

# The Marketing Language of Hospitality

## A Semiotic Approach

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**Abstract**— This paper explores how a language of hospitality is contained within contemporary marketing communications. This paper traces an established global semiotic language of hospitality, and how definable set of images and textual conventions have come to define both the hospitality industry and the hospitality experience within contemporary marketing practices. The ability to recognize and understand the theoretical foundations of this language when utilized alongside traditional marketing creates a more holistic form of marketing practice. This paper forwards the assertion that marketing is fundamentally a cultural activity that requires an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural foundations of the activity, and it is only once this has been achieved can we tailor and create effective marketing campaigns generates meaning and is understood and appreciated by the consumer.

**Keywords-component:** *Semiotics, methodology, sign vehicle, hospitality, dining, food, marketing, interpretation, websites.*

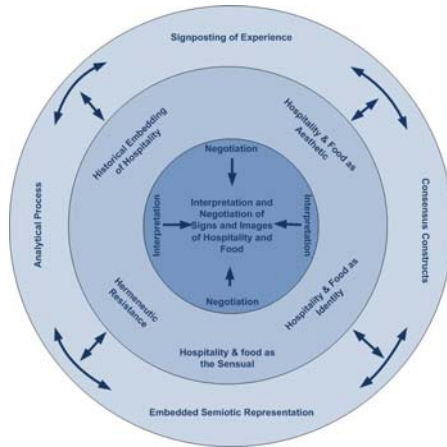
### Introduction

One of the crucial elements of effective hospitality marketing is that the marketing message provides a transparent communication about the nature of the product, and the benefits the consumption of the product bestows upon the consumer. However, in order to reach this stage, marketers and academics need to understand precisely what messages should be communicated, and how the consumer understands and locates meaning within hospitality orientated communications. This necessitates both the adoption of traditional approaches to the analysis of markets through segmentation, and the augmentation of this approach with a more culturally orientated methodology. This enables the identification and exploration of the significance of the product or activity for the consumer. It may be argued that the Hospitality experience plays a significant role in contemporary life and is often employed to commemorate the passage of time, life, death and celebration, as a result our own individual relationship to hospitality as consumers are imbued with social, cultural, historical and individual biographical significance. This brocade of influences informs a discourse or language of hospitality that permeates contemporary hospitality marketing. This paper explores this language and identifies how industry generates meaning and how as consumers we interact with this discourse. In order to achieve this, the paper adapts a social semiotic model (see Figure 1).

To illustrate how the language of hospitality has become fundamental to effective contemporary hospitality marketing practices this paper explores three hospitality websites; Raymond Blanc's Two Michelin Star Hotel and Restaurant 'Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons' (<http://www.manoir.com>), Thomas Keller's 'The French Laundry' (<http://frenchlaundry.com>) and Danny Mayer's 'Gramercy Tavern' (<http://www.gramercytavern.com>). Traditional marketing approaches have adopted a largely quantitatively orientated approach to segment the market, and as such the consumer is identified as part of a homogenized mass (Tresidder 2013) However in accepting and recognizing a more culturally orientated approach, we need to recognize that each individual consumer will bring with them a personal biography of knowledge and experiences. This biography directly influences the way consumers interact with marketing communications, and as such each individual will find different meanings when negotiating hospitality marketing communications. In order to comprehend the impact of this personal biography upon the interpretation process, this paper utilizes a hermeneutically informed social semiotic methodology that has been influenced by the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001). Within this approach the consumer is identified as an interactive participant in the communication process, and within the interpretation process they negotiate and interact with the text to find meaning. Thus, consumers play a dynamic role in the marketing process rather than being passive, unquestioning participants in the communication process.

The method presented below was originally developed to analyze how potential tourists interpreted and found meaning within tourism brochures (Tresidder 2010), however by adapting the conceptual framework to reflect the social and cultural significance of hospitality within the methodology it has been possible to effectively to modify it for the hospitality sector. The method consists of three layers of meaning and analysis (see Figure 1). The external layer of the model identifies how consumers are influenced by the historical and cultural embedding of the hospitality experience within society, and how this establishes a language of hospitality through elements of shared understanding, or as Emmanuel (1997) labels them, 'consensus constructs'. The second level explores how meaning is both produced and

consumed, and recognizes that this process is informed by a historically and culturally significant discourse that surrounds hospitality, and ultimately informs the interaction each consumer has with the text and the subsequent experience of hospitality for the individual consumer. While the third level of the method, embodies the individual's interpretation and identification of meaning by the consumer. The analysis of these layers will be explored throughout the remainder of this paper.



