'Discourse AND Figure':

Learning through visual regimes of signification

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Abstract

Arts marketing has been dominated by considerations of how the arts can 'do marketing'. With the additional interest in creativity in business (Bilton, 2006, Fillis, 2002), this conceptual paper questions why, when the profession it shadows is so sophisticated in its visual literacy, visual thinking remains overlooked as a site of professional practice within the discipline of marketing. In order to illustrate this, the authors consider the potential of visual practics within the context of assembling poster presentation. This conceptual paper has implications for arts marketing practice and marketing education.

Introduction

Arts marketing has been dominated by considerations of how the arts can 'do marketing'. With the additional interest in creativity in business (Bilton, 2006, Fillis, 2002) the paper is curious to better understand why, when the profession it shadows is so sophisticated in its visual literacy, visual thinking remains overlooked as a site of professional practice within the discipline of marketing. The authors are particularly interested to explore this line of argument given that Lash (1988) finds 'desire' in the figural, signalling a renunciation of the signifier, while Featherstone (1991) observes that everyday life has become aestheticized. Additionally, visual space can be seen as a site which unites art and marketing in a number of ways. Firstly, posters as used in the context of marketing communications draw heavily on visual art in terms of their aesthetic vocabulary. Secondly, the poster is a key element of the marketing communications campaign of most arts organisations. Finally, we argue that the poster is an unappreciated and misunderstood tool in the communication of marketing knowledge among the academic community. In this exploratory paper we map components of 'learning' from the figural practice at the core of poster presentation. We indicate a topic, influenced heavily by the arts, with the potential to contribute, not only to the development of our visual literacy, but also to our knowledge of how poster presentations can be made to work more effectively as dissemination media and pedagogical tools for advancing critical thinking skills through exposure to figural assemblages. In an era hungry for creative ways of making teaching and learning more active and scholarship more productive, and making all of them more contemporary and accountable, this seems like a worthwhile topic.

Maximum meaning, minimum means

The authors cast their gaze *specifically* on the marketing academy's use of poster presentations, not only as an information technology, or internal marketing vehicle, but more formally as a situated representational practice, a figural economy of signs and space (Lash & Urry, 1994) that produces meaning through staging desire, not signification (Williamson, 1978). It argues that as an occupational culture our current practice with regard to poster presentations reflects a frightening underestimation of the *transformative potential of the visual* (Pink, 2004), not only as a research and pedagogical tool, but an important area of professional academic practice.

The paper sets out to offer a persuasive case for rethinking our practice regarding the visualisation of marketing knowledge through poster design and presentation. It suggests that a rich vein of new disciplinary capital (Bourdieu, 1984) remains to be exploited through investing in the marketing academy's competence, in this case, with the *rhetoric of the image* (Barthes, 1977), especially the post-discursive insights of Lash (1988) and Zizek (2005). Emmison and Smith (2002) discuss the under-utilisation of visual information within the social sciences, citing as key issues the marginalization of visual depiction and the indifference of social scientists to such representations as a means of dissemination research findings. Indeed they write that Chaplin (1994) argues that social science has developed in such a way as to privilege verbal forms of communication.

Within the discipline of Marketing there is also an embedded disregard for the figural work of visual communication and its architect, graphic design. It manifests itself in the widely held view that such efforts are peripheral to the 'real work' of marketing management. And the misconception at the core of the view seems to stem from the lasting impact of Charles Ames' (1970) in which he distinguishes the 'trappings' from the 'substance' of marketing in terms of an ill-advised focus on visuals and graphics within advertising and promotion, to the dangerous detriment of the real strategic work of realising a customer orientation through

substantial marketing. Over the years this paper has transformed itself from a loosely observed set of normative statements about good management practice into an iconic transfiguration of doctrinal status; and we note that in the discipline of marketing, current institutional structures seem to privilege textual practice, i.e. discourse, militating against poster executions being recognised as an appropriate medium for the dissemination of peer-reviewed research. Nor do they attract the prestige and rewards of paper presentations, with their 15 minutes of ritual monologue, plus 5 minutes for questions and discussion. Indeed, in decentralising the dissemination of scientific information away from the lecture theatre, not only does the poster presentation radicalise how we frame the communication of scientific information, it also suggests that we rethink the nature of the informational exchange the presentation is trying to facilitate.

