

Chris Arning\*

## Becoming a commercial semiotician

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**Abstract:** In this paper, the author sets out a brief account of how you become a semiotician, breaking it down in terms of motivations and competences. This is a paper written from the personal experience of the author. It is not meant to be prescriptive or to offer any sort of orthodoxy. The catalyst for the paper was frustration with the dearth of writing on this topic. The paper argues that the process of becoming is not just about acquiring knowledge or cognitive ability but also involves personal values and self-identity. It also seeks to dethrone the place of theory as predominant, arguing that interpretive practice relies as much upon a repertoire of aptitudes and techniques of reading and other soft skills. Theory acquisition in itself is simply not enough. In terms of its structure, the paper starts with a definition of what commercial semiotics is, continues with a section defining its scope, validity, and applications. The meat of the paper is devoted to laying out the different aptitudes and techniques mentioned above. The final section discusses the semiotic enterprise as a quest for knowledge and argues that there is no single trajectory in becoming a commercial semiotics practitioner. The paper argues that it is an odyssey of constant learning. It includes some comments on the institutionalization of the field. The hope is that this paper will give insight to interested parties into the craft of commercial semiotics.

**Keywords:** semiotics, consultancy, Greimas, craft skills, aptitudes

### 1 How and why is commercial semiotics applied to brands and marketing?

Semiotics is the most appropriate tool for understanding questions surrounding brand symbolism and meaning and the multiple and layered messages that underpin this meaning.

Brands are big business – intangible assets are an increasingly important proportion of a company's balance sheet and powerful brands are a large part of this. Brands are viewed from the semiotic view as consumable signs that are invested with positive meanings through systems of differences. At a time when

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\*Corresponding author: Chris Arning, Creative Semiotics – Studio 24, Westbourne Studios 242, Acklam Road, London W105JJ, E-mail: [chris@creativesemiotics.co.uk](mailto:chris@creativesemiotics.co.uk)

brands are becoming increasingly ubiquitous as a way of packaging goods, services, and events, it has become more important than ever to manage their meaning through marketing communications. The continuing onset of globalization and increasingly assertive brands in developing markets has given a further fillip to this trend.

The fragmentation of media and the migration of brands online, as well as increasing mistrust of corporations have meant that the task of conveying the right meanings has become even more challenging. Applied semiotics in marketing can be conceived of primarily as a decision-making tool. Andrea Basunti in his study on UK commercial semiotics writes: “Semiotics helps brands to develop innovative communication strategies. Specifically, it provide a competitive advantage by revealing the communication codes embedded within the brand itself, its competitors, its category and the wider symbolic and cultural context in which they exist” (2004: 29). The late Virginia Valentine, in her 2007 MRS research paper quoted various market industry experts giving their opinions on the great value of semiotics:

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... 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. (Valentine 2007: 3)

As Grant Venner of Brand Semiotics<sup>1</sup> suggests, semiotics can be used for innovation, creating new meanings, renovation, revamping tired or outmoded meanings, and to help in articulation too – being clearer in how things are communicated. In summary, commercial semiotics is a strategic thinking tool that helps brands gain a competitive advantage through deep insights.

The scope of commercial semiotics is quite broad. It studies advertising, logos, websites; everything that creates meaning for brands. Strategic brand development, new product development, logo evaluation, corporate identity refresh, brand creation work are all amenable to semiotics. It can also be used in crowd-sourcing and to evaluate social media output. As a unified perspective on meaning it can engage with all sign based communication.

Experience suggests that the essence of semiotics is best conveyed by examples rather than definition and the following case studies<sup>2</sup> should give a flavor of the range of usefulness.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.brandsemiotics.co.uk>

<sup>2</sup> Some of these studies can be found in the case studies section of <http://www.creativesemiotics.co.uk>

*Ad Proposition Development:* situating a brand proposition for a car manufacturer within the context of the trajectory of car communications in the UK in order to brief their agency on more evocative articulations of a European brand proposition. The role for semiotics was to look at brand communications across the car sector going back five years and to pull out the principal communication codes and what they said about the car and its cultural meanings in the UK.

*Product design:* Pernod Ricard wanted to better understand the way their Martell brand was positioned within the various tiers of the cognac category and how to best evolve the brand in the future. The role for semiotics was to look at the visual equities of the competitive set and to give concrete recommendations on development of the various pack descriptors and the brand logo.

