

# The Consumer Culture Theory of Brands



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# CHAPTER ONE

## OVERVIEW

### **Consumption is communication**

All human beings communicate constantly. To be human is to engage in a continuous stream that signals essential humanity to the surrounding environment, which is the context within which individual humans occur. Although other life forms also reveal their essences to their environments, each life form can only reveal its own essence. Humans only can reveal a human essence. Humans can only reveal a human essence. And humans must reveal that essence. They cannot choose otherwise. To terminate communication is to terminate being. An individual human may choose isolation from social context yet must remain in a natural physical context where the individual continues to reveal a human essence in relation to other non-human essences. If an individual human chooses isolation from social context, and others are aware of that choice, the isolation communicates to those who are aware of it. Communication is imperative to human essence.

Every form of human behavior conveys a message. Involuntary actions such as heartbeat convey a message of a fundamental, requisite property of the physical capacity that an observer can recognize as human. Many other forms learned from social contexts become so ingrained as to seem innate and beyond conscious control. Yet, those forms are integral components of the human communication systems that includes other more clearly articulated and controlled forms. The various forms do reflect and comply with a uniquely human grammar that organizes, initiates and interprets human behavior in all its forms. Individuals become so proficient at initiating, recognizing and interpreting integrated behaviors that when one component form is absent, individuals instinctively produce it in their interpretations. Although many observers assume the primacy of language in the communication system, the correct meaning of language depends upon the many other components. Language offers the convenience of recording through writing, which allows structural analysis. The convenience of

analysis obscures the importance of necessary accompanying forms, each with grammatical structure that eludes analysis.

Communication involves an initiator and an interpreter. Behavior must affect or influence another to communicate. An individual who chooses to leave all social contexts can still influence another by that choice. So long as the individual's absence influences another who is consciously aware of the absence, the behavior communicates. An initiating individual need not intend communication. Whenever at least one other individual interprets behavior initiated for any reason, communication has occurred. Whether present or absent, active or passive, the mere act of being human communicates because influence on another is inevitable. Just as an initiator communicates by attempting to avoid communication, an interpreter completes the process even by choosing to disregard the initial behavior because the initiator has influenced the interpreter to make that choice. The form of behavior is irrelevant to the fact of communication. When one individual is even aware of another, communication has occurred and continues until an interruption in that awareness.

This book discusses brand consumption as behavior in contemporary market cultures. As all other human behaviors, brand consumption communicates. In using any specific brand, an individual consumer initiates a communication process by inviting interpretation from others. Within the culture, individuals understand brands for their meanings as components within the greater behavioral system. Brands do not replace any other communication form. Rather they augment the system by expanding the forms available. Though each brand is a meaningful unit by itself, it only contributes to the communication context when integrated with other forms. Brands have proper places in the grammar of behaviors that constitute consumer culture. The meaning of any single brand modifies the meaning of any consumer communication. The modification can be slight or substantial depending on the context of other forms, which includes the centrality of a brand to an initiator and to an interpreter.

Brands acquire meaning through repeated social use within the context of other behaviors. This particular behavior utilizes a visual form that can occur independent of any other behavior. Users include brand display into their behaviors according to the meanings users expect to elicit in observers' interpretations. Expectation is founded on cultural standards of associated meanings. Standard meanings can and do arise informally through repeated initiations and interpretations. A dominant basis for brand meaning, however, is advertising and other forms of marketing communication. Advertising endeavors to set standards of meanings through associating brands with other cultural elements that have widely



known and accepted standard meanings. The display of brands in advertising constitutes a publicly available parallel to a dictionary for written words. Through advertising, consumer culture disseminates and continually updates current brand meaning standards to aid consumers in their selection of display behaviors. For communication initiators, advertising is a guide to expected interpretations. For interpreters, advertising is a guide to correct interpretation.

Culture is commonly misunderstood as merely an influence on the many aspects of human behavior. Aggregate behaviors have various areas that even currently many view as distinct though interdependent. Thus, religion, politics, economics, marketing and even communication are distinct areas of investigation with defined parameters. From this perspective, culture consists of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that affect those other areas. Further, culture also affects individual psychology and group social psychology as an external variable. This tendency to distinguish aids in organizing observations but requires observers to ignore interconnections beyond the scope of defined parameters. The tendency is founded on assumptions that observation must confirm. An assumed distinction may not be valid, but because observation confirms assumptions, it perpetuates the invalid distinction. Therefore, the assumption that culture is only an external influence on other areas is confirmed and perpetuated in observation.

Some who previously perpetuated that assumption have come to realize the comprehensive nature of culture. The view of areas of behavior outside of but affected by culture is giving way to views of those same areas acting within culture. Institutions once considered distinct from culture now are considered important, integral components of culture. Areas of human behavior lose distinction with the realization that culture is not only the foundation but also the generator of all areas of social behavior. Culture determines which institutions will emerge, what forms they will take and what relationships they will have with other institutions. Without an understanding of culture, understanding of behaviors and institutions is frustrated by arbitrary fragmentation. Through its organizing framework, culture creates the comprehensive and comprehensible system of behaviors and related institutions that govern the complex of interactions that constitute a society. Various institutions are merely cultural divisions.

Major firms that once considered marketing to have clear and distinct boundaries with other areas recognize the importance of cultural research. Anthropologists have become valued in marketing as external consultants, as internal staff and as faculty at major business schools. Cultural insights

are becoming the standard foundation for marketing efforts. The market itself is an institution wholly within culture that emerged from the surrounding culture integrated with other institutions. Marketing boundaries are nebulous rather than clear and distinct. Successful marketing strategies are discoveries that arise from cultural studies of consumers. The more insightful marketers realize that consumers reveal strategies through the patterns of their cultural behaviors. Although consumers themselves sometimes cognitively organize their lives into compartments, their behavioral boundaries are indistinct or non-existent. Reflecting consumers, then, marketing boundaries are blurred, extending to all areas of consumers' cultural blend.

