the skin. In such an enhanced virtual sensory environment, emotions are heightened and senses teased in a bid to boost sales of their new range of Marriott Hotels.

Multisensory marketing also looks set to be the next frontier for the mobile phone industry. Another perfect example of the technology, which is only really feasible via a mobile platform, the industry is now exploring ways to create immersive user experiences in real time. One avenue the industry has is that smartphone users are already conditioned to respond to sounds and vibrations emitted from their handsets. By manipulating the duration and frequency of the tactile cues that co-occur with cleverly crafted sound and brand owners can create multisensory triggers that cue consumption behaviours for specific brands at relevant times if the touch targets are at appropriate locations. An example is a snack brand that sends the enticing scent of a potato crisp being crunched with a vibration mimicking the shaking movement associated with Salt ‘n’ Shake crisps to a brand user at a known snack time. Or digital ads for theme parks that exploit biases in our visual systems to recreate the illusion of riding on a new rollercoaster, while simultaneously enhancing the experience through sound and haptic cues delivered via the mobile device.

As the technology behind sensory delivery systems continues to advance, brand owners are likely to become more aware of the nature of the consumer experience at each stage of the customer journey – and the new modes of enhancing that brand experience using multisensory strategies. Another facet of this development is the recognition of the optimal cross-modal combination with sufficient subtlety and appropriateness so as to avoid sensory saturation and interruption. Testing and pre-testing will be essential, particularly on currently underexploited platforms – but the good news is that strategies for multisensory optimisation are to hand.

Whenever route brand owners choose to exploit, be it in-store, in-home or on a mobile device, the lesson is clear. In future, if brand owners wish to engage consumers at a much deeper level, they need to learn how to engage and differentiate themselves from the competition, they will need to embrace the multisensory experience and play on the potential in this area of marketing...