Drawing on the literature of contemporary practice in poster design[1] and presentation in the medical sciences and engineering, the paper also suggests that the *economy of signs and spaces* (Lasch & Urry, 1994) that animates academic marketing conferences could be rejuvenated through taking steps to professionalise the poster presentation, as has clearly been done for the paper presentation, and to facilitate a more imaginative understanding of the figural – i.e. a more visually literate approach to poster design and its aesthetics beyond that of parsimony. We argue that the visualisation of marketing knowledge in scholarly posters has the potential, not only to suggest alternative ways of looking at marketing phenomena, of facilitating a critical approach, but also for delivering marketing knowledge. Centralising the poster as a means of communicating this knowledge would answer calls for marketing to be more creative; the pedagogic need for marketing courses to prepare students for practice and to learn from the worlds of art and design which implicitly inform marketing practice. And indeed, it argues that the process of poster design and execution can be understood metaphorically as an economy, not only in the sense that it frames the communication problem in terms of constraints on the availability of media space and audience mobility and attentiveness, it draws on scarce resources of signs, space and practice to build a platform for the generation and visualisation of information that can then be promoted and made available for distribution and exchange in a local market for insight and ideas. Mobile audiences demand a spatial reorientation on the part of the poster presenter. Gudis (2004:127) refers to this as "*an architecture of mobility*". And in our view this 'architecture of mobility' is energised by aesthetic practice which is itself informed by study of the figural assemblages achieved in posters through the ages.

White (2002:17) observes that "*space is created when a figure is placed in it, [it] is undefined until it is articulated by the placement of an object within it*", suggesting that there is an immutable link between figure, space, location and visualisation. The paper takes this line of thought forward through suggesting that, as well as thinking of posters as spatial economies, we can also think of them as economies of meaning, for as Gameset al. (2003) assert, effective poster design must be guided by the principle of maximum meaning, minimum means (design elements). In other words, design effort is guided by the idea of putting as much figural meaning into the poster with as little apparent graphic design content

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[1] Briscoe (1990:153) defines a poster at a scientific meeting as an enlarged graphic display containing a title, the authors' names and affiliations, and text and figures explaining the research, typically on a poster board around 2x3 m in size. She states that "*this form of presentation was developed as a way to handle the increased size of meetings and the growing number of presenters. Where formerly all information was conveyed in fifteen minute talks, now there is a choice of talk or poster, or posters only*." The point of the poster presentation is said to be the visual communication of one or two ideas in a simple, clear, interesting and creative way. It is also a teaching device and the more visually appealing, well organised and informative the poster is, the more people are likely to understand the ideas being communicated. A number of important decisions have to be made about what information to present and how to present it in the poster. Generally speaking there will be a trade-off between the amount of information presented textually in the poster and its attractiveness and ease of comprehension to a mobile audience.

as possible. In addition, we can think of posters as visual assemblages of figural work. They have an architecture, the foundation of which is the aesthetics twists and turns of composition which provide the basic structure that 'supports the other graphic design elements involved' (White, 2002).

The printed poster remains one of the staple components of the communications mix appropriate to trade shows as well as in store design and retail branding (Davies & Ward, 2005; Kent & Stone, 2007). As the visual centrepiece of an in-store merchandising display or promotional exhibition, or the servant of it, the poster provides the basis of an effective form of visual messaging. As marketing promotions professionals already know, posters work hard to set information in a motivational context; i.e. to attract, briefly hold and sometimes animate the attention or curiosity of the passing traffic of an audience in motion.