Within that cultural environment, marketers create brands as tools for selling the specific results of their productive behaviors. The intention for marketers is to initiate a discursive act through the brand as a meaningful sign. As initiators, marketers assert certain claims about themselves and the objects resulting from their productive behaviors or just about the behaviors. However, a secondary productive behavior is marketing communication generally and brands specifically. The discourse initiator has no control over whether the interpreted meaning matches the intended meaning. Therefore, marketers are careful to initiate discourse using reliable cultural signs. But the interpretation belongs to the interpreter, who, in a sense, buys the initiated discursive act just as one buys the result of the productive act. Both the production and the marketing are discursive behaviors. Through the sales process, a marketer offers discursive acts to consumers. When consumers accept meaningful discursive constructions, those constructions become theirs to use for their own discursive purposes. Brands then become components of the cultural system available to consumers for initiating their own discourse.

### **Brands belong to consumers**

Consumption is the culmination of the marketing process. Once consumers accept and acquire the discursive product that a marketer offered, the marketer's role is all but eliminated. From that point, the marketer may have no further impact on the discursive construction. A brand is a unit of discursive construction in consumers' stock of such units. The only role a marketer continues to play is that of guarantor. Having produced a discursive unit of certain meaning, the marketer is responsible for maintaining that meaning. Marketing communication utilizes cultural symbols in establishing brand meaning and in initiating discourse about that meaning, but the brand itself is not a unit of marketing communication

discourse. A brand is a unit of consumer discourse only. Because consumption is the process of consumer discourse, marketing ends when consumption begins. Brands are units of construction for discourse initiated by consumers for other consumers to interpret. Consumer interpretation derives from marketing communication just as consumer initiation does. But a marketer is neither initiator nor interpreter in consumer discourse.

The process of any discourse belongs exclusively to those engaged in that discourse. Consumer discourse, then, belongs exclusively to consumers. The process gives concrete, tangible form to any exchange of abstract cultural concepts. As the tangible elements of discourse construction, brands belong to those with the right to utilize them in the exchange process. A brand has no significance or discourse value except through the convention of consumer culture. Consumers own a brand insofar as it remains a useful element in discourse construction. The brand concept, which is the idea a brand evokes, is the common property of all consumers. The viability of a brand as an element of discourse depends completely on consumer value for a brand as a useful signifier and for the signified concept. Consumers can change a brand concept so that it signifies another idea. They can discard a brand as a useful signifier altogether. They can maintain the brand concept but terminate its cultural value, discarding both signifier and signified together. In these ways, consumer ownership of brands is inviolable.

Just as any other symbolic device, a brand signifies only itself unless a consumer adds another signifying value to it. A marketer may suggest a signified value in initiating discourse about the brand. But consumers are free to interpret a brand as signifying any of the full range of possible cultural signified concepts, including the concept a marketer may suggest. The utility of a brand in consumer discourse depends upon agreement among consumers only. An initiator selects a brand for discourse construction with an expectation of agreement from an interpreter. Feedback among consumers indicates the validity of the initiator's expectation and the accuracy of interpretation. The continuing process of initiation, interpretation and feedback establishes the location of a brand in consumers' shared perception, without which a brand is meaningless. Shared perception places a brand in relation to other brands as its signified concept stands in relation to other signified concepts. A brand is a component of consumers' signified conceptual environment that is the shared perception of consumer culture.

Consumers are the locus of all market value. In consumer culture, no object becomes a product without an associated consumer value. Interaction between the consumer and any object must produce an

attractive modification in the physical, social or psychological environment. The object itself carries no value. Only the result of consumer interaction with the object carries value. The object carries only instrumental value toward achieving an outcome during the interaction process. Otherwise, the value is only potential. Even then, the value is located in consumers who choose whether to place value in an object. Once the outcome of interaction with an object is achieved, the object loses its value. The nature of the outcome determines the durability and extent of object value. A tangible outcome can have an expressive function so that the appearance of the outcome is an element of consumer discourse. Consumer interaction outcomes can initiate discourse as displays of cultural value available for other consumers to interpret. With some objects, the utility lies in modifying the social or psychological environment. Mere possession and display initiate discourse concerning the value that culture places in possession and display. The market cannot confer such values without consumer consent.

Brand success depends, of course, on consumers, whose consumption choices and patterns drive commercial viability in the market. Significance is the key to consumer choice. Consumption as a discursive process is the system of relationships that constitute consumer culture. Although consumers acquire branded objects for tangible outcomes, they choose the outcomes for the cultural significance associated with them. Because brand consumption has no tangible outcome in itself, the significance that consumers associate with a brand is the only determinant of market success. Consumers acquire significance available through the market. A brand can succeed only to the extent that it carries significance that substantial numbers of consumers currently value. When a marketer can recognize such a value and induce consumers to recognize and accept a brand as its signifier, then the brand has high likelihood of discursive utility, actual consumption and commercial success.

This book examines the influences on consumer response to brands. The meaning of any stimulus is the response of the stimulated. In discourse, the meaning of an initiated act is the interpretation of the observer. In consumer culture, the meaning of any brand as an initiated stimulus is the commonly shared interpretation of the stimulated consumers. The processes and influences that foster the commonly shared interpretation are the critical concern in consumer culture. Without such interpretation for the entire brand system, consumer culture cannot achieve coherence or cohesion. Cultural viability and development depend on agreement and acceptance as accurate as possible of the specific signifying qualities of brands. Consumers must respond to a brand as readily as they

would to the semantic features that the brand signifies. Assurance in commonly shared responses permits consumer confidence in utilizing brands to initiate discourse intended to evoke desired responses or feedback. Through presentation and use conventions, brands are the media through which consumers establish, maintain, reinforce or revise their relationships to their social surroundings.