**Figure 1. Charting the Semiotic Interpretation Process or The Search for Meaning**

**Reading the Hospitality Experience**

As stated previously, this paper utilizes a social semiotic method that was formerly developed for understanding how consumers read tourism brochures. Although the conceptual framework needs to reflect the subject area, the foundation of how consumers read texts remains the same. It is to this element that we now turn. The signs and images used in the sites can be separated into two components the 'Narrative' and the 'Conceptual' (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996:56). Narrative structures always have a line of communication that directs the consumer to the message being presented within the communication, or in the case of this paper the website. Conversely, conceptual representations do not rely on vectors to transmit meaning as the 'conceptual' facet belongs to the culture in which they are generated, for example the significance of hospitality within the culture the reader is associated or immersed with. Vectors are established by routes or lines of vision across the screen or text, these vectors connect and link the text to the author. As a consequence of this process, an image can be both a participant and a vector (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996:59). A vector affords a connection or a 'method of realization' between the consumer and the text or narrative, once this connection is made, the initial interpretation is achieved. The vector guides the consumer and emphasizes the importance of the representation, critically, the '...means of realization produce quite similar semantic relations' (2001:44). Thus, the affiliation between the website and the consumer is supported

and reinforced, this relationship allows the communication of meaning to be identified and espoused by the consumer in terms of collective hegemonic definitions of hospitality. Nevertheless, not all visual or textual elements on the website support universal forms of interpretation that cross cultural and social divides:

Rather, a given culture has a range of general, possible relations which is not tied to expression in any particular semiotic code...This distribution of realization possibilities across the semiotic codes is itself determined historically and socially. (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001:44)

Therefore, the representations of the experience hospitality in the three websites (and all hospitality orientated marketing) are mediated by historical and cultural discourses (see Artbury 2005, O'Connor 2005, O'Gorman 2007) that are continually contextualized by a meaning rich semiotic language of hospitality. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, this mediation challenges notions of reality, as they state:

Pictorial structures do not simply reproduce the structure of reality. On the contrary, they produce images of reality which are bound up with the interests of the social institutions within which the pictures are produced, circulated and read. They are ideological. (1996:45)

Therefore, semiotically, restaurant websites can be seen to have an objective and a purpose that is ideological (Ferguson 1998) as it represents a number of commercial or capitalist discourses, for example the many discussion that surround the relationship between McDonalds and globalization, westernization or health.

The reactionary process the consumer enters into when reading the website of the restaurants observes the actors within the site also becoming to be reactors, while the goals of the website become phenomena (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001:64). The reactor is the participant who does the looking or gazing, while the phenomenon element is shaped by alternative participants at whom the reactor is looking, or by a whole visual proposition. Therefore, the images become the actor as they are non-transactional, while representing a phenomenon of the hospitality by virtue that it is located contained by The French Laundry or the Gramercy Tavern's website. While the web banners linking to information about the Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons' and the Orient Express Group become a reactor, a transactional response is devised by the reader as the 'text directs perception' and interpretation through reinforcing 'signposts' of experience. Critically, the written textual element of the website guides perception and underlining the significance of the images used, this results in a conversion activity taking place that is guided by techniques such as, the use of text (Davis 2005), changes in written context and the represented meaning of the hospitality experience (Marshall 2005). Kress and van Leeuwen

(2001:67) call this process 'participant relay'. This is clearly witnessed in The French Laundry's website with elements of the philosophy directing the interpretation process. For example, the picture of a dressed scallop is accompanied by text that supports the experience by stating that;

"Because a great meal is not one that fills you up. A great meal is a kind of journey that returns you to sources of pleasure you may have forgotten..."

This relay demonstrates a text-image association in which text extends or re-conceptualizes the visual information about the nature of the experience being offered by the restaurants.