*Brand creation:* Wrigley's US wanted to create a new brand from scratch to appeal to a mature teen audience, a sector in which they were underperforming relative to competitor brands. The role for semiotics was to look at gum design codes and to juxtapose them with emergent cultural codes becoming popular with teenagers. This identified those cultural tension points and white space opportunities those led to the eventual launch of 5 gum.

*Design innovation:* World Gold Council needed to maintain the kudos of gold jewellery in the face of competition from other precious metals. The role for semiotics was to explore cultural barriers around the position of gold, (inflation of meaning, kitsch, hyperreal, etc) to generate a stream of inspirational ideas.

*Brand revamp:* Lindt wanted to tailor and hone its positioning within the competitive UK market. The project needed to have an effect on product portfolio management and to feed into a new marketing plan. The role for semiotics was to look at the symbolic world of chocolate (structural and graphical codes) and to give guidance on implications for the Lindt brand in terms of overall brand identity and the product portfolio.

*Logo design:* a Scandinavian bank wanted to roll out a new logo across Europe. Keen on semiotics, they wanted an expert opinion to supplement qualitative research as so much was at stake. Working with a team of five local analysts, semiotic analysis pulled out the relevant connotations of the options on the table, recommending two logo routes as most congruent with desired company vision.

*Packaging audit:* a major player in ready-to-drink coffee in Japan wanted to renew its can packaging design in a fast-moving category. This was about evolving the brand symbol in line with new masculine archetypes and a new economic environment. The task for semiotics was to bring some meaning and strategic vision to their attempts to create stand out new packaging with a crowded marketplace.

*Design inspiration:* the brand team for a personal care manufacturer wanted to create a new male grooming brand. The semiotic analysis, through intensive fieldwork and supplemented by expert interviews roved over areas as diverse as fashion, automotive, kitchenware, cycling, and sports apparel. The final output helped the design team help build meaning into their output.

## 2 What is the basis of commercial semiotics, its method and validity?

Academic fields and scientific disciplines are defined in terms of a) a homogeneous domain, b) a unified perspectives, c) a central method, d) a core body of knowledge, and e) a dominant means of presentation, and so as not to be amorphous, a subject must prioritize one of these.

We can settle upon evaluating semiotics as a pursuit unified by perspective – an insistence that everything can be a sign; hence that “semiotics is a discipline which studies everything there is from the perspective of its functioning in sign processes” (Posner 2003: 2368). So, commercial semiotics is an auxiliary, applied form of semiotics with the following features.

*Domain:* commercial marketing and corporate reputation output mostly involving brands and their manifestations across media from corporate identity materials through logotypes, online identity, brand iconography, advertising, packaging, direct marketing, retail and merchandising spaces and all associated communication.

*Perspective:* studies everything from the perspective of its generation of meaning in terms of processual semiosis or signification systems in a way that encompasses the full range of semantic, syntactic and pragmatic aspects of sign creation, processing, and interpretation.

*Method:* desk research, applying a grounded theory approach to content analysis and fieldwork (where necessary) using various techniques of interpretation

underpinned by a commitment to abductive hypothesis and lateral thinking, and with the findings collated and structured through skilled merging and synthesis of data.

*Theory:* multiple theory fragments employed (Peirce, social semiotics etc) depending on the challenge but all rooted in a set of axioms and propositions based on the validity of sign interpretation within certain limits and underpinned by certain premises including the role of semiotician as model reader and super decoder.

*Means of presentation:* through written reports usually enumerating codes (as proxies for clusters of signs), the use of maps and other visual heuristics in order to create a spatial awareness of relationships between brands, categories, culture, and the strategic implications of these mappings.

*Validity:* two principal types of validity; both content validity (sampled widely from culture) and ecological validity (the object of study is close to what you want to find out). Thirdly, it is often given predictive validity where its findings are corroborated by other research methods.

So, having defined the attributes of commercial semiotics we can conclude that it is an auxiliary or applied version of semiotics within the realm of marketing and brand research.

Rooting the practice of commercial semiotics in this concrete way makes explicit that there is a systematic philosophy behind the practice and that it is not just opinion “made up” on the fly.

### 3 Becoming a commercial semiotician

Becoming a commercial semiotician is much more than just “being clever” or being a “brain for hire.” Semiotics is more of a passion, life philosophy, or worldview than merely a job.

It is not just about certain types of knowledge but also about passion, attitude, and vocation.