All stimuli are information sources. Through sensation, people can perceive or fail to perceive departure from random occurrence. The apparently recurrent, predictable departures from random are the foundation of recognized patterns. Through recognition, people know and comprehend their surroundings sufficiently to develop interaction strategies and tactics to achieve recurrent, predictable reactions and responses. Grammar usually refers to interaction strategies and tactics in language. But the word can also apply to all other human behaviors as well. Because all human behavior consists of strategies and tactics to achieve recurrent, predictable reactions and responses, grammar can also refer to these strategic and tactical behavior patterns. Brand consumption is a system of strategic and tactical behavior developed to achieve recurrent, predictable reactions and responses among consumers. Consumption consists of culturally developed behavior patterns that consumers can know and comprehend. Consumers can use brands to reveal that they are not random commodities, but rather recognizable identities in relation to other consumers. Advertising disseminates brand meaning and grammar throughout the culture, enabling consumer discourse for effective social interaction.

## **Brand ownership**

Traditionally and legally, brands have been the property of a producer or marketer. Only the producer or marketer could claim the right to possess, use, enjoy the benefits, and dispose of the brand. For brand acquisition, consumers also had to acquire the product or service that the brand ostensibly signified. But modern marketing appeals to certain consumers who would choose one brand instead of others. With multiple brands available for barely distinguishable products or services, single brands appeal not only to certain consumers, but also to certain consumption contexts. Successful marketing strategies closely associate brands with those certain consumers and contexts so that brands signify them and not the products or services attached to brands. Consumers produce the contexts of consumption that brands signify. Although producers or marketers continue to own the physical appearance of brands, the

significance or meaning is the property of consumers. Brand value belongs to consumers who assign it through their cultural consumption grammars.

Brands are the morphemes of a communication subsystem. The complete system comprises all human behaviors integrated to refine and clarify meaning. Various forms of behaviors differ from each other sufficiently to form recognizable groups. Yet, boundaries are often unclear. All physical movements convey information. But some movements convey information as their primary purpose, while other movements primarily effect tangible environmental change, which secondarily conveys information. In either case, physical movements are morphemes, distinguishable units that combine to increase information. Physical movements are an analog information system because they tend, in some way, to resemble what they signify. Brands are like the words of language. In each system, the meaning, that which the brand or word signifies, is arbitrary. A brand or a word could signify anything. What it does signify depends only on convention. Those who utilize the system must do so with a high degree of consistency.

A single person can use a movement, sound or other physical device that is unique. The use can be deliberate or inadvertent, that is, with or without intent. Still, the behavior is completely idiosyncratic. A single person can use a movement, sound or other physical device that is not unique, but use it in a unique context. Although the device is not idiosyncratic, the use context is. Because all behavior conveys information, this idiosyncratic action communicates something about the subject. The behavior at least informs that the subject is unique regarding this specific behavior. Although significance relies on convention, a complete break with convention paradoxically signifies by convention. The break with or departure from convention is a conventional signifier of uniqueness and other qualities associated with the break or departure. Idiosyncratic acts, whether repeated or unique in their occurrences, are components of the general communication system of the single person who performs the acts. They identify a specific individual and permit recognition.

If even one other person appropriates through imitation the same movement, sound or other physical device, then it is no longer idiosyncratic or unique. Significance no longer belongs to the original initiating single person when another person appropriates the device and introduces it in a new context. The fact of use by another person is a new context in itself even though all other contextual elements might be similar. Appropriated use diminishes information because the identity of the user is uncertain. Rather than specify a single, individual person, the physical device can signify either or both users. Further, the imitation

takes a step toward signifying neither user but rather the context of use independent of any specific user. The device then signifies all possible persons, individually or collectively, in sufficiently similar contexts. The significance stays with the context. It is the property of those who enter the context, to be relinquished when they exit the context. The more persons who use the device, the less information the device carries about the user, and the less control any single use has over what the device signifies.

A brand is a signifying device. Originally, the brand as intellectual property belongs to its creator, who can be a single individual, or a producer or marketer who sponsors the creation. Although brands originally signified unique, idiosyncratic relationship between the creator and the vehicles that carried them—products or services—the intention was that brands would facilitate consumer use. Through brand consumption, a single consumer could initiate a unique, idiosyncratic context that would convey perfect information by eliminating all uncertainty of her identity. However, market viability usually requires a criterion number of consumers to adopt the brand. Just as with other devices, the number of users is inversely related to information content concerning specific consumers. The brand develops to signify a context within which a consumer occurs. Because many consumers potentially can occupy the context, the brand signifies a relationship with all other consumers: Either they share the context or they do not. One particular entity becomes completely external with no potential for entering the signified relationship: the brand creator, producer or marketer. Once brands signify consumers in a consumption context, increasing consumer use entails that the creator, producer or marketer increasingly loses control of significance.

As owner of the appearance known as the brand, a creator, producer or marketer seeks to enjoy the benefits of use. Producer use, however, is not the equivalent of consumer use. Producer use involves restricting access to the appearance, controlling the supply of brand appearances to control value. The producer has no need to restrict access unless consumers demand access, which they will do only if the brand appearance carries some use value for them. Producers create brand appearances intended to signify consumer values. Consumers accept or reject the relationship between the signified value and the signifying brand. Because the relationship is arbitrary, the brand could signify anything. As with morphemes of linguistic systems, the process of dissemination and discourse development can modify over time what the brand signifies. Consumers initiate the modifications that other consumers accept or reject

without producer approval. The producer may attempt to modify or retain significance in efforts similar to those of language teachers who attempt to reinforce correct word meanings and uses. As with language, the dynamics of consumption discourse modify morpheme significance over time despite producer attempts to control it.