The interpretation of narrative images on the website is additionally directed by the presence of what Kress and van Leeuwen define as 'secondary participants' (1996:67). These



Vegetable Garden French Laundry



Vegetable Garden Le Manoir

Figure 2: Serving the Organic

participants are not related via vectors but become linked in other contexts (2001:71) within the 'setting' of the narrative

images. For example, if an image of a customer is contained within an advertisement, they create a vector that defines their role and status within the service context, while waiting staff in the background, emphasize the nature of the relationship between the host and guest and status of the guest within service relationship as they are demonstrating their subservience (sic). Another example of this process are the glass cloches that protect the vegetables from the weather as seen in Le Manoir's garden (see Figure 2), or the statement on the Gramercy homepage which states "...bricks for the wood burning oven come from the last American foundry to cut bricks by hand." Both of these examples represent relationship to the authentic and offer a contrast to the fast food culture (Delind 2006) and inauthenticity of postmodern culture. In a way such semiotic examples of authenticity offer a form of providing roots in a rootless society, or alternatively a semiotic refuge for the consumer to enter, and to psychologically escape the profane aspects of everyday life.

The first stage of the consumers' interpretation places the experience of hospitality within the numerous cultural and historical discourses that define hospitality and food. These discourses are supported by narrative and conceptual structures utilized within the websites. The recognition of these structures both locates and signposts experience of The French Laundry, Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons' and The Gramercy Tavern within contemporary cultural definitions of food and hospitality, the embedding of significance and the use of distinct hospitality orientated signs and images are contextualized with this movement. The websites intersperse and distort conceptions of place, country, the archaic, the contemporary and the commercial, but simultaneously providing a shroud around the commercial marketing of the websites to create an individualistic space.

The use of hegemonic representations hospitality within marketing texts, creates what Jenkins (2003) calls 'expected places', these places reflect the ordering of images by providing representations of all the aspects of hospitality we would expect to see, for example the dining room, food, décor etc. or in other words the foundations of the language of hospitality. These are supported in the case of the three restaurants by a variety of experiential themes, such as the statements pertaining to the provenance of the bricks, or the garden at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons', these experiential themes add an additional layer of experience to the practice of hospitality and marks their difference. The use of these experiential themes, signposts what these restaurants stand for, thus cementing their position, status and reinforcing the myth of haute cuisine. The impact these conventions within hospitality marketing, perpetuates definitions of luxury and hospitality and creates a need, want or desire on the part of the consumer. This theme is developed in all the sites, the Gramercy Tavern utilizes a tradition and heritage that is represented through the décor and statements about the provenance of the bricks and the antique American furniture. The French Laundry provides a more organic or 'earthy' approach, the initial picture of the door that is painted in a heritage blue and surrounds by mellow bricks and ivy,

signifies an understated notion of home, and this feeling is further reinforced by the continual link to the seasons and products. Therefore, time as represented within the websites unifies the past, present and future into a temporal malaise that is expressed by Jameson (1991:67) as, '...a series of pure and unrelated presents in time'. Although the language of hospitality within marketing communications offers countless escape attempts in which the consumer can find significance and escape, the experience of hospitality becomes '...dominated by a consciousness which emphasizes the discontinuity of experience' (Harvey 1993:157). Nevertheless, the representations of the restaurants and communicated experiences of hospitality proffer a delineated hospitality space in which experience may be semiotically consumed in the form of a tangible ontological act.

### Constructing the Language of Hospitality

In order to understand the significance of the language of tourism developed and utilized within the restaurant websites, it is important to understand the meaning of the language, and how it is constructed, the following sections of this paper explore the significance of this semiotic language. The marketing of 'Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons', 'The French Laundry' and the 'Gramercy Tavern' provide access for the consumer to a sensual world of luxury and hedonism in which food and the experience of dining are elevated from the mundane to a multi-sensual experience in which food, landscape and philosophy merge as one. Hospitality marketing utilizes what Dawkins (2009:34) labels, '...the semiotics of the senses'. The marketing of experience differs from other sectors such as, fashion marketing as the selling experiences are not tangible act, we cannot test drive or try the experience on as we can only feel or consume it once, the experience will differ every time we re-visit it, as such experiences marketing endeavors to immerse the consumer in a sensual world of luxury and indulgence whereby we can



Figure 3: Le Manoir Bedroom

imagine consumption. As a result, the language of hospitality adopts a very sensual and visceral focus and consequently the

relationship between hospitality marketing and the senses is of particular significance.