The narrative trajectory of becoming a semiotician is determined by what semiotic theorist A. J. Greimas termed modalities (Floch 2001). There are four of these: *wanting-to-do*, *having-to-do*, *knowing-how-to-do*, and *being-able-to-do*. Being a commercial semiotician involves all of these in a sort of interrelationship. This provides a rich framework for showing semiotics as a vocational as

well as intellectual pursuit and helps more precisely model how one becomes competent in the craft.

Of course *knowing-how-to-do* or *savour-faire* is at the core of competence as a commercial semiotician but it is important not to overlook the latent aptitudes and personality traits dealt with in *being-able-to-do* as well as the motivation needed to pursue this challenging profession addressed in *wanting-to-do*. Finally, the modality *having-to-do* exerts an important, if less obvious, influence both in impelling novices into greater seriousness in the semiotic practice. Because I believe the act of decoding can acquire a character of compulsion. The next sections go into detail as to each modality showing its principal contribution.

Since they are underlying psychological or existential conditions are thus are personal to the semiotician, rather than the method, it is possible to cover off *wanting-to-do* and *having-to-do* as factors in relatively short order.

### 3.1 Wanting-to-do: Cathexis and emulation

There are two aspects to wanting-to-do. The first refers to the pleasure of decoding and the second refers to the desire to emulate or even to eclipse a more senior semiotic practitioner or to reach a standard of excellence.

Semiotics can be fun, and is fun in an all consuming way, it is diversion through edification. It is the fun of applying a lens to new phenomena, seeing things in new ways. Those new to semiotics often become intoxicated by the process of decoding when they become engrossed in textual analysis. There is such a thing as the pleasure of the text and this then instills a craving for further texts of an engrossing nature until decoding is second nature.

There is often an apprenticeship served by those who become semioticians. The admiration for the qualities of a mentor and or the desire to be respected for bringing insight in the way a senior person demonstrates is a prime motivator. This continues as semioticians meet, network with, and work with others whom they respect and want to learn from. This is an important part of overcoming the obstacles that would otherwise hinder development.

### 3.2 Having-to-be: Vocation and compulsion

There is a certain maverick mindset to those who practice semiotics in the commercial world. For most who go on to do commercial semiotics it is an

occupation that is congenial to their character. In some cases this is about working alone, in some cases a penchant for provocation, and in others a desire to reconcile apparently disconnected realms of thought in one single sphere. It is this sense in which I would suggest that semioticians are partly born although they can be molded too. Doing semiotics is somewhat a matter of genetics, circumstance, and serendipity. A restless imagination, a desire to create a curriculum that cuts across scattered pools of knowledge (design, philosophy, advertising) or a penchant for exposing the workings of ideology all comprise what might be called a “semiotic streak.”

There is a compulsive facet to interpretative practice and the thrill of the epiphany moment that leads to new ways of seeing. It is almost impossible to look at anything again at face value after having encountered semiotics. The addiction motif is a recurrent trope in the way semiotics is discussed and a habit for digging deeper quickly becomes deeply ingrained. It is possible to hypothesize that there is a neural pattern in pleasure centers that keeps semiotics practitioners hooked to the practice of the ruminating over meaning in films, TV ads, and all sorts of cultural texts that one encounters in everyday life. Of course this pleasurable musing is very different from the focused activity of actual project work when it is necessary to promptly home in on correct interpretations and to keep pushing the mining of meaning and refining of interpretation to ensure you’ve got it right.

## 4 What are the craft skills of a semiotician?<sup>3</sup>

These are divided into two sections which are the aptitudes (being-able-to-do) and relevant techniques (knowing-how-to-do), which, as you’ll see, is only partially determined by theory.

“Doing semiotic analysis of any material requires more of what one would call ‘right brain’ thinking... intuitive abduction, and to get it right, the analyst requires wide ranging knowledge and immense curiosity about human nature, societies, about cultures and about language” (Semiotic Thinking Group – a professional group on LinkedIn).

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<sup>3</sup> There were some contributions to this paper from the Linked In Semiotic Thinking Group which numbers 600 members at the time of writing this first draft. As posited on the thread, all members will be quoted anonymously simply as STG in this paper.