## **Language of consumption**

Consumption is the communication of relationships. Any culture is a comprehensive system of relationships. The system includes everything conceivably necessary to the effective function of the culture. Primitive cultures tend to stress the provision and maintenance of the material conditions of existence, with relationships defined according to material standards. Over time, relationships become abstract and alienated from their materialist origins. Language originates as a method of abstracting the material world, but over time develops as a method of abstracting relationships, which are already abstract. Consumption abstracts a newly developed system of relationships that emerged from earlier culture. As with any other culture, the signifying system includes only those forms that the culture can utilize to convey meaning. Although all behavior communicates generally, not all behaviors convey meanings in all cultures. Some behaviors have no information content in a specific culture. In this emergent consumer culture, consumption consists of only those behaviors that carry information about relationships and values that can identify individuals.

Within consumption as the observable expression of cultural relationships, brands are discrete morphemes. Each consumer is a discrete cultural component with the potential for distinction. Consumption is the process of expressing not only cultural unity, but also divergence within cultural parameters. Without consumption behavior, an individual person warrants no cultural attention but only casual disregard. With consumption behavior, an individual person warrants attention only as a cultural commodity. Brands are the devices that provide opportunities for divergence, deviation and distinction from the standard commodity. Technically, all individuals diverge and deviate from the standard. But because they do so in ways that are not culturally defined, culture cannot recognize and understand the distinctions. A finite set of elementary symbols, each culturally defined, can reduce or eliminate uncertainty concerning distinction. In consumption, brands are the discrete information sources that offer distinguishing choices. They constitute a system because consumers must combine them as components of cultural



expression. Any alteration in brand choice effects a change in the combined expression.

Culture is a complex set of influences. All phenomena within the boundaries of cultural perception carry definition requisite to recognition. Analysis is the foundation of definition. Whether concrete or abstract, cultural concepts, which are the ideas about what things are, have their fundamental definitions in what they are not. Every concept stands in relationship to every other concept to create definition. Although basic relationships are limited, the degrees of differentiation are not. Each concept occupies a distinct perceptual location in relation to each other concept. The many qualities that constitute each concept are only variations in closeness to other concepts on a very small number of fundamental qualities. Cultures assign tangible form to the many perceptual locations either through natural appearance or culturally created appearance. Brands are forms of culturally created appearance. Consumers select brands, either alone or in combinations, as means of expressing and recognizing perceptual location within their culture.

Cultural influences set standard patterns for effective discourse. Any person can initiate discourse according to idiosyncratic whim. Any other person can interpret by equally idiosyncratic whim. But if the purpose of discourse is to achieve agreement between initiator and interpreter, idiosyncratic whim is most ineffective. Standards provide conventions of agreement so that any initiator can expect a certain interpretation, and an interpreter can assume particular certain intent. Participants forfeit freedom of initiation and interpretation in exchange for a cultural guarantee of effectiveness. Further, culture confines intent and interpretation to the signifying capacity of its symbolic devices. Although humans may have the potential for a great range of thought, the symbolic system can convey only a partial range. The range of emotions may be similarly great, at least in degree. (Some scholars assert a very limited number of emotions.) However, the capacity to signify emotion or degree of emotion determines what a culture can recognize and accept. Similarly, only appetites and overt behaviors within cultural signifying capacity have recognition and acceptance. All else is culturally disallowed.

In consumer culture, brands constitute the major form of signifying. Any value that the culture can conceptualize must have a signifier. Signifying systems generally utilize multiple forms to reduce uncertainty and refine significance. In each system, one form dominates all others. The form that emerges to dominate is that which most effectively signifies cultural values and provides for the greatest certainty of intent and interpretation. Brands signify the values that consumers share. The

contexts and values that brands signify are widely known, facilitating effective expression of intent and accurate interpretation. The brand system responds to consumer expressive needs through expansion and dynamism within the complete information system. For consumers, brands not only provide devices to signify values and contexts, they also offer choices of values and contexts to signify. Consumers can signify their cultural relationships through brands. But through knowledge of brand significance, consumers can also learn the relationships that culture favors or rejects.

Choices from available meanings conform to the overall grammatical structure of the unique cultural information system. Each constituent form of the system utilizes its own grammar determined largely by the capacity of the particular form. The complete system integrates forms according to the overall structure in which each form signifies uniquely. Although the various forms may exhibit a great degree of redundancy for uncertainty reduction, no single form is an adequate substitute for any other single form. No form contains exactly the same information as any other. They must be consistent with each other, but they cannot replace each other. Verbal language is but one such form. It cannot replace graphic devices, be a substitute for such devices, or be translated into them. Conversely, other constituent forms of the information system cannot replace verbal language, be substitutes for verbal language, or be translated into it. Grammatical structure itself is not meaning but rather a reflection of effectiveness in prior discourse. Consumers' meaning choices reflect the thought patterns unique to the complete information system. Signifying patterns utilized formerly become conventions when they acquire an established record of accuracy between intent and interpretation.

Consumption behavior, then, is not random. But it defies explanation as merely a means of providing the material conditions of existence. Material value is predictable because it stems from demands basic to all living organisms. Consumption does not comply with the predictions of material value. The culture of consumption emerges in social groups that have secured the capacity to provide adequately for the material conditions. Material values are not random, but neither are the elements for achieving them. Consumption is stochastic in the sense that the component elements are random and arbitrary, just as the component elements of verbal language. The system of relationships emerges from convention. The relationships could change radically without altering material conditions. But the cultural conditions depend on social agreement. Within the cultural information system, material components signify value assigned arbitrarily. Their meanings are secured through

high degrees of correlation with other symbolic devices. Predictability derives from social consistency rather than inherent properties because symbolic devices are not what they signify. The probability of consumption behavior must be learned socially. It cannot be discovered through independent investigation.

