

Semiotics: a strategic tool for innovation

 By [Dora Jurd](#)

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Semiotics is the art of deciphering the meaning of any type of signs (verbal, visual or physical) that surround people in a particular culture.

From a marketing point of view, semiotics is able to unveil the profound connotations of a brand, a product or a consumer's habit and therefore, is usually used in branding and consumer research, to analyse the meaning of a brand's communications or the profound drivers of consumers' usages and attitudes: What do the communications produced by a brand tell us about the positioning and the personality of this brand, compared to others in the same category?

What is the territory pre-empted by the brand? How can it evolve? What are the profound drivers that lead consumers in this category? Etc.



Semiotics is thus key to research the **cultural insights** that drive consumers, products and brands in a particular market or culture.

But how can semiotics and innovation specifically interact with each other and how can they feed each other?

To begin with, innovation and semiotics, as expertises, both require the **same approach**: Constant questioning, curiosity

and empathy. Innovators and semioticians are all driven by the desire to design something that makes sense for a market or culture. They naturally enrich each other deeply and have all the reasons to work hand in hand.

Second, the innovation process is roughly composed of three main phases: Inspiration, ideation, implementation/prototype, where, in each of them semiotics serves as a strategic guide.

Semiotics can be a valuable tool for inspiration as it helps identifying where the white space is, where an untouched territory can be grasped for a brand, a service or a product. It helps to navigate better in the uncertainty and make clearer and wiser decisions.

At this stage, semiotics can help evaluating the potentiality of an innovation by:

- Identifying culturally the territories of competitors and therefore precisely defining which territory needs to be grasped and why,
- Assessing if one chosen territory is suitable for the product or the brand regarding the cultural environment of this brand or product,
- Giving new inspirations for territories or brand positioning based on cultural trends.

In the ideation phase, semiotics is helpful as it puts ideas directly into a cultural context and assesses them with regards to this context.

It thus gives to the **ideation phase** a more precise and detailed orientation. For example, for a new product, the semiotician can assess each component in terms of cultural acceptance: Does this particular component make sense with the general use of the product?

How will it be perceived in this particular country?

What can be improved: Shapes, colours, sounds, etc?

In the **prototyping phase**, semiotics helps to get a detailed analysis and assessment of a prototype, complementary to a consumer test. Consumers give their opinion, if they like or dislike and why.

Semiotics assesses every single component of a product or service and analyse the acceptance and interpretation of these components within a particular culture. Why this component will perform better than another or not? Where do we need to put the emphasis? On which idea or components is it strategic to communicate to have the best welcome?

Overall, semiotics acts as a powerful and detailed strategic tool for innovation and can be integrated very early in the process so as to save time and money.

Indeed, it helps to reduce iterations, to aim accurately and to take the right decisions. It also adds finesse and depth to any innovation thanks to its strong analytical power and cultural anchoring.

ABOUT DORA JURD

Dora Jurd co-founded Innovative Matters, a strategic innovation lab, with Armandine Robin in 2014. The company is dedicated to designing innovative concepts and building consistent brand experiences. After working in product development for cosmetics, luxury goods and industrial firms in Europe and the USA, she worked as a brand strategist at the TBWA Group in France. She published a book in 2002 on family businesses in France and contributed to the 2015 Brands & Branding edition.

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