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## **Cashing in on Culture: Breathing New Life into Old Brands**

One of the biggest challenges of consumer research is that it is often focused on the present; consumers tend only to play back what they are currently experiencing and what they know is going on around them right now.

For brands this is tricky. On the one hand, understanding 'now' is useful to get a sense of context and to course-correct on current strategy or to adapt to consumers needs. But on the other, it's hard to get a view on the future; how the bigger picture is changing and what opportunities – and threats – those changes might bring.

One of the strongest indicators of change is culture. Mapping how culture is changing can give brands a deeper insight into where their markets are heading. Cultural insight looks at how the world is changing, picks up on emergent shifts and then suggests to brands how they could adapt their positioning or creative execution to either remain relevant in existing markets, or seamlessly enter new ones.

In other words, cultural insight gives you the equivalent of a 'Rough Guide' to a market or category. And, like any traveller, once you know where you are going and what to expect when you get there, you can plan with more efficacy and make better decisions en route.

### **Gathering the information**

The modern brain encounters more cultural input in a day than the average 17th century person would have encountered in a lifetime. Which means most people have developed a huge bank of subconsciously learnt meanings to draw upon when they see something new.

Basically, it's how we know the red light means 'stop' at a traffic light and that a skull and crossbones means danger. It gets more complex when we consider that in Western culture we assume that a woman in a white dress is likely to be a bride, while in the East, the same image might indicate someone at a funeral.

Most of this bank of meanings is biased to the particular culture a person has grown up in. This is why many South Africans think beer in green bottles is 'posher' than beer in brown bottles, while the Greeks think about the category the other way around. These meanings are typically so integral to our experience of the world that most times, as consumers, we don't even think to articulate them in traditional research.

Cultural insight is what we use to map that bank of meanings. Rooted in anthropology, semiotics and literature studies, a lot of cultural insight tools are academic in origin and evolved from critical thinking developed at the beginning of last century to understand the production of political meaning in literature and art, (starting with Structuralism and Marxism and developing into the marginally more user friendly discipline of Cultural Studies.)

The approach relies on careful observation and analysis – of consumer behaviour and social interaction, of magazines and advertising, of retail floors and shelves. The researcher may also interview academics and specialists who are at the forefront of their industries and likely to reveal clues into specific cultural changes. Any direct interaction with consumers is rooted in the tenants of ethnography; observation and conversations are held in the consumer's own environment, with the emphasis on noting behaviour and cultural influence.

### **Decoding culture**

The 'hidden' but shared cultural meanings are referred to as 'codes'. A cultural insight specialist seeks to understand what networks of meaning or 'codes' are at play in a certain cultural context in order to

understand how – and why – people interpret the messages they encounter. In other words we sort through a culture's bank of learnt meanings to understand how that culture interprets what it sees and how these interpretations evolve through time.

Imagine your market is all about 'indulgence', 'speed' or even 'happiness'. Imagine you've identified 'masculinity' or 'efficacy' as the important cues in your category or central to your positioning. Cultural insight takes these ideas, unpacks them and then brings to life how they can be expressed and owned in the future.

As culture changes so do cultural codes. The analysis of these codes enables cultural insight experts to identify pattern of changing codes, giving them valuable clues to what the future could be like. Focussing on the emerging codes that signal cultural change can spark new thinking for positioning, innovation and communication purposes.

At any given time in a culture, there are residual, dominant and emergent codes. Residual codes are the 'dated' messages; what has been around for some time and is on the brink of being out of step with the culture around it.

Dominant codes are the 'everywhere' and reflect the dominant mood of current day society. You might say, they are so dominant, they appear middle of the road.

By contrast, emergent codes are what's happening at the cusp of the wave. They are evidence of a new infiltration of thinking and approach and can be powerful and differentiating for brands.

Very often, emergent codes may not even come from a brand's own category. If, for example, we wanted to understand how to embed premium as a central element of a brand's positioning, we'd look at a range of premium categories such as fashion, music, liquor, motor vehicles, jewellery, object d'art; for inspiration on what the most current expression of premium might look like.

### **Bling versus frugality**

There is no doubt that culture can impact what brands say and do.

For example, in Europe, the stark reality of the recession has focused people's attention on the value of other things; like health, family, freedom. Even luxury brands are showing restraint; at Hermes, when it's time to leave with your purchase, you'll be asked if you'd like a branded shopping bag or a plain brown paper packet. Careful frugality and a focus on value has replaced 'bling' as an expression of luxury. Even BMW is no longer about the flashiest, fastest car – it's now about joy and creativity, about simply being.

Cultural insight also provides an edge for multinational brands. Operating in many countries can be a marketing minefield and the industry is rife with stories of cultural faux pas. What works in one market is almost guaranteed to fail in another if no cultural due diligence is undertaken.

For example, when recently exploring 'womanhood' for a client, it became abundantly clear that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to communicating the brand's core positioning would never work. Simply put, not all women express their 'womanhood' in the same way, and the codes that speak to women in the United States are very different to those in Saudi Arabia where the burhka is still worn. And again very different to Israel where women fight alongside men in the army or indeed, to South Africa, where women battle to balance their traditional heritage with modern life. To truly succeed with women in all of these markets requires a subtlety and an understanding that speaks to their context.