## 4.1 Being-able-to-do

### 4.1.1 Aptitude for digging

I started a discussion thread on the craft skills of a commercial semiotician in 2011 “My own restless urgency to see beneath surfaces led me inexorably towards... semiotics.” (STG)

Semiotics is a driven, restless desire to find change in the way we see the world akin to artists and scientists. Unraveling meaning is approached systematically like the scientist but is also subject to the leaps of insight and lateral thinking more redolent of the artist. A comparison here would be to draw a parallel with detective work and routine police work. Semiotic work, which tends to be geared to solving more intractable issues around meaning tends to be more akin to detective work. Consumer research does tend to be for the more straightforward diagnostic questions and is therefore perhaps more akin to routine police work. There is a contrarian side to most semioticians who are looked upon to provide a singular point of view and to be provocative. For instance, in a project on air purification, the tack taken by the semiotics findings was to make a connection between the paranoia and militaristic discourse of ‘neutralising airborne threats’ prevalent in air purification brand communication in the United States and the climate of anti terrorism fear post 9/11. These enabled us to better understand the meaning in the category and to understand the dominant category codes.

### 4.1.2 Aptitude for seeing

Semiotics is a perspective that helps you see differently. A good example of this would be a recent automotive study think piece. The key conclusion of this work was that car advertising is increasingly self-referential and surreal and that this is because it is reflective of the neuroses and complexes of the car industry. Car ads are an attempt to persuade the car industry of its own future validity. Car advertising is a displacement of driving freedom into other sorts of symbolic freedom. The study teased out codes that included the transformation of freedom (previously symbolized by the open road) into frenzied forms of abstract expressionism (the car as impulse to self-expression) and the attempt to reframe the car shape into something more organic or digital. This conclusion may sound startling and not entirely willingly-accepted by the client but, like all the most robust studies, is built on a wealth of evidence spanning across brand advertising and employed by a number of car marques. This is a perspective that the car industry would then be unlikely to have

unearthed by itself or through consumer focus groups and is a function of a radical semiotic eye.

#### 4.1.3 Aptitude for patterns

“My business is ‘unlocking intelligence’ and this discipline allows me to present data/information that appears to be disconnected and show its connective tissues” (STG).

Codes are clusters of signs that help to group together pools of meaning. Because culture is a fuzzy domain of study (codes are loosely and not sharply demarcated areas), a high degree of an acute awareness of fine grained distinctions is needed to identify them though this is a talent that can be quickly developed.

Identifying and classifying representational codes of meaning is the main currency of semiotics in marketing since it creates clarity for clients within the nebulae of brand meaning.

Of course, identification of these codes is a skill since it entails substantiation (even if only provisionally) of a particular code through adducing recurrent evidence within the material. The general rule as discussed by practitioners is that of continuing to substantiate codes with new material until each one has sufficient evidence and fresh iterations yield no novel observations. A good example of this would be the use of the colour orange on sun tan lotion packaging as a proxy for bronzed skin - an prominent code. A less obvious code, requiring more digging, would be the recurrent use of constructivist motifs on chocolate packaging as a proxy for contemporary premiumness.

#### 4.1.4 Aptitude for detail

Semiotic findings are most robust and convincing when contextualized through both evidence and the ability to be clued in on culture. This happily endorses indulgence in absorbing cultural experience as a valid part of being a better semiotician. Semiotic projects involve profound immersion in the source material and painstaking work, but in order to turbo-charge research, which is often undertaken under punitive time pressure, it helps to have a sixth sense for where to look for answers from the outset. Being a “culture vulture” is an advantage. Art exhibitions, types of unconventional reading matter, and cultural happenings help feed the brain, add novel references, and can be made directly relevant for projects. Hoarding bits of information and being able to retrieve them and apply them in a pinch is important. For example, a Wellcome Institute

exhibition on skin was the catalyst for a couple of codes on a global semiotics of softness project. One often stumbles upon relevant material and impromptu camerawork in public is often necessary.

#### 4.1.5 Aptitude for empathy

As semiotics goes global it is even more important to be culturally savvy and to work together with local analysts. It would be foolhardy to conduct a study outside of one's one market without working with a local research partner. This is to ensure that local detail is correct and that the specificities of local culture are accounted for within interpretative frames. Even with the local help, however, it helps to be cosmopolitan and to be aware, for instance, of emergent male docility and indigenous beauty codes in Japan or the demise of "Y culture" in South Africa. This is particularly important as markets such as India and The People's Republic of China become more important. Diplomacy is also useful when presenting a debrief on codes of entrepreneurialism to a mixed-race crowd in South Africa where it is difficult to generalize findings in a still polarized country. *Semionaut*, the online semiotic magazine, provided a good model involving crowd-sourcing a semiotic analysis "Brazilianness" using a network of global partners. Applying flexible analysis frameworks would also be part of this philosophy.

