

Managing sensory expectations concerning products and brands: Capitalizing on the potential of sound and shape symbolism

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Abstract

In this article, the evidence demonstrating the existence of a variety of robust crossmodal correspondences between both sounds (phonetic speech sounds, tones, and other parameters of musical expression) and shapes, and the sensory attributes (specifically the taste, flavor, aroma, and oral-somatosensory attributes) of various foods and beverages is reviewed. The available research now clearly suggests that marketers can enhance their consumers' product experiences by ensuring that the sound symbolism of the brand name, as well as any shape symbolism of/on the labeling, and even the very shape of the packaging itself, sets up the right (i.e., congruent) product-related sensory expectations in the mind of the consumer. In this review, the rapidly-growing literature on the topic of sound and shape symbolism is critically evaluated. Potential caveats, limitations, and problems of interpretation with previous studies are highlighted. The question of whether this approach to sensory marketing should be considered as implicit (or functionally subconscious) is also addressed. Finally, some of the relative strengths and weaknesses of this approach to modulating a consumer's product-related expectations (relative to various other approaches) are considered.

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Introduction

Most of our everyday experiences, at least the pleasant ones, are multisensory. A consumer's brand and product experiences are no exception, as many sensory marketers are increasingly coming to realize (e.g., Hultén, 2011; Hultén, Broweus, & van Dijk, 2009; Krishna, 2010; Lindstrom, 2005; Spence, 2002). That said, introspection often tells us that we see color only with our eyes, that we feel softness exclusively with our fingertips, and that we taste the crunch of the potato chip only with our mouths. However, the empirical evidence that has emerged from the psychology and neuroscience laboratories over the last few years tells a very different story. In fact, it has now become increasingly apparent that what we see, and how we feel about it, are also influenced by what we happen to be smelling at the time (Demattè, Österbauer, & Spence, 2007; Li, Moallem, Paller, & Gottfried, 2007; Spence, 2008). Similarly, our perception of

softness is influenced by olfactory cues (Churchill, Meyners, Griffiths, & Bailey, 2009; Demattè, Sanabria, Sugarman, & Spence, 2006; Laird, 1932), and crispness turns out to be as much a matter of what we hear, as about what we actually feel in the mouth (see Spence & Shankar, 2010; Spence, Shankar, & Blumenthal, 2011; Zampini & Spence, 2004).

One aspect of multisensory perception that has started to gain increasing importance over the last couple of years relates to the topic of *crossmodal correspondences* (Spence, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). Generally-speaking, crossmodal correspondences can be defined as a tendency for a feature, or attribute, in one sensory modality to be matched (or associated) with a sensory feature, or attribute in another sensory modality (Parise & Spence, in press a). One ubiquitous crossmodal correspondence is that between larger objects (no matter whether seen or felt) and lower-pitched sounds, and smaller objects and higher-pitched sounds (Parise & Spence, 2009; Walker &

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Smith, 1985). In this case, at least, the correspondence reflects a fundamental law of physics. The two classes of crossmodal correspondence that I wish to look at in this article are commonly referred to as sound and shape symbolism. *Sound symbolism* is the name given to the association that people experience between specific sounds (including speech sounds) and particular stimulus attributes (e.g., as when they associate words containing the ‘i’ sound with smallness). *Shape symbolism* refers to the similar crossmodal mapping that exists between abstract shapes and other sensory attributes (e.g., as between sharp pointy shapes and bitterness or carbonation in foods and beverages).

Put simply, when the different sensory attributes of a product, or its packaging, or of the environment in which that product is purchased, used, or experienced match (or correspond) crossmodally, then this can impact positively on the consumer’s overall multisensory consumer experience. In this chapter, I want to review the evidence demonstrating that our rapidly growing understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying crossmodal correspondences, and in particular sound and shape symbolism, can be used to set up the appropriate sensory expectations in the mind of the consumer which, in turn can enhance the consumer’s multisensory experience of both products and brands.