### **Power and empowerment**

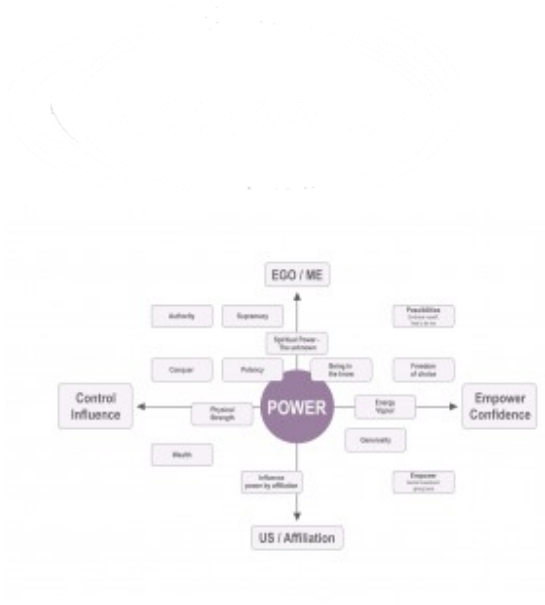


Fig. 1: Power Meaning Map (click to enlarge)

By way of another quick example, let's consider something closer to home in South Africa; power and empowerment. Culturally, power carries rich meaning in this country. (Fig. 1)

In the South African context, where entrepreneurship, empowerment and the transformative power of change are embedded in the cultural psyche of the country, power has evolved from meanings around ownership, control and conquering, to codes that express empowerment and the freedom of having the power of choices in one's life. More emergent codes add magic and transformation cues to the meaning of power (Fig. 2).



Fig.2: The Codes of Power (click to enlarge)

So what does this mean for brands?

In a consumer context of growing distrust and disillusionment in the behaviour of big brands, those companies that play on power in their positioning need to be wary of what they're communicating.

Consumers are questioning traditional expressions of power. Brands can still be about power, but consumers are less likely to trust brands who communicate authority blithely or try to project power with cues of the conquering hero or powerful provider. Brands that can embrace and express a new kind of transformative and more positive power will feel fresher and more connected to consumers as the market evolves.

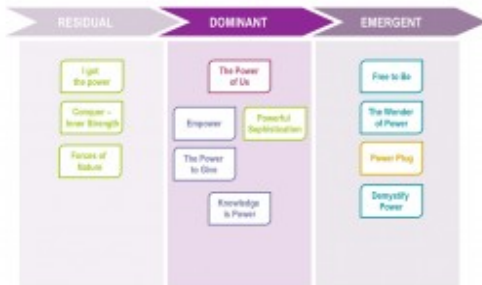


Fig. 3: Residual, Dominant and Emergent codes in Power (click to enlarge)

Honing in on the codes of power suggests emergent routes that could be useful to brands playing with this concept (Fig.3).

‘Demystifying Power’ is about de-bunking the traditional symbols of power and playing to the idea of rebellion but in a mocking and blunt manner. It’s about giving voice to the power of the consumer.

‘Free to Be’ cues not being bound by too many rules and the power that exists in throwing caution to the wind. This comes with a naïve, yet admirable boldness.

‘Power Plug’ communicates the power enabled by technology, how the proliferation of new technologies give consumers the complete freedom to manage life on the go: share opinions, broadcast life, comment and recommend content, products, purchases and experiences to both their friends and an almost unlimited online audience.

‘The Wonder of Power’ makes visible the unlimited possibilities of power, showing consumers how to harness the transformative nature of unseen forces. Cues revolve around the creative expression of energy transforming words into sound, beauty and dynamism.

### **But this is just the beginning**

Marketers appreciate that great brands are built from more than the sum of their parts. They target the few and sell to the many. They serve an important and enduring need for consumers. And they have a magnetic personality and identity that consumers desire.

However, over time, desire fades if it is not regularly refreshed. To re-inspire desire and mobilise brands into the future, culture can provide the rich fodder needed for new and emergent and innovative ways to express a brand’s positioning and remain relevant to its audience.

Whether you are looking to create a new brand, reposition an old one or just find the latest expression of a heritage positioning, cultural insight can take a concept, bring its many facets to life, and provide the inspiration to evolve in the most future focussed direction.

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Written by Dr Inka Inka Crosswaite, anthropologist and cultural insight specialist, for Added Value's blog, [Source](#).

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Added Value offers brand development and marketing insight services to blue-chip companies across all industry sectors. Everything they do starts with insight and ends with action, in pursuit of healthy brand growth for their clients.

With a footprint that now extends across 23 offices in 14 countries, drawing on the expertise within its global network, Added Value Group fuses brand marketing, consumer insight, innovation, and communications optimisation to help solve clients' marketing problems.

Added Value Group is part of Kantar Group, the information, insight and consultancy arm of WPP, a world leader in communications services.

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