### **A model for brand communication**

To understand the consumption communication process, a basic model is useful. A model specifies elemental components of a process or system. Through graphic depiction, a model shows the interrelationships that constitute the process or system. The interrelationships are critical for the elements to be components, and for them to compose a process or system-coincidental group. For consumption to communicate, it must signify, so it must have something to signify. As signifying behavior, consumption constitutes an information system. The forms of consumption cannot be random behaviors but must increase knowledge or reduce uncertainty. Consumption is a culture because it defines and determines the attributes and interrelationships of those who utilize the system, namely, consumers. Learning among consumers is the *sine qua non* of effective cultural propagation. Advertising is the cultural component through which consumers learn the meanings of consumption. A model of advertising as communication aids in understanding the consumption learning process. In addition, the model aids in understanding consumption as communication.

An early communication model in information theory applies to the use of communication technology. The first component of the information model is the source. In terms of discourse, this is the initiator of the communication behavior. The source acts deliberately. Although noticeable changes in the natural physical environment can increase knowledge or reduce uncertainty, they do not initiate a communicative act because they are not the deliberate behavior of any object capable of independent action. Because they are not deliberate, they do not form a message, which is the second component of the information model. Freely selected signifying symbols constitute messages. The source must be aware on some level of intended meaning for message formation. The third component is the channel, which is the means by which the signifying symbols of the message become available to the receiver, the fourth component, who is the interpreter in the discourse process. Anything that hinders or prevents the accurate transfer of symbols or interpretation of the initiator's intent is noise, the fifth component of the

information model. Finally, the sixth component, feedback, is the interpreter's response that permits the initiator to evaluate effectiveness.

The information theory model of communication is only a basic sketch. It can be useful as an overview or outline in only basic communicative acts. The kinds of communication it can cover are limited. For human communication, the information theory model can depict direct and spontaneous interpersonal behavior. For technological communication, the application is a much better fit. In the context of culture, the information theory model is not adequate. Although the model suggests the possibility of a continuing act, the communication flow has a beginning, middle and an end. The beginning is the source; the end is feedback. Any such model must justify those limits. Even in simple direct and spontaneous interpersonal behavior, the beginnings and ends are difficult to define. Further, components of the information model invite and even demand expansion into more detailed subcomponents. An adequately detailed model would at least be an exploded diagram of the information model. The adequate model must also include the cultural context, which can be an element of each component.

Scholars have applied the information theory communication model to advertising with limited validity. For the objective appearance of advertising, the model is useful just as it is useful for the objective appearance of other communicative acts. Advertising has a source, which in the simplicity of the model is an advertiser, who is some person or group of persons with discourse to initiate. Advertisements are the messages in the information model, composed of various graphic, verbal or aural elements alone or in combination. The elements are the symbols intended to convey a desired meaning in information theory. The channels are the various media that convey the symbols. The information model specifies that the symbols must be conveyed effectively. Advertising media planning emphasizes selection based not only on technical capacity, but also on the probability that the symbols will reach the receivers, who are the consumers. Noise can be advertisement composition, advertising clutter, competitive advertising, or the entire symbolic environment that vies for consumers' attention. Feedback has a number of forms depending on the communication objective. Research into message awareness or brand attitude is feedback that the advertiser initiates. The ultimate, consumer-initiated feedback is consumption.

The conceptual criteria for the information model consider whether the symbols conveyed effect a desired outcome. In simple discourse, the initiator desires accurate interpretation that agrees with the intended signifying. The interpreter correctly understands the message when the

interpreted signified is the same as what the initiator intended to signify. When the initiated message conveys knowledge or reduces uncertainty for the interpreter, information exchange has occurred. Although information exchange is critical to consumer communication, advertising has an additional purpose. Consumption itself is the purpose of advertising. Because consumption itself is communication, advertising is a communication mode that induces further communication. Economic exchange, which is the commercial acquisition of objects and symbols, enables consumption participation. Advertising attempts to induce consumption that can only occur subsequent to economic exchange. Because advertising has desired outcomes on two levels, the feedback has two levels as well.

The traditional information model includes the feedback component without detail. Evidence that the channel effectively conveyed the message to the receiver is feedback. In the traditional view of advertising, the evidence is consumers' marketplace behavior. If effective symbols flow through an effective channel and reach the receiver, then marketplace behavior in the form of purchases is the feedback evidence. However, the information model includes noise, which is anything that might interfere with effective transmission and reception. Assuming the chosen symbols effectively signify, and that the chosen channel effectively conveys, the context of communication still can alter, modify or cancel the desired effect. Because of the lack of detail, the information model offers no guidance concerning the source, character or mechanism of noise. Nor does the model suggest how feedback may offer insight into noise. General feedback shows only general effectiveness that cannot adequately evaluate the initiated communication. Marketplace purchases ultimately may be the desired advertising affect, but as feedback, they are too general to evaluate communication effectiveness.

### **A better-tailored model**

The traditional information model may be useful for an overview of general communication processes. Within the overall cultural information system, however, various forms have distinct features that the general model fails to illustrate. This becomes obvious with attempts to define conceptually the various model components. Operational definition clarifies the inadequacy of the general model. In advertising, which largely determines brand significance, the component definitions are ambiguous. As a source, the marketer seems clearly to fill the role because the marketer initiates the process. But if the source is whoever initiates the

message and not just the process, then, in common current practice, the marketer is not the source because an agent initiates the message. The interaction between the marketer as process initiator and agent as message initiator is another complete communication sub-process. Just this brief, initial example shows that the development of brands as consumption morphemes is a complicated process that comprises sub-processes.

