

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

By Gemma Calvert and Dr Abhishek Pathak,
Institute on Asian Consumer Insight

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 'clack' 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 make it 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 disbelief, 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 finished product post launch, scores plummeted. Examples such as this mitigate against a siloed approach to the design, production and pre-testing of new products given that we now know that a product, service or marketing campaign is not simply the sum of its individual sensory parts.

So how can marketers determine which combination of sensory features is likely to be perceived as congruent or not? The difficulty lies in the fact that multisensory integration occurs automatically, and often without our conscious awareness. Asking people whether they think a fragrance, colour, shape, surface feel or any other sensory cue is going to ‘go well’ with any other, is therefore often a fruitless exercise because it requires conscious introspection of an involuntary, subconscious brain process.

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Over recent years, there has been growing interest in the exploitation of multisensory rating paradigms and implicit cross-modal reaction time tests that tap into System 1 brain responses (see *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman). By exposing respondents to different sensory combinations and monitoring the speed with which they respond, it is possible to measure how well different sensory inputs combine and impact on detectability, discriminability and liking – without the need for conscious feedback. Charles Spence at the University of Oxford has been using multisensory integration tests to measure cross-modal interactions that impact consumers, including the often impenetrable cross-cultural influences on food and flavour preference. For example, among Chinese consumers, the perceived flavour of noodles is heavily influenced by their colour, as well as the texture of the receptacle in which they are served.

Importantly, these multisensory optimisation studies are relatively straightforward to conduct. Some audiovisual interactions can be easily studied online (e.g. how sound interacts with the perceived colour, shape and design of a packet to make it more appealing; or how the musical soundtrack over a TVC can modulate its appeal). Others require respondents to be tested in a central location (e.g. those involving tastes, smells and tactile experiences). Whether online or offline, these multisensory tests are relatively fast to conduct and have proven very cost-effective, particularly in view of the punitive consequences of launching an incongruent multisensory experience onto the market.

The beginnings of sensory marketing can be traced back to the late 1970s, when marketers began to realise that it was possible to engage consumers using sensory triggers

other than visual ones to enhance brand promotion. Petrol station owners began wafting the smell of coffee to customers at the pumps to entice them into the outlet to purchase baked goods, and at Christmas, store owners found they could increase sales by infusing the air with pine. By the early 1980s, brands were becoming aware that they could also exploit the sense of smell to invoke positive brand associations among their consumers. In addition to introducing well-chosen scents into their flagship stores (e.g. Nike reported an 80% increase in intention to purchase thanks to their new in-store branded fragrance), companies slowly began exploring with other sensory triggers. Slow music was found to increase spending in supermarkets, while playing either French or German music above the wine aisles influenced the sale of French or German wines respectively, even though shoppers reported being completely unaware of any music being played overhead.

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 retaining the familiar and easily recognisable brand tune. A good case in point was the adoption by British Airways 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 Microsoft start-up tune or the sound of a Nokia phone being switched on?

Today, multisensory marketing is gaining traction across multiple sectors and categories. Brands are aware of the need to connect with their consumers at a deep, emotional level, and cognisant of the opportunities afforded by multisensory communications. One of the pioneers of the immersive experience must surely be Apple, which has designed its concept stores in such a way as to ensure its customers can see, listen, feel and experience all the sensory facets of its products. Furthermore, Apple products have maximised the value of sensuality and style across multiple sensory



touchpoints, creating a brand that offers consumers a slice of the state-of-the-art lifestyle.

Starbucks is another company that aims to satisfy consumers, not only in the realm of taste, but across all the other senses. The company has invested heavily in the creation of an in-store environment where the background music, ambient aromas, and tactile touchpoints (the mugs, plates, seats) are all uniquely aligned, providing consumers with a refreshing and comfortable environment in which to enjoy their coffee.

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. Heston 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 waves 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 sensorial 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 McCain’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 spill 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 heaters 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 holiday packages.

Multisensory marketing also looks set to be the next frontier for the mobile phone industry. Aside from location-based targeting, which is only really feasible via a mobile platform, the industry is now exploring ways to create immersive user experiences in real time. One advantage 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 signals, brand owners can create multisensory triggers that cue consumption behaviours for specific brands at relevant times and when consumers are at appropriate locations. An example is a snack brand that sends the enticing sound 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 and planners will need to understand the nature of the consumer experience at each brand touchpoint in order to create new modes of enhancing that brand experience using multisensory strategies. Another facet to consider is how to deliver 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.

Whichever 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 emotional level, build loyalty and differentiate themselves from the competition, they will need to embrace the multisensory opportunities now afforded to them.

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