#### 4.1.6 Aptitude for synthesis

In the practice of semiotics, being a voracious reader is an important prerequisite – an obvious point – from art criticism to cultural histories to Marxist theory. Reading is a technique not only for acquiring knowledge but also for sharpening insight and critical powers. Due to the pure volume of relevant literature, there is a sort of extractive skill that involves scanning texts and winnowing out nuggets. These useful elements should be able to be combined together. The outcome is an ability to weave together a rich tapestry of source material without showing the seams. In a project on versions of whiteness globally there were quotes from Moby Dick, Malevich, kitsch store displays at Selfridges department store, reports from an academic from the *School of Oriental and African Studies* at University of London, and a southeast Asian art curator. In order to do this, some sort of powers of imagination are also required. There is probably a frustrated novelist inside many semioticians, since weaving together a narrative is critical skill too. Knowing how to apply

semiotic theory and have it work towards marketing outputs is another very valued skill. This is an aptitude that is particularly important when structuring reports as described below.

## 4.2 Knowing-how-to-do

### 4.2.1 Intuiting client briefs

Semiotics is very labor-intensive and involves a constant tradeoff between breadth and depth, so making sure the client knows what they want is crucial. Whittling down the brief into something sharp and manageable is a key skill. Knowing what is required and demarcating the parameters of what must be covered in detail, what touched upon and what falls outside the remit of the study itself can often involve reading between the lines – pre-study semiotics (Figure 1).

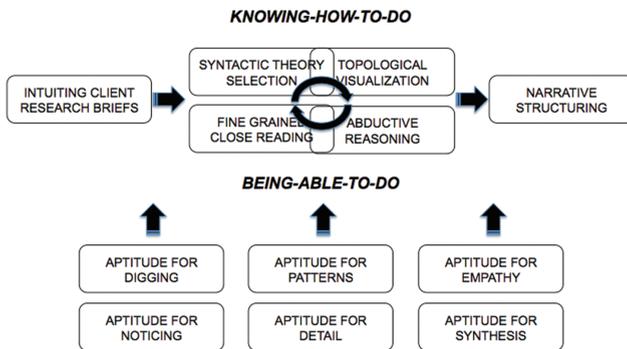


Figure 1: The craft skills of the commercial semiotician through Greimassian modalities.

Judgment on this question can affect the estimated number of hours devoted to the project, who to choose for subcontracted labor, and methodology. The aim of the semiotics project is not just brilliant analysis but to meet business objectives, and also aid clients professionally since they have made a business decision to hire a semiotician; often in the teeth of scepticism. It may be that the semiotician may need to suggest an approach that was not considered.

### 4.2.2 Fine grained readings

Having established the corpus of texts, it is important to be able to dig into the detail. Clearly there are many ways to do this close scrutiny of the material to a

forensic examination and re-examination. Observation should be performed with a suspicious eye, with the premise that nothing is innocuous and may include the question “where have I seen this before?”. The use of green filter or grading to photography in spirits advertising may more clearly signify absinthe to a culturally-aware reader but regardless gives a slightly hallucinogenic and louche tint to a beer ad. This is important. Similarly, typefaces, the type of framing used or what could be construed as incidental content is all-important. John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* and Stuart Hall in his book *Signifying Practices* helpfully bring out what fine-grained reading entails. Kress and van Leeuwen’s *Reading Images* includes a primer on how to look for compositional symmetry, vectors and such like more conspicuous symbolic attributes, embedded forms, the meaning of geometric shapes and their likely effects.

#### 4.2.3 Correct theory selection

Pure semiotics is not a realistic proposition in a world subordinated to the dictates of utility and actionability. Establishing a series of axioms and a broad approach is important, but at the coalface of interpretation any tools will be determined by the task at hand. Semiotics involves “custom theories” created to match the object of analysis, which varies from logos to TV ads to social media content. One of the main skills of competence, *knowing-how-to-do*, is the ability to see what models of meaning will be most revealing and to apply them appropriately. Theories are probes designed both to dissect objects of study and to ask why the signs are arranged in the way they are. Soft theory is akin to what international relations scholar Susan Strange called the “burning building” analogy for theory. She writes: “we tend not to waste too much time asking ourselves why people characteristically run *out* of a burning building. On the other hand, if we wish to explain why people might run *into* a burning building, some kind of theorizing may be necessary” (Strange 1988). This is akin to what Gill Ereaut describes in her work: “different models might be thought of as offering a range of computer applications running in reduced form at the bottom of the researcher’s mental “screen” – they can be pulled up as tools to help clarify analysis when something in the data itself prompts it” (Ereaut 2002).