The advertising message is an apparent sub-process. The message comprises the components of the traditional model, but the components are fictional. Advertising is an impersonal form, as are other forms of mediated communication. Such a form imposes the traditional model onto a message in which the same model is embedded. The source has an identity within the main message that is not the source of the main message; it is a source of the subordinate message embedded in the main message. The channel in the subordinate message differs from the channel of the main message. The subordinate channel is implicit. While the main channel is mediated, the subordinate channel can be direct and interpersonal. The effectiveness of the implicit channel is entirely within the control of the main message creator, as is the effectiveness of the symbols conveyed. Therefore, in the embedded subordinate message, noise may not be a component. Similarly, as a creation of the main message source, the receiver in the subordinate message can only interpret the message as the main message source chooses. The fictional sources and receivers of the embedded message may share implicit aggregate characteristics with actual main sources and receivers, but at best, the fictional are only symbolic signifiers of the actual.

The advertising message is an embedded discourse. An apparent initiator utilizes conventional cultural symbols to construct propositions. The first proposition concerns the identity of the initiator in terms of possessing the cultural standing to offer subsequent propositions. The second proposition concerns the identity of an apparent interpreter, revealed as though known by the initiator. The third proposition concerns the relationship between the apparent initiator and the apparent interpreter. The relationship is complementary, with the initiator in a superior position to alleviate tension or conflict that environmental interaction has engendered. The tension of conflict can be physical, psychological or social. The initiator has knowledge of or expertise about tension or conflict management, reduction or elimination. The tension or conflict never arises from the relationship between apparent initiator and apparent interpreter. The fourth proposition concerns the ideal or desired relationship between the apparent interpreter and the physical, psychological or social environment. The fifth proposition concerns the relationship between the

apparent initiator's knowledge or expertise and the ideal or desired relationship between apparent interpreter and environment.

Cultural convention defines the significance of the embedded discourse. Consumers interpret a comprehensive significance based on message features that convey another level of embedded message. The appearance and presentation of the message leads consumers to interpret the message as advertising. An embedded message could be for edification, elucidation or emotional gratification. For advertising, the correct cultural interpretation is that the embedded message is a parallel or an analogy that consumers can apply to their own circumstances for more effective environmental interrelationships. Upon receiving an advertisement, consumers can accept, reject or ignore the relationship in the embedded message. Further, they can accept, reject or ignore the implicit propositions. Consumers consider whether the apparent receivers and circumstances are parallel or analogous to actual consumers and their circumstances, and whether improvement in fictional relationships would transfer to actual relationships.

The advertising message has two sources, two channels and two receivers that are actual and embedded respectively. But as noted already, another distinct communication process usually occurs in the creation of the advertising message. The primary source initiating the entire advertising process is also the source in the preliminary communication. The message is the symbolic influence to elicit co-operation from a receiver who is the source's agent in advertising message creation. The channel can be face-to-face or mediated, but is generally interpersonal. The feedback is the advertising message that the agent creates. The feedback component in all communication involves a relationship reversal in the model. By initiating feedback, the receiver becomes a source. By interpreting feedback, the source becomes a receiver. An agent creates an advertising message and submits it to the source for approval. Because this is a feedback process, the agent that was originally the receiver becomes the source. The primary source becomes the receiver of feedback. Further, the primary source becomes a receiver of the advertising message who interprets the message and responds with feedback such as approval or requests for revision. Because of the various components, interrelationships and sub-processes, advertising cannot fit the basic information model of communication.

Although the components of the information model are also components of an adequate advertising model, they must be elaborated for sufficient detail. The complexity of interrelationships among components is also greater than the information model can illustrate adequately. All consumption, as a culture, is a complex communication process. In its

simplicity, the information model provides a conceptual base. But an adequate model--and even more so a cultural model--expands the base to accommodate variation in the components and their interrelationships. Ultimately, advertising is intra-cultural communication. A model that accommodates culture as communication will also accommodate advertising. The source will include the primary initiator, the creator or author, and the implied or fictional source in the embedded message. The advertising message includes the implicit message from the primary source to consumers, the embedded message that is the advertising content, and the implicit or explicit message concerning the relationship between the actual consumer and culture. The receiver includes the primary source as content reviewer, the implicit or explicit embedded receiver, and consumer as intended actual receivers. The entire process occurs in a cultural context that both initiates and interprets significance.

### **Branding relationships**

Relationship is a component of all communication acts. The sender-initiator proposes at least implicitly a relationship with the receiver-interpreter. In disseminating consumption, an advertisement proposes to establish a primary relationship and signify that relationship with a brand. Because of the complexity of the process, advertising establishes subsidiary or subordinate relationships that the brand also signifies. The brand can signify the advertisement, an advertising campaign or a history of advertising campaigns. The sum of symbolic environments that constitute advertising becomes encapsulated in the brand. Consumers look to the brand for signifying consistency. The relationship between the consumer and brand is the significant analog to the cultural context. Whichever relationship consumers derive as primary or dominant from the advertising message, a brand signifies and conveys it to the surrounding culture. Through brand consumption, consumers initiate discourse that proposes a cultural relationship analogous to that which a brand signifies.

One contemporary view of brands isolates the signified relationship from the surrounding culture. Historically, brands appear on physical objects. The strong association between brands and physical objects easily conveys an interpretation that the relationships brands signify include physical objects. The objects, however, convey a cultural significance even without brands affixed to them. Culture converts objects to products even without human intervention that modifies objects from naturally occurring states. Culture affixes significance to an object that converts it to a product. The significance is the value that culture attaches to the



object. The significance resides with the product, which may be physically indistinguishable from its earlier state as insignificant object. A brand affixed to an object signifies that the object itself is significant as a culturally valued product. When a consumer utilizes the branded product consistent with the affixed cultural value, the brand can signify that the relationship between consumer and product is the culturally recognized value.

