



# Tacit meaning in disguise: Hidden metaphors in new product development and market making

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**Abstract** This article explores the role of metaphor in product development processes and market making. Based on a sociocognitive perspective of innovation dynamics and required learning by market actors, the potential of metaphors for mental model development during new product development (NPD) processes is investigated. Three roles for metaphors as cognitive focusing devices for the co-evolution of producers' and consumers' mental models are inferred: mental model communication, mental model matching, and mental model creation. These roles are illustrated by examples that reinforce the need for creativity in applying metaphors as cognitive focusing devices in NPD and market making.

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## 1. A sociocognitive view of market evolution

Is there a business concept that can be more easily defined than 'market'? Hardly. A market represents a geographical space enabling the transfer of products between producers and buyers. In economic terms, cross-price elasticity is applied as a test for defining the relevant market. Accordingly, the *market-based view* of strategy advises corporations to enter attractive markets, achieve attractive positioning, and then exploit their positioning

by weakening cross-price elasticities (Bain, 1968; Porter, 1980, 1985). The underlying rational choice model of market transactions may be valid for mature markets; however, things are not so clear-cut regarding emerging markets. Deterministic market definitions fail when fundamental uncertainty forecloses individuals to optimize utility along established and stable preference functions, since they do not know what to optimize in the first place. This uncertainty imposes the need for interaction, discussion, and collective sense making.

The *sociocognitive perspective* describes the mutually dependent formation of producers' and consumers' mental models during market evolution. Here, markets are not given but socially constructed. In the beginning of the formation of a market, producers may not know what products they should develop, while customers may not

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know what they can use these products for. This holds because there are no entrenched mental models regarding what new products are all about. Thus, functional details and design aspects may change frequently, addressing fast-moving and heterogeneous customer preferences until a dominant design finally emerges (Utterback, 1994).

This process of market evolution requires continual and mutual consumer and producer learning. Besides producers' traditional conduct of research and development (learning by searching, as well as learning by unlearning). Durand (1993) describes three complementary forms of learning: producers' 'learning by doing,' consumers' 'learning by using,' and 'learning by interacting' as continuous feedback between producers and users. In sum, markets co-evolve with the sharing of product knowledge among market actors. Market narratives circulating between different market actors (e.g., manufacturers, customers, standard setting bodies, advertising agencies) act as catalysts for, as well as artifacts of, market evolution (Molotch, 2003). They are primary vehicles for the emergence of new, stable, and shared interpretations of product categories during processes of collective sense making (Rosa & Spanjol, 2005). Stories help market actors determine the value of new products, understand how to sell or use them, and understand how to position them relative to other products. Because of their potential to link disparate knowledge domains together, we posit that metaphors can be powerful cognitive focusing devices for market stories; metaphor acts as a device in a real or imagined discourse, shaping the mental structures of both producers and consumers.

In this article, we explore the role of metaphor in NPD, as explained by the sociocognitive perspective of market dynamics and required learning by market actors. We first portray how metaphors can bring life to mental models. Building on both the sociocognitive view and the description of how metaphor works, we then infer three roles of metaphor during NPD and market making.

## 2. Understanding (by) metaphors: How metaphor brings life to mental models

Traditionally, the study of metaphors belongs within the disciplines of linguistics, rhetoric, literature, cognitive psychology, and philosophy. Metaphors, however, are far more than just linguistic tools; they are the outcome of a cognitive process in which the literal meaning of a phrase or word is

applied to a new context in a figurative sense. Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life: in language, in thought, and in action (Grant & Oswick, 1996; Lackoff & Johnson, 1980).

The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (Coyne, 1995). Metaphors link two knowledge domains by performing a transaction between them; to speak metaphorically is to relate two entities or terms through the verb "to be" or the copula "is" (e.g., "the organization is a machine"). Further, there is ongoing discussion regarding how metaphors alter mental representations, i.e., cognitive maps of individuals (Cornelissen, 2005).

The *comparison view* holds that, during the cognitive processing of a metaphorical statement, certain and often preselected aspects of the source domain (i.e., the secondary subject) are mapped one-sided onto a target knowledge domain (i.e., the primary subject). By relating a secondary subject to a primary subject through metaphor, multiple comparisons may be made, differences may be noted, and paradoxes may be discovered. Metaphorically, crafting a metaphor is building an overarching mental bridge between two subject domains. By applying analogical reasoning, the metaphor can be explored, resulting in a cognitively enriched target domain (Tsoukas, 1991).

Inspired by the philosophical writings of Richards (1936) and Black (1962, 1977), the *interactionist view* stresses that *both* domains acquire new meaning as a result of a metaphorical process. The meaning of the primary subject changes, but the meaning of the secondary subject (i.e., the source) often changes, too. As Coyne (1995, p. 260) noted, "...some terms of a source domain appear to have greater currency in the new context. How often do we use the term 'desktop' other than as a descriptor for a computer screen?" Thus, the terms interact to give new meaning to both concepts. The metaphorical projection creates a new conceptual domain called the 'ground' or a 'blend'; therefore, interaction is also referred to as 'conceptual integration,' or 'blending.' As explained by Fauconnier and Turner (1998, p. 133), "In blending, structure from input mental spaces is projected to a separate, 'blended' mental space. The projection is selective. Through completion and elaboration, the blend develops structure not provided by the inputs." In interaction, only a few properties of the metaphor's two domains interact with one another; as such, there is a process at work that melds only select attributes of the map domain, while others are omitted. This process is mainly guided by the context in which a metaphorical utterance is made: "To understand meta-

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