Semiotic theory fragments work well as hooks upon which to hang one’s thinking. Theories should be seen as probes, in both senses of the word. Firstly, they prod the mind into sensitizing us to previously unseen structures or correspondences. For example, they ask us to look at the binary oppositions in a category or the communicational thrust of a piece of packaging or ask us what sort of sign *x* is as opposed to *y*. Secondly, probes are sent out experimentally

into unknown terrain to bring back new data. So in the course of the work we ask ourselves what it would mean or what it would explain about the business problem to hold a or b hypothesis and thus to think abductively. So, overall theories in commercial semiotics are thinking tools that help hone innate aptitudes and that help us see around corners and into cultural texts in ways we otherwise would not, but they should not be used dogmatically or they become straitjackets.

#### 4.2.4 Abductive logic and thin slicing

Abduction is the touchstone of commercial semiotics. It proceeds by informed inferences, the validation of hunches, and sudden flashes of inspiration. While grounded theory forms the bedrock of the semiotic enquiry, which is a systematic way to interpret data, semiotic analysis does extrapolate from more slender data than would be ideal. This is what Malcolm Gladwell in his 2005 book *Blink* calls “thin slicing” – our ability to gauge what is really important from a very narrow period of experience. This is combined with a method of reasoning pioneered by semiotic pioneer Charles Sanders Peirce who saw abduction as critical for all progress in science. As inquiry proceeds, observations coalesce into patterns that then allow working hypotheses to be deduced, which, on corroboration with the available data, graduate into full blown insights. As Eco and Sebeok cover in their book *The Sign of Three*, a good analogy for abductive reasoning is detective work, where various, and sometimes minute and apparently innocuous clues help to drive the quest for answers that explain the clues. Semiotics is a form of intrepid stunt thinking where leaps of logic are often made without first scouting out a solid landing with corroboration only coming late. Scholars have pondered whether abduction is inferential or instinctive (Paavola 2005). It is probably both.

#### 4.2.5 Spatial mapping

The use of maps, matrices, and visual schemes of various types are the stock-in-trade of most semioticians. This is because one of the benefits of paying for a semiotic study should be the virtue of simplifying chaotic material into simple models of meaning. In many respects, any models used should be no more difficult to understand than the various models taught by the business schools at the MBA level (Ansoff Matrix, Porter’s Diamond, etc.). Marketing executives should therefore be more accustomed to these various matrices and quadrants

and, in an increasingly visual culture where infographics are valued, these are an important output. The prime skill here is choosing the correct terms to label the axes used and how to arrange the plotting of brands or various semantic features so as accurately to represent the key findings. Mapping the subtle codes of whiteness for a global detergent brand was a task completed in a previous project and helped to correlate these various codes with predicted meaning effects, which helped clarify how to execute the symbol for whiteness that was eventually chosen. Of course, the holy grail of such visual maps is when they postulate fresh areas that have yet to be substantively exploited symbolically by the client in question.

#### **4.2.6 Narrative structuring**

One key to success in the realm of applied semiotics is an ability to “recode” what has just been decoded for smooth consumption. This does not mean “dumbing down” since the aim is to enlighten and inspire; not to stultify clients. What it does require is an understanding that the findings are being presented to a group of business executives, many of whom might have a natural suspicion towards anything that is not empirically provable or without statistical weight behind it. Objections of this kind generally recede once the client has seen the value of the work but this value can only be brought out through skilled sequencing and signposting of the presentation such that is digestible for someone not literate in semiotics.

The knack of presenting new information in a way that builds upon knowledge or preempts unpalatable news is very valuable sharing with the creative or other partner agency for any amends before any face-to-face presentations to the final client commissioner.