Although consumption may include relationships with products, those relationships are only components of a larger system. Consumption is communication. Products are non-social objects. They signify cultural value, but they are not cultural components. Product value resides with the product but does not inhere in the product. A relationship with a product, therefore, is a relationship with the culture that attaches value to the product. The product is a medium of the relationship with culture. Product use is merely a form in the larger communication system. Through anthropomorphism, culture can attach social qualities to products so that culture members interpret them to be social objects. Yet, products can do no more than signify the cultural social-object model through which consumers relate to culture. Consumption communicates relationships between and among persons. For consumers to have relationships with products, culture instills in consumers a sense of object personhood. In this way, consumption can comprise relationships with both natural and social environments.

Products can and do signify. But as physical objects, they typically carry the capacity to modify the consumer's physical environment. By itself, a product does absolutely nothing. Even a product meant for decoration and aesthetic pleasure does nothing until a consumer interacts with it by observing. Without consumer participation and interaction, a product is only a culturally irrelevant, meaningless object. Without a consumer's notice, that object is not even a constituent component of the consumer's environment. No object occurs until a consumer becomes aware of it. The object becomes a tool when a consumer can interact with it to effect a circumstantial modification to the consumer's benefit. The tool becomes a product when the modified circumstances conform to, comply with, and at least partially fulfill a cultural value to the consumer's individual and cultural benefit. The quality of being a product is inseparable from actual consumer utility within the recognized and prescribed patterns of cultural behavior.

Converting objects to tools and then to products manifests consumption. But the use of products is a mode of expression that communicates within a cultural context. The content of consumption can be product use. Actual

consumption lies behind product use. Consumption is the set of relationships that are available for perception derived from sensation. All behavior can communicate. Some behavior falls outside the system of information forms that constitute culture. Consumers do not attend to such behavior as meaningful, so it may escape notice. Through repetition and imitation, behavior that was once outside the system tends to become meaningful. The meaning is not the behavior itself or even the observable consequences of the behavior. All behavior asserts a relationship. Product use is a signifying act. As other behaviors, it signifies relationships. Product use systematically manipulates signs of culturally recognized relationships. Consumption is the process of engaging in relationships that symbolic behaviors signify. Product use is only one form of symbolic behavior in the consumption system.

Brands signify relationships. That is their only purpose. They give appearance to what is naturally abstract. A relationship involves at least two concepts. In consumption, one of the concepts is always a consumer or group of consumers. Products in relation to consumers are media through which consumers establish relationships with other consumers and the culture. A brand signifies a relationship with a product only insofar as the product signifies a relationship with another concept. Without the conversion of object to tool to product, a brand would signify nothing. Within culture, products define a set of like consumers who signify relationships through specific product use. Brands signify relationships within sets of similar consumers. Consumption is the entire system of possible relationships. Each brand signifies a specific relationship or modifies a general relationship to be more specific. In consumption discourse, brands are the initiated message content that guides the interpreted relationship. Because all consumer relationships are branded, brands inform consumers concerning what relationships they can have.

A study of consumer relationships with brands is always incomplete. A brand is an object in the sense that it has a physical appearance available for sensation. Unlike a natural object, a brand is an artifact of human behavior. All physical appearances elicit some interpretation from a human observer. The brand appearance elicits at least the interpretation that the brand is an intentional rather than accidental form. A brand cannot be just an object with no implicit relationship. The intentional appearance implies a purpose that compels the interpretation that a brand is at least a tool, which is a relationship between concepts. A brand is complete appearance with no capacity to modify a physical environment except in appearance. The inevitable interpretation is that a brand signifies some

recognized cultural relationship. Consumers have relationships with brand appearances according to signifying capacity. A brand is a conduit to connect consumers in a culturally recognized relationship. The complete relationship between consumer and brand includes other consumers specifically and generally. The types of relationships between consumers and brands are the same as the types of relationships among consumers.

## Creating communication

To be adequate and accurate, any communication model must include all components necessary for communication to occur. Even a general model must somehow include every *sine qua non* of the communication process. One of those components is the sender. Another is the receiver. In the culture that is consumption, consumers can send or receive, initiate or interpret. In considering whether the symbols of the message convey the desired meaning, discourse analysis assumes that the desired meaning originates with the sender or initiator. In consumption, brands are the symbols that initiating senders use to convey meaning to interpreting receivers. Both senders and receivers are consumers. Consumer initiators use brands for their accepted capacities to convey specific meanings accurately to consumer interpreters. In the advertising process, however, the sender initiator is not a consumer but rather a marketer or other message sponsor. Because brands will be components of consumption communication, the meaning is that which is desired by consumers rather than by marketers. Consumers, therefore, are the ultimate creators of the meaning that the sender initiator must convey.

Culture binds marketers and consumers both to the set of meanings available to signify. Even an apparently innovative product must fulfill some latent value to make it manifest. Apparent innovation merely reduces a cultural tension by providing a signifier for a relationship that has always been implicit in a culture. Rather than initiate communication, a marketer imitates communication already initiated through culture. The marketer appears to initiate, but only does so on behalf of culture. The initiated discourse must assert a relationship that culture already recognizes and accepts, even though the relationship may be latent. With an innovative, original product, the brand signifies the newly manifest relationship. Advertising portrays culturally defined relationships that brands signify. Consumption is the system of defining relationships and making them manifest. Consumption cannot be separated from consumers. Their behavior defines the conventions of relationships and the symbols available to signify relationships. Brand design is a process of discovering

the symbolic properties that will evoke, and thus signify, specific relationships.

