

Using Sensory Signatures to Build Brand esSense: Bringing experience to the heart of your brand identity

What is brand identity?

When asked to define brand identity, many people brand logos and names as well as the history and values of brands. Some even mention the design of a product or experience, but very few immediately mention the role of the senses in creating distinctive and memorable experiences. Many dictionary definitions focus solely on the visual look and feel of brands, but a better definition might be, “the elements of a brand that together identify and distinguish the brand in the consumer’s mind”.

For Keller, Aperia and Georgson, brand identity answers the fundamental question, “Who are you?” However, my favourite definition comes from Alina Wheeler’s *Designing Brand Identity*. She states that, “Brand identity is tangible and appeals to the senses. You can see it, touch it, hold it, hear it, watch it move. Brand identity fuels recognition, amplifies differentiation, and makes big ideas and meaning accessible. Brand identity takes disparate elements and unifies them into whole systems.”

She is right to focus on the importance of tangible elements in brand identity. Physical experience is fundamental to the way our brain understands the world and how it creates meaning from our experience. The look, touch, sounds and smell of a brand hold far more power in the mind than any marketing message that a business communicates. More than half of the brain’s huge processing power is dedicated to making sense of experience, and all the great brands know this.

What is a sensory signature?

Some brands already realise the importance of making customer experience part of the “DNA” of their brand. The most famous and most talked about example is the iconic Coca-Cola bottle shape, which led Martin Lindstrom to talk about the “smashability” of the brand (the fact that the brand would still be recognised even if the bottle were broken into pieces). Arguably Coca-Cola’s signature assets also include the brand colour and especially the handwritten font of the brand name. Recent marketing campaigns have definitely proved that the font is very smashable (see Figure 1).

The image shows the word "Coca-Cola" in its iconic signature script font, which is a cursive, flowing typeface.

Figure 1: Coca-Cola's signature font

Similarly, the pink ribbon has become the visual signature of the breast cancer movement, symbolising much more than a simple brand logo. Microsoft's sensory signature is the combination of a visual logo and a sonic logo – perhaps you can remember one or both elements?

Ricola's sonic logo has recently worked its way into my head with its continue repetition of the yoddlers' "Ri--co--la" in the cinema before every film I see. Of course the iPod Touch and other Apple products make use of the sense of touch to create a strong sensory memory from user experience, which is why it's so important to allow people to interact with products in store. And Nutella (my choice of breakfast this morning on toast) has a unique balance of nutty, toasty and cocoa flavours and a smooth consistency, unique to the brand.

Sensory signatures defined

A good way to think about a sensory signature is a unique sensory impression or combination of sensory impressions that are associated with a brand consistently across its various products or services, providing differentiation and identity. They can be related to one or more of the senses, although usually focused on key sensory criteria that can convey a distinctive experience.

Sensory signatures must be able to distinguish a brand (individual or group of products or services) as different from other brand universes. A sensory signature should be common to all the products or services that fall under the brand. Ideally, the elements of the sensory signature should be consistent with the brand universe and the core values and emotional benefits of the brand.

Using sense, symbol and story

The most powerful signatures are like a brand DNA, infused throughout the total experience of the brand. In TapestryWorks' golden circle of *Brand esSense* we include the Why, What and How of the brand in the sensory signature. The Why reflects the core purpose of the brand and its underlying story, the What is the meaning of this for the brand's users and the associated symbolism of the brand, and the How is how the story and meanings are executed into the physical experience of the brand.

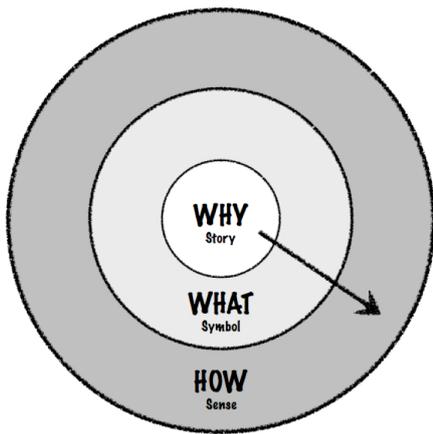


Figure 2: Golden circle of Brand esSense

For example, Dettol antiseptic includes elements of graphic design and iconography (the sword in the logo) as well as a signature smell and white clouding on mixing with water, all symbolising the efficacy of the product and supporting its “mission for health” and its claim to “protect the family”. In a very different way, Virgin Atlantic use advertising to support their language, service style and in-flight entertainment to create a playful and fun brand signature.