## **5 What are the qualifications and trajectories involved in coming to semiotics?**

There are a number of trajectories to becoming competent in semiotics. It does not have a set series of qualifications such as medicine or law. As alluded to above, with most it appears to be a passion developed in the course of doing something else. On the Semiotic Thinking Group, which has close to 600 members, of the 11% that use the word semiotics as a self-descriptor on their profile only about half of them have studied semiotics more formally. It seems that there are two

routes. One route seems to be is to learn semiotic theory in the academy, which can then be applied outside of it. Another is to become more aware of semiotic tendencies and of techniques that one is already applying. In the personal comments appearing on the thread, many wrote that they feel they have always been semiotic practitioners of sort, but that they did not have the vocabulary to describe this before.

*Doing a PhD in the subject.* This is clearly the most formal way of going about it and this brings intellectual respectability and proof of academic accomplishment. There are a number of universities, particularly in Europe and Latin America, that offer some form of degree in semiotics. It does not seem to be a prerequisite for practicing in the field though, certainly not in the way that a law or architecture degree would be a mandatory for progress in those fields. This route does not guarantee that the candidate has the wherewithal to provide insights into commercial material however. Since PhD's are text-based and theoretical, there can be a wrench to apply theories developed to the commercial realm where pop culture knowledge is absolutely vital. Of course, I argue here that whilst a PhD of course provides great scholarly weight in becoming a commercial semiotician, the acquisition of certain techniques and aptitudes is the litmus test of true qualification.

*Developing semiotic thinking through working.* Many people come to semiotics because they need to use it as a perspective within their job – for instance, evaluating communications or developing the visual language for corporate identity work. A background in social sciences and critical theory definitely helps in knowing the terrain but the right instincts can go a long way. Training can often therefore be formalized by joining a training course or reading around the subject. More rarely there is an apprenticeship that allows semiotic training to be passed on. The advantage of this route is perhaps that the approach is more flexible because it is subordinated to meeting business briefs rather than abstract thought experiments and takes a more pragmatic approach to theory.

*Through semiotic training courses.* This is a route that is not so used at the moment. Though the Market Research Society (MRS) and European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) do have training courses, these are meant much more to familiarize people with the discipline as clients or for the curiosity of users rather than to help people to become semioticians. The late Virginia Valentine in a 2007 conference paper mooted the idea of semiotic technicians. These would be people trained in the techniques but not experts. They would learn such areas as narrative analysis, metaphor mining, code

tracking, etc. To be sure, training courses do have merit but probably will not allow someone to be an autonomous practitioner without further application and exposure to the discipline. As semiotics practitioner Rachel Lawes remarked on the Linked In Semiotic Thinking Group:

If you want to go further with semiotics and make a full time job out of it, then you will have to sacrifice a LOT, and not just your time. Specifically, you are going to have to intimately embrace social constructionism, structuralism, post-structuralism, micro-sociology, some aspects of social psychology and many other strands of philosophy and social thought.

*Qualification and certification.* If we think about becoming a semiotician as a quest then tests must be overcome. Greimas talks about various tests: “qualifying test: the subject becomes competent, qualified to do something through examinations, competitions, initiation, rituals, and so on, a decisive test, the subject is fulfilled by completing a certain number of actions, [and] in a glorifying test: the subject is recognized for what he or she has done, and by that, what has become” (Floch 2001: 53). The obvious answer is that getting a PhD in semiotics would seem to constitute the glorifying test to endorse someone as an expert. It seems that only a small minority however of commercial semioticians actually possess such a qualification.

Unlike in the academic world where the criteria of note are peer reviewed articles, publishing deals and teaching evaluations, the more transient nature of commercial work means that success is assessed via client satisfaction, recommissioned projects, and glowing testimonials. Competence is often assumed as long as the work helps give the inspiration or the direction that client needs. Benchmarks for a commercial semiotician then should perhaps be a balanced scorecard consisting of client satisfaction and peer-reviewed assessment of quality.

Clearly there is a slight tension between academic attainment and commercial success. This goes back to the hybrid nature of the craft and its simultaneous pursuit of meaning and practical utility.

*Standardization* is a topic that has been broached a number of times. This would logically entail the founding of some sort of certifying body that could be appointed to set benchmarks.

Since applied different from academic semiotics it is unlikely to expect that formal examinations alone could be a valid means of evaluating competence in the discipline. It may be that over time some sort of guidelines for methods and glossary of terms could be asserted.

Certainly the knotty problems here would be setting thresholds of attainment and evaluating who is qualified to ascertain whether someone has reached the required standard.