The marketing of restaurants draws from a semiotic code that surrounds both hospitality and food (see Brunori 2007), these codes also include the formal ritual of food production and service (see Figures 2-5) to create an identifiable experience and theatre that elevates the experience of dining at luxury restaurants to that of the extraordinary. Resultantly, establishments such as Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons', Gramercy Tavern and The French Laundry represent the iconic (see Claseen 2007) or mythical (see Magee 2007) sectors of hospitality, and upon which others will be compared and judged. The mythical discourse that surrounds hospitality is informed by the theme of hospitality providing physical and psychological peace, security, comfort and refreshment (Hely 2002), in other words the myth that surrounds these restaurants and their representations within hospitality marketing provide a refuge from the world of fast food and ambiguity of living in a the post-industrial world (Delind 2006). The semiotic language of hospitality offered within Figures 2-5 offer the consumer a world of prodigality and luxury to explore, a world of experience in which the average consumer is generally excluded. The images used by the websites are empty, with no sign of human interaction; the site invites us in as consumers (or even voyeurs) to vicariously find escape or even social therapy through the semiotic consumption (rather than physical consumption) of the represented experience of hospitality.

Meaning is guided or signposted by a set of visual and textual marketing conventions in which as consumers we invest in through exchanges of cultural capital and consumption as expressions of identity, as such our relationship with hospitality acts as a marker of who we are, (Howes 2004, Delind 2006, Ruben 2008, Dawkins 2009) or who we wish to be. It is interesting to note that Thomas Keller reflects this sentiment within The French Laundry homepage and states that;

"Respect for food is a respect for life, for who we are and what we do"

Additionally, we elevate the consumption of food as a sensual and luxurious exercise (Reed-Danahay 1996, van der Veen 2003, Howes 2004, Magee 2007, Dawkins 2009). Just like all marketing and the production of materials within the media (Kress and Van Leewuen 1996) the language of hospitality is an ideological construct (Ferguson 1998, Ruben 2008) that is disseminated by the portrayals of hospitality and food in culture (Ferguson 1998, Hollander 1999, Ferry 2003, Magee 2007) and advertising. It is from these ideological influence and embedded definitions of hospitality that hospitality draws its' content, structure and message.



Gramercy Tavern

The French Laundry



Le Manoir

Figure 4: Dining Experiences

### Hospitality as a Sacred Journey

The language of hospitality marketing also offers a defined notion of time and space that may be conceptualised as a 'servicescape' (Chronis et. Al. 2012:265). Hospitality marketing continually utilises the differentiation of time and space as a convention within marketing practice, this manipulation of time and space can be seen to operate at a number of levels, whether that be in terms of offering empty spaces in which consumers can find joy or pleasure, or whether it is offering a refuge of authenticity in an authentic world. However, what links all of these conventions together are that, the representations and messages contained within marketing texts provide a representation of hospitality as not being ordinary, as not being part of everyday life. The extraordinary nature of the three restaurants and their 'servicescapes' examined within this paper represent a time and place that is so removed from everyday lived experience, that the configuration of the hospitality experience may be defined as sacred.

Although the relationship between hospitality, food, the sacred and religion is clearly developed (Hely 2002, Artbury 2005, O'Connor 2005, O'Gorman 2007, Claseen 2007), the communication of the hospitality experience within the three restaurant websites institutes a 'configuration' of time, space' (Jokinen and McKie 1997:23), that locates hospitality and food as the sacred and as the antithesis of the profane aspects of everyday lived experience (Sered 1988). The idea that hospitality can be part of a sacred journey or even a cultural pilgrimage is clearly reflected in the

Philosophy element of The French Laundry's website that states;

A great meal is a kind of journey that returns you to the sources of pleasure you may have forgotten and takes you to places you haven't been before.