In order to try and keep this article manageable, I will focus on the use of sound and shape symbolism in the food and beverage sectors. However, it should be noted that the findings outlined here are equally applicable to a number of different classes of product, everything from portable electronic goods to prescription medications, and from fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs) to major household investments, such as cars (e.g., Abel & Glinert, 2008). Interestingly, many of these crossmodal effects appear to operate on an implicit level (i.e., without the consumer necessarily being aware of what is going on). Hence, it is not uncommon to find that, when asked, consumers deny being influenced by sound and shape symbolism, and yet carefully controlled studies of their behavior, in both the laboratory and in the marketplace, tell a very different story (see also Cheskin, 1972).

Sound symbolism in the marketplace

Marketers have long been aware of the non-arbitrary relationship that exists between a brand’s success in the marketplace and the speech sounds that are contained in the brand name itself. So, for example, 30 years ago, Ira Schloss who was, at the time, assistant research director of the Advertising Research Foundation, noted that the letter ‘k’ was significantly over-represented among the top 200 brand names during the late 1970s — think Kraft, Kellogg’s, Kodak, KFC, etc. (Schloss, 1981). He also pointed out that there were far fewer brands starting with the letter ‘s’ than would have been expected by chance alone, given the distribution of words in the dictionary starting with this letter. Follow-up studies published a few years later came to essentially the same conclusion regarding the success of brand names beginning with the ‘k’ sound (Vanden Bergh, 1990; Vanden Bergh, Adler, & Oliver, 1987; see also Abel & Glinert, 2008). Indeed, the publication of such findings may help to explain the prominence of this letter in so many of today’s most well-known, and

successful, brandnames — think K-Mart, IKEA, TK Maxx (in UK, TJ Maxx in North America), etc.

Other commentators, meanwhile, have been tempted to attribute the historic failure of certain brands, such as the *Ford Edsel*, named after Edsel Ford, a relation of the company’s founder (Wallace, 1975), and launched back in 1958, to the poor choice of brand name by the marketers concerned (Hartley, 1992; see also Cheskin, 1972; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edsel>, especially Section 3.3, downloaded on 14/07/2011; Vanden Bergh et al., 1987). In this regard, it is interesting to note how many of Ford’s successful car models in more recent times have had names ending in the letter ‘a’ — think Ford Cortina, Ford Fiesta, Ford Granada, Ford Sierra, and Ford Ka. Other seemingly non-coincidental combinations of letters appearing in brand names include the letters ‘i’, and often also ‘d’, and ‘l’ found in the majority of the budget supermarket and store chains currently doing so well in the UK (e.g., ‘Aldi’, ‘Lidl’, ‘Londis’, ‘Iceland’, and Primark; ‘Lotto’ may be one of the few exceptions to this general pattern). Is this more than mere coincidence, one might ask? I would argue that in many cases it is. What is more, scientific research is now starting to provide some intriguing insights into the putative principles underlying many of these examples of *sound symbolism* in the marketplace.

For many years now, researchers have argued that there is a non-arbitrary relationship between the words, or rather, the speech sounds, that we happen to use to name objects and the properties that those objects possess (see Hinton, Nichols, & Ohala, 1994; Nuckolls, 2003; Robson, 2011, for reviews). As will become apparent below, many of the consonant and vowel sounds found in English, not to mention in other languages, appear to have different crossmodal associations linked to them. Of course, there is always a danger here that one can read too much into apparent examples of sound symbolism, seeing patterns where all there really is, is mere coincidence (as may well be the case in the case of Ford cars ending in ‘-a’; see also Saussure, 1916). Fortunately, however, statistical techniques now exist with which to determine the significance of such patterns of crossmodal correspondence (see Spence, 2011c), both in the psychology or linguistics laboratory, and, more importantly, out there in the marketplace.

When ‘i’ = small: Mil, mal, and the success of the Mini!

I will illustrate the principle of sound symbolism with an example: There are good grounds to believe that brands that are associated with small objects, and/or companies that are associated with low prices, would do well to include the [i] sound in their brand name. Indeed, this may be the reason why, as we just saw, the letter ‘i’ appears in so many of the names of those successful budget supermarket chains. It likely also explains, at least in some small part, the continued success of the ‘Mini’ car brand. Could a large car ever have succeeded with such a ‘small’-sounding name?¹ (In fact, the word ‘mini’ actually means tiny in French as an

¹ True, the ‘Infinity’ car marque has more ‘i’s’ than a Mini, but in this case, the semantic meaning of the word may override the sound symbolic associations present in the word itself.

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