Because all behavior communicates, products are components of a cultural grammar. Derived from physical objects, products are mechanisms for signifying achievement. As a system of relationships, culture defines and specifies all forms of environmental interaction. Objects transformed into tools afford consumers the means to modify the physical environment. Modification that serves a culturally defined value transforms the tool into a product, which signifies achievement or potential achievement of the value. A product is not the object or even the tool, but rather a symbol that signifies a physically observable consequence of consumption. Brands are also components of a cultural grammar. They differ from products in that they neither begin as objects nor transform into tools. In a broad sense, all symbols are tools for the purpose of message formation and communication. But a physical tool has some logical or sensible relation to achieving observable consequences. The relationship between a symbol and the value it signifies is arbitrary. Brands signify cultural values that otherwise defy physical observation because they are social and psychological. The purpose of brands is to make social and psychological values available for observation.

Because they derive from objects, products have physical properties and can be physical property. In a culture that recognizes personal property, the distinct object with specific physical dimensions, even when transformed into a tool and product, can belong to somebody. That is, a specific person can have the exclusive right to possess, use, enjoy and dispose of the object. How any person may use the object does not inhere with the object but rather with the person. The transformation of object to tool is the foundation of intellectual property. Diffusion among others manifests shared value achieved through a specific use, and transforms the tool into a product. The specific object may be individually owned physical property, but its mode of use is commonly owned intellectual property. A brand can signify a specific use. Although the actual use is commonly owned, the brand is the intellectual property of its creator or sponsor, who retains the right to possess, use, enjoy and dispose of the brand. When used for marketing, the brand signifies the commonly owned product value. The privately owned device signifies the publicly owned value. Unless consumers accept the significance, the brand is worthless to its owner.

At its inception, a brand is only an artifact of human behavior. It begins as a graphic device that communicates only that some behavior has occurred. All behavior communicates. As an artifact of behavior, the

brand signifies the creative behavior that resulted in the appearance of the device. At its creation, the device is not yet a brand. Even if the ultimate creative purpose is to establish a brand, the initial result is only an artifact that communicates the occurrence of some deliberate behavior. The artifact must undergo transformation to become a brand just as an object must undergo transformation to become a product. The first occurrence of a device may not be a cultural act but rather an individual whim. At this point, the device signifies only itself and the behavior that originated the appearance. Repeated duplication separates the device from signifying the creative process. The device becomes a deliberate design that signifies the purpose of its duplication, which can be independent of the initial creative purpose and can bring the design into the cultural system. Then, the design is available to signify something other than itself or the duplication purpose. At this point, what the design can signify is arbitrary, subject only to consumer perception and interpretation. It becomes a brand.

A brand has a tangible aspect. Usually, the properties of a brand make it available for visual perception. But the ability to reproduce the specific properties determines the form a brand can take. Further, the properties must be perceptible from a distance, and they must be durable enough to be available for repeated perceptions. As a symbol, the form must consist of properties that a channel can convey effectively. The properties must have the capacity to signify, which is to evoke something other than those same properties. Fragrances, flavors and tactile devices may be unique to certain products, but they can only evoke themselves. They may be reproducible, but no channel can convey them. Audible properties may be unique to certain products, but they can evoke only the combination of properties that constitute that product. Other audible devices may be arbitrary, having no inherent association with any other properties that constitute a product. A channel can convey them. But they lack durability. Upon conveyance, the device disappears. Further perception requires duplication. Visual devices have all the qualities to be effective brands. They are reproducible. They have the capacity for conveyance through effective channels. They are durable. They can be purely symbolic with no inherent relationship to what they may signify. Their tangible aspects are irrelevant to their meanings.

What brands signify is what they actually are. What they signify to the brand rights owner differs from what they mean to consumers. To the rights owner, the brand signifies a commercial relationship with consumers. Through commercial transactions, the rights owner licenses brand use to consumers. The license gives consumers a temporary right to possess, use and enjoy the brand. But consumers may not dispose of those

rights in another commercial transaction. The commercial transaction between rights owner and consumer depends on what the brand signifies to consumers. Though the rights owner can and will endeavor to establish brand significance, consumption occurs only through significance that consumers establish. Consumer perceived significance does not inhere in the physical, graphic device. It does not inhere anywhere. Consumers create the value that they perceive the brand to signify. The rights owner actually only owns the rights to the physical, graphic device. Consumers own what the brand signifies and, therefore, what the brand actually is. Consumer whim can alter or remove significance.

A product and a brand are both cultural artifacts. The former derives from an object. The latter derives from a graphic device. The object and the device originate as meaningless appearances. The process of assigning meaning transforms object into product and graphic device into brand. Culture is the activator in the process and the source of meaning. As cultural components, consumers produce the values that make objects and devices meaningful. Shared values and conventions of recognition belong to all consumers collectively through consumption as culture. Regardless of who owns the rights to an object or graphic device, consumers create and assign the meaningful value and the result of transformation into product or brand. A device cannot be a brand without active consumer transformative behavior. The essence of a brand belongs to consumers. A brand can only serve a cultural purpose in signifying relationships among socially valued concepts. The graphic device is merely a symbol conveyed by the channel, which is the object to which the device is affixed.

## **Consumption model**

Neither the graphic device nor the object that carries it is the brand. The device signifies a cultural concept and its relationship to other concepts. The relationship between device as signifier and the signified concept is the brand. That relationship occurs only in consumers' minds. Unless consumers mentally connect the signifying device with the signified concept, branding does not occur. The owner of device rights may affix the device consistently to a certain product. Consumers may recognize the unique association between device and product. But that recognition only transforms the device into a design. When consumers perceive the design as signifying an abstract concept and relationship, transformation into a brand occurs. Ultimately, a brand cannot be affixed to any object because it is an abstract relationship between signifier and signified. That which occurs in consumers' minds can only belong to consumers. Brands only