Commercial practitioners have different perspectives and ways of working tailored over years of experience. Since semiotics does not yet have a trade association or representative body in consumer insight perhaps creating one would be a useful first step. This would start by convening a colloquium for discussion and perhaps be creating a journal for sharing articles. These are topics that are currently being broached on the Linked in Semiotic Thinking Group.

*Personal Trajectory of the author* is not typical. Starting in a qualitative research company and already holding an MA in a critical theory subject he was exposed to commercial practice through an effective apprenticeship to a commercial semiotician – Alex Gordon at Flamingo. Earmarked as a favored collaborator, only then did he later undergo a formal education in semiotics (University of Toronto with Marcel Danesi). This involved courses at Masters level in visual semiotics, cultural semiotics, post-structuralism, and theory of the sign that helped to contextualize his earlier exposure to commercial practice. Successful autonomous working on commercial projects with direct client contact followed at Flamingo and later at Space Doctors, adding a professional endorsement. Publication of journal articles in *Semiotica* followed.

Since then perpetual readings around the subject have continued to plug gaps in knowledge – auto-didactic continuous learning is probably key to excellence in commercial semiotics.

## 6 Some conclusions on becoming a commercial semiotician

It is hoped that this paper has given indications as to what is unique about commercial semiotics and acts as an exposé on what semioticians in marketing do. It is an all-consuming enterprise involving a several soft skills (not just theory) entailing passion as well as cognition.

The use of the Greimassian modalities of *wanting-to-do*, *having-to-do* has hopefully shown how semiotics is more than just a cognitive process. The path to competence involves theory and acquisition of knowledge but does rely on some innate aptitudes as well as alignment of the semiotic enterprise with one's life goals. The schema below shows how the interaction of these modalities drive the process of becoming in what can best be described as a spiral pattern of motivations and competences. The trajectory to becoming adept in commercial semiotics is not set and there are many paths. There are semiotics practitioners who come from the worlds of academia, design, and advertising. Experience in these fields teaches practitioners how signs work to create meaning. Ideas gleaned from practice can

then be consolidated and rationalized through readings. Applied semiotics is ultimately a creative act that involves sculpting one’s own tools (frameworks) to make them fit for purpose and then applying them correctly to phenomena. Within this process, theory does play a vital role but it should not be overemphasized in the process in which it is embedded. Due to the scope of the field, the opinion of the author is that self-awareness and constant self improvement are key principles in this ever evolving-field. This will be even more true as semiotics becomes more modular and needs to be flexible enough to work alongside methodologies such as neurometrics as well as text mining tools enabled by semantic technologies. This is why the diagram pictured below includes at its center a sense of doubt, a *not-knowing-how-to-do*. For the author, periodic querying whether one’s level of competence and performance is adequate keeps semioticians open to fresh learning.

French semiotics practitioner Jean Marie Floch wrote that: “semiotic research is always ongoing, never quite complete... it would be more appropriate to speak of semiotics under fire or as constantly put to the test” (Floch 2001: 12). It is great that semiotics is flexible and always evolving but I believe that greater solidarity among commercial semioticians and loose institution building and collaboration can only aid the development of the craft and certainly would not hinder it.

This paper contends that semiotics can become stronger and produce higher quality interpretations, by more consciously cultivating the aptitudes listed above (which may currently be used unwittingly), rather than being fixated on theory. This paper is just a modest contribution but as there are so few treatments out there, hopefully one that fills some gaps in the literature. A qualitative research programme would allow substantiation of the frameworks laid out here and a chance to corroborate the hypotheses with empirical data (Figure 2).

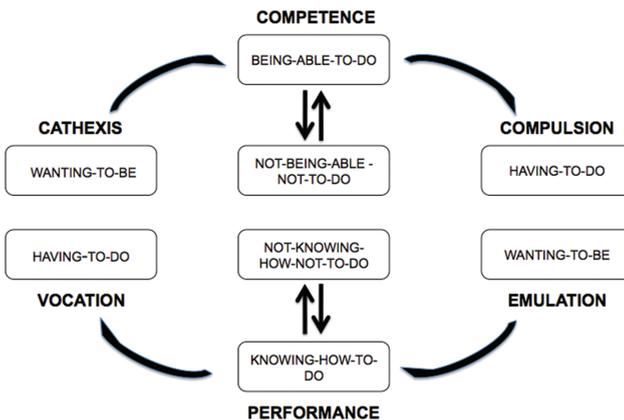


Figure 2: The progression to competence through performance of the commercial semiotician.

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