

Chapter 15

Creating Cultural Analogues in Virtual Communities through Branding

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ABSTRACT

This chapter shows how cultures construct analogues of actual environments, societies, communities, and the individuals who compose them. Analogues replace actual in human perception. Analogues engender further cultural development and renewal that produce higher order analogues in which the original actual may submerge into oblivion. Brands have evolved from representations of property to representations of consumers, but always expressing cultural value. As components of cultural discourse, brands have become an important mode of consumer communication, identifying and distinguishing consumers as social objects within consumer market culture. Virtual communities have evolved from telephonic verbal communication to highly interactive electronic media. Throughout this evolution, virtual communities have been analogues of actual communities to the extent that technology permits. Greater technological detail brings greater detail in the production of analogues. eBranding offers identity components in virtual consumer culture environments for transfer to actual consumer culture environments, resulting in brand viability and marketing success.

INTRODUCTION

The term analogue as used here means a similarity or parallel in relationship. The critical analogue is culture, which is a system of representations, signs used as substitutes for actual objects or concepts for the purpose of communication. In the actual world, objects and concepts have relationships. By analogy, their representations hold the same

relationship. Through culture, the reverse also obtains: A relationship established between representations extends by analogy to the objects or concepts represented. The latter process is critical to branding consumers in either actual or virtual environments. The greater analogic relationship, however, is between the entire actual and virtual environments. Culture governs the structure and interrelationships among representations in any en-

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vironment but especially virtual environments. By analogy, representations in virtual environments hold the same relationships as the represented objects or concepts in actual environments. The reverse also obtains: Relationships established between representations in virtual environments extend by analogy to objects concepts in actual environments. Utilizing brands as consumer representations, relationships established between consumers in virtual environments extend by analogy to consumers in actual environments.

This chapter discusses brands as critical design elements in virtual communities. All human behavior communicates, including brand consumption, which is so important to consumer culture that any electronic environment without brands will seem unrelated to any actual environment. The increasing use of electronic technology in marketing communication requires that marketers understand the culture of consumption and the function of brands as consumer communication. This understanding will enable marketers to create effective electronic environment designs for product and brand trial, and to integrate electronic environments with other marketing communication.

This chapter is about the evolution of brands and virtual communities, projecting that evolution into future trends. The chapter begins by discussing the evolution of brands from representations of property rights to representations of consumer properties. The next section discusses the evolution of virtual communities. The following sections discuss culture generally, the system of meanings in consumer culture, culture in virtual communities, communicating culture through products and brands, and branding consumption. The final section discusses future trends, a continuing evolution in which marketers design virtual communities that include brands to give consumers a sense of being in those communities.

EVOLUTION OF BRANDS

Brands are signs, components of system of symbolic representations that largely constitutes culture. They have always expressed value, which is subjective. The origin of brands is cloudy. Centuries ago in traditional Indian marketplaces, some merchants already used tokens to distinguish their products from competitors' commodities. Through such use, brands asserted greater relative value to buyers. Brands have also been statements of property, i.e. the right to possess, use, enjoy and dispose of an object. Such use asserts not only that an object carries subjective value, but also that the value belongs to the owner and no others. Brands have been necessary to distinguish objects that were difficult to distinguish by their own inherent properties, attributes or characteristics that had subjective value. Brands further developed into statements of the outcome of product use when the attributes that cause the outcome were difficult to distinguish. That is, brands evolved to represent the expected subjectively valued outcome of human interaction with products. Through the entire evolutionary process, brands have been components of conventional social communication.

Originally, brands most often occurred in the context of the objects to which they were attached in actual environments. By association, brands primarily represented objects and secondarily the outcome on the environment of interacting with the objects. Contemporary brands, however, most often occur within the context of marketing communication. That is, brands most often occur within the context of the system of symbolic representations that constitute the analogue world of culture. Therefore, consumers interpret brands based upon the context of communication more than upon product use or relationship with the producer.

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