Both Dettol and Virgin Atlantic go beyond the five senses to create experiences that resonate with their core values across sense, symbol and story.



Figure 3: Dettol brand signature

How do I create a sensory signature?

The start point for building a sensory signature is to understand your brand assets. What are the sensory characteristics driving the uniqueness of your brand or range? When thinking about sensory characteristics, it helps to think as broadly as possible. For example, in TapestryWorks’ Brand esSense framework we include symbol elements and brand storytelling along with the senses, as all are ultimately experienced through the senses.

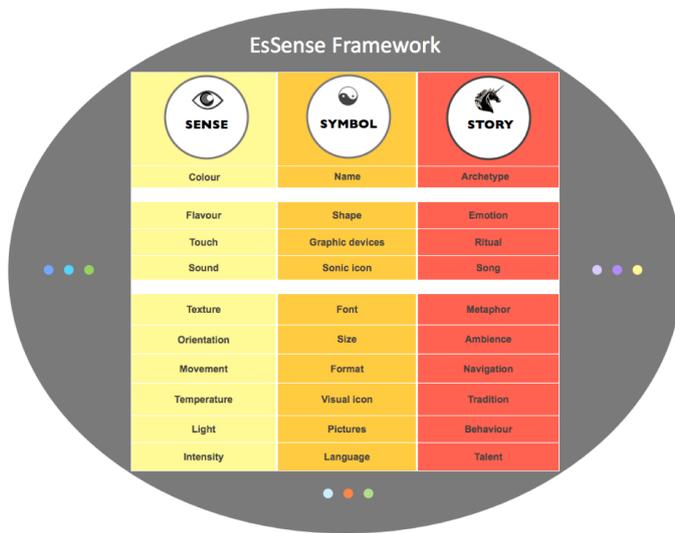


Figure 4: Brand esSense framework

It's important to understand how these unique characteristics link to the benefits of the brand, especially the emotional benefits that drive brand choice. From this analysis you can identify the core signature of the brand (if it has one).

At this stage, decide if your brand already has a strong sensory signature, has elements of a sensory signature or really has no common or unique sensory characteristics. The answer to this will determine whether you need to “simplify”, “unify” or “amplify” your existing sensory signature.

Simplify, Unify or Amplify?

If your brand really has no unique sensory assets that are common across the range, then you need to create a sensory signature by Simplifying. Simplifying means focusing on a few characteristics that can be designed into the whole range.

If your brand has some common or unique sensory characteristics then you need to consolidate your brand signature by Unifying your offering and ensuring that all key elements of the sensory signature are gradually introduced across all of the range.

Finally, if your brand already has a clear and distinctive sensory signature, then there will still be opportunities to Amplify the signature. You can amplify your brand signature by identifying additional touch points and senses through which you can communicate the core values of the brand and the common underlying patterns of its existing sensory signature.

Again, the Brand esSense framework will help you to find other touch points through which you can do this. For example, if your brand has a friendly taste, smell and feel, but uses a more formal typeface in its name and logo, is there an opportunity to use a more handwritten typeface to make the “feel” of the logo more consistent with the other elements of the sensory signature?

Use a sensory signature to drive brand recognition

Building a sensory signature will help you build a stronger brand identity and recognition and hence a greater mental availability and strength of association with the key aspects of the brand

experience. This will aid memorability and recognition in-store, and make it much easier to extend the brand's range into other areas, through use of a common and distinctive identity.

It can also make it easier to make changes to other aspects of the brand, while retaining a strong identity and without losing recognition. Famously, when Tropicana juice changed key aspects of their packaging identity their sales dropped by more than 20% (until they reverted to the original packaging). In contrast, when Google recently changed the typeface of their logo in order to make it more "digitally friendly", there was no loss of recognition as the unique colour sequence of Google's six-letter name as retained.

Sensory signatures are a powerful way to strengthen your brand's identity, reinforce its core values, and bring together all the different touch points of the brand to create a more consistent and unified feel. Your customers remember brand experiences much better than they remember brand messages, so make sure the way your brand touches the human senses, tell the story of your brand.

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This is the fifth in TapestryWorks' series of case studies and white papers. TapestryWorks decodes people and culture to build consistent meaning into brand experiences. We help build culture sense for brands.