The visual deficit
When used in marketing education as a pedagogical device, the idea of poster design, preparation and then exhibition[2] encourages presenters to think laterally about a topic, particularly about the language, both visual and textual, used to give shape to research ideas. They need to ensure that their poster execution has strong visual impact and attracts attention, and both the content and the presentation of a design require careful thought and preparation. Thinking about how to give visual expression to a research topic is one way of exploring the possible ways of framing a research idea and how they shape research objectives. This process is similar commercial poster design where the images and text need to be formulated in order to attract attention while communicating the key benefit of the product or service being promoted.

To state that ours is an age increasingly occupied with the production and consumption of visual images is hardly going to set the arts marketing community buzzing. However, although we rely on images (static & moving) for so much of our information about the world, including the marketing world, the paper argues that we have yet to bring an articulate visual perspective to the knowledge-making practices of the marketing academy. The authors' curiosity about how visual images do, or could function within academic practice has been partly energised by Schroeder's (2002:11) observation that "*the dominance of visual imagery does not necessarily make for visually literate consumers*". He goes on to argue that this occurs at a time when fluency with visual issues and the language of representational forms and technology is "*increasingly important for marketing practice and theory*" (op cit:17).

The paper seeks to reenergise Schroeder's (2002) efforts to persuade our gaze towards the sweep of visual culture in contemporary consumer society. In setting out their broad ideas on templates of visual rhetoric, Phillips and McQuarrie refer to literature (Leiss et al, 1986; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2003; Pollay, 1985) that documents that, "[in print ads] *the emphasis on pictures over words has steadily increased throughout the last century*" (2004:113). In focusing on the visual construction of rhetoric, after Forceville (1996), McQuarrie and Mick (2003) and Scott (1994), among others, this insightful paper renders a sense of the gap between the academy's highly literate theorisations of visual communicative practice and its

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[2] A poster is a visual presentation of your research and should be designed to grab your readers' attention and encourage them to read your poster by providing a summary of the key ideas. At a scientific meeting a poster presentation is an enlarged graphic display containing a title, the authors' names and affiliations (signature), and text and figures explaining the research, typically on a poster board around 2m² in size. This form of presentation was developed as a way to handle the increased size of meetings and the growing number of presenters. Where formerly all information was conveyed in fifteen minute talks, now there is a choice of talk or poster, or posters only.

illiteracy in the context of giving visual representation to such knowledge through poster design and presentation.

Schroeder (2002) reminds us of the high levels of visual literacy and creativity employed by the professional design and advertising community. Economic imaging technology is widely available, contributing to the intensification of image production in the media of contemporary consumer culture. Commercial practice offers a sophisticated level of graphic design capability and creative media skill, as well as fluency with the vocabulary and grammar such forms of visual representation offer. Given this, we can argue that new forms of cultural capital and communicative intelligence are emerging. And perhaps skills in drafting intricately woven textual forms of representation (eg. conference papers), although still useful, should no longer occupy a place of special privilege among the armoury of skills expected to be within the command of the accomplished academic communicator.

Conclusion
Reflecting on the above, we argue that the poster is a key research site with implications for marketing academics in disseminating knowledge and in terms of creativity and practice in marketing pedagogy, and arts marketers in understanding key marketing tools and the wider intersection between art (and design) and more general marketing practice. The consequence of the inferior status of posters is a vicious cycle of under-achievement and missed opportunities for marketing excellence. In the presentation we will argue that we may now have reached a point where, before inadvertently taking further steps to perpetuate this cycle, we are required to critically evaluate our own poster practices and set them in a wider context of good practice. Scholarly study is required of poster presentations in order to indicate how the medium offers the marketing academy the potential of new information delivery models, as well as suggesting ways of tapping into the creative energies circulating among our students, practitioners and other audiences, including our peers. The presentation will review the issues raised above and provide an opportunity for exploring the arts/marketing axis within this context.

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