The language of hospitality marketing draws on various images, phrases, conventions, debates and discourses words and images to create the representation of a world in which, food and hospitality legitimately become part of what, Reed-Danahay (1996) refers to as, the 'legitimate art of living', the extraordinary and even the sacred when considered as the opposite of everyday lived experience. The conception of the hospitality experience as being linked with the notion of the sacred and the differentiation of time and space as represented within hospitality marketing has been developed, through the modification of Durkheim's (1995) hypothesis of the 'sacred and profane'. The consumers' exploration of websites of these three restaurants is just one of the means by which the consumer locates and fixes their encounters with the social. Just as Silverstone (1988) envisaged television as a 'ritual frame', as a cerebral, creative and practical space, in which everyone can access the things that mark off the social from the private (Couldry 2001:158), the website fashions a ritual frame that is semiotically constructed representing the ritual character of hospitality, one of the major conventions used to express this ritual frame are graphically illustrated by the ritualistic setting of the tables (see Figure 4). This ritual formality demonstrates a type of experience and way of life, it informs behavior, perception and cements the significance of the activity.

Just as the language of hospitality is a product of the social so are contemporary definitions of what constitutes the sacred, Durkheim (1995) in his exploration of religion as a social phenomenon, recognised that the notion of the sacred and profane are socially engendered and reflect the particular nature of the society and culture in which it is generated, thus reflecting their own conceptions and relationship to the sacred, the sacred emphasizes the distinction between social and ordinary experiences. In opposition to this, Caillois (1988:20) recognised that the two worlds of the mutually exclusive domains of the sacred and profane do not mingle in unmediated ways, that is, in the absence of collectively recognised rites of passage and acknowledged risks of admixture. 'He took great care to outline how the profane needs the sacred, and the regulation, through rites, of the process of consecration in the passage into the sacred from the profane.' (Genosko 2003:75). In adapting these foundational works within the context of consumer behaviour and marketing, Belk et al (1989), recognised that consumers enact a sacred/profane distinction within common domains of experience, and consumption becomes '...a vehicle of transcendent experience' (1989:2). This is significant for understanding the nature of the language of hospitality marketing in providing the individual consumers with access to a world in which escape, and fulfilment is possible. This notion of hospitality being elevated to the level of the sacred is

inextricably linked with the concept that marketing texts generate semiotic form of stimulation. Berlyn identifies that humans attempt to sustain a preferred intensity of arousal and seek, 'artificial sources of stimulation...to make up for the



Gramercy Tavern



French Laundry



Le Manoir

Figure 5: Food as Art

shortcomings of their environment' (1977:170). The experience of hospitality and dining is elevated into this atmosphere of transcendental arousal through ritual and significance (Fantasia 1995, Ferry 2003, Marshall 2005). The language of hospitality that underpins contemporary hospitality marketing, signifies, connotes and directs interpretation while reinforcing the significance of the ritualistic element involved in the production and consumption of the hospitality experience. The ritual of dining generates a form social harmony (Givon and Trostler 2008) and even

social therapy, it acts as a script that regulates order of dishes, the formality of setting and intensity of experience (Marshall 2005). The websites offer the interactive participant a 'passage into the sacred' or the 'sacred sphere of excess' (Caillois 1988:282). The embedded connotations of luxury within the restaurant websites, expresses a social distinction that augments social bonds in which the hospitality experience and dining turns out to be a celebration of society itself (van der Veen 2003), and in the Durkheimian tradition 'sacred'.

## Conclusion

Hospitality marketing provides an interesting case study of how meaning is constructed and consumed within marketing communications. From the research it is clear that subjects such as tourism and hospitality generate strong feelings as they play such an important role within our lives. In addition to this we need to recognize the cultural and social significance of such activities, and acknowledge that our understanding the hospitality experience has been shaped by a complex mixture of historical, social and cultural influences that embed the experience of hospitality within the contemporary world. It can also be argued that the marketing of tourism and hospitality need to be treated as a specialist area of activity, that locates and identifies the significance of the activity and its importance for the individual consumer. As stated previously, although traditional approaches to hospitality marketing adopt a largely quantitative approach to understanding the sector, the adoption of a more culturally orientated approach will enable marketers to comprehend the most effective means of communicating the hospitality experience, the result of this will be to enable marketers to utilize an effective semiotic language that truly reflects the meaning of contemporary hospitality.

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