Marketing is communication between marketers and consumers, with the purpose of directing the flow of products, services, information, ideas, and emotions from producers to consumers; it creates, satisfies, and reacts to demands, desires, and fashions of the marketplace in a process that involves the exchange of cultural, economic, and ideological values (Kotler, 1987: 3; Werner, 2004). The study of signs, meanings, and communication in the processes of marketing and the consumption of goods is a research field of applied semiotics, the ‘semiotics of marketing’ (see Semiotics: History).

Signs and Messages of the Marketplace

Marketing is not possible without language. The art of selling and creating involves a verbal rhetoric and a vocabulary of its own, and the word formation of brand names is a complex branch of linguistics with special relevance to marketing and economics in general (Piller, 2000). However, the marketplace is also the locus of countless nonverbal signs, whose study requires analytical tools of a general theory of signs. The gestures and facial expressions of the vendors and sales promoters are part of a nonverbal rhetoric of marketing; visual and musical messages support advertising campaigns in the media with nonverbal means; product and packaging design makes the object of exchange a material message, whose sender is the marketer and whose receiver is the consumer (Fritz, 1994; Nöth, 1998); logos and trade marks are indices both of a brand image and of corporate identities that contribute to the easy identification of the product in the multitude of goods available in the marketplace (Semprini, 1992; Gallert, 1998); and facts and myths concerning the utility and quality of the product, propagated by advertising campaigns, create a brand image that results in a complex semiotics of goods (Aronoff, 1985). The marketplace is a stage of nonverbal communication, a communicative space where marketers and consumers meet to exchange goods, ideas, and values; it is everywhere in consumer societies, at home (mail, newspaper, telephone, television), in the street (machines, street vendors), at the local supermarket, the shopping mall, the industrial fair, the office, or on the World Wide Web.

Survey of Semiotic Approaches to Marketing

Semiotics, the general study of signs and sign processes, has provided analytical tools for the analysis of verbal and nonverbal processes of marketing communication. The semiotics of marketing is a branch of applied semiotics, and an interdisciplinary field of research that investigates the signs, meanings, and communicative processes involved in marketing.


Closely related to the semiotics of marketing are three research fields of economics, which aim to interpret the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers. This is not as a process of production and distribution to satisfy consumer needs, but as an exchange of symbols between senders and receivers: the theory of symbolic consumption (Levy, 1959, 1978), consumer aesthetics (Hirschman and Holbrook, eds., 1981), and the semiotics of consumer behavior (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1993; Lambkin et al., 1998).

**Verbal Exchange and the Exchange of Goods**

There are differences and analogies between the flow of words in a dialogue and the flow of goods from producers to consumers in return for the flow of money in the opposite direction. Words and sentences in a dialogic exchange are immaterial, whereas goods and money in economic exchange evince materiality. Furthermore, the participants in a dialogue speak one and the same language, while producers and consumers of commodities speak and reply in two `languages`, those of goods and of money (Coulmas, 1992). Semiotic features in common are that both words are signs and constitute systems of values (Nöth, 1996).

Karl Bühler discussed “the exchange of goods” as “the counterpart of sign circulation” and described goods as signs with “symbolic values” (1934: 60–61). His focus was on trademarked goods, which evince two further parallels with words: conventionality and type-token structure. The conventionality of trademarked goods guarantees the sameness of their values in marketing and consumption. A product with a trademark, just like a spoken word of a given language, is a token of a more general semiotic type, namely its brand. According to Bühler, one of the differences between verbal signs and goods is their material quality. While material sameness is decisive for the value and the identification of a trademarked product, words are relatively flexible as to their phonetic realization, since they allow for much variation in voice, tone, and articulation.

**Verbal Signs, Goods as Signs, and the Marketplace as a Sign System**

Karl Marx set up the following parallels between goods and language signs: “Value . . . converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language” (1867: 79) (see Marxist Theories of Language).

F. de Saussure, extending the analogy between words and goods to the level of the systems, argued that linguistics and economics are both “concerned with a system for equating things of different orders – labor and wages in one and a signified and signifier in the other” (1915: 79). In a comparison between the value of a loaf of bread worth five francs and the value of a word in a language, Saussure concludes (1915: 115) that both goods and words are signs displaying relations of similarity and dissimilarity within the systems to which they belong (see Saussure, Ferdinand (~Mongin) de (1857–1913)). Both consist of signifiers and signifieds, which are dissimilar; the loaf of bread’s use value is dissimilar to its monetary exchange value, and a word is dissimilar to its meaning. At the same time, there are relationships of equivalence. In the system of economic objects, all goods of the same monetary exchange value are equivalent in this respect, just as verbal synonyms are equivalent to their semantic value or word categories to their syntactic value. Like the phonemes and words of a language, the goods of the marketplace form not only a system of paradigmatic relationships, which consists of their structures of equivalence, but also a system of syntagmatic relationships. The order and arrangement of food products in a supermarket or on a dinner table, the furniture in a living room, or clothes worn according to the rules of culture and fashion testify to a syntax of possible and excluded combinations of goods in everyday life.

Like words, goods are polysemic signs associated with a plurality of meanings not inherent in the goods themselves but generated in the marketplace. Products not only denote their use and exchange values, but also connote sociocultural, aesthetic, emotional, or mythical meanings (Noth, 1998). The semiotic system of goods and services is a system of differences par excellence, since the discourse of the marketers tends to maximize the differences and minimize the similarities between the products in their attempts at making their offerings appear unique.
Self-Referential Words and Goods

Words refer to objects (their referents) just as goods refer to their practical utility and the needs they may satisfy (their *use value*). As such, both kinds of signs have reference to something else not inherent in themselves. In poetry and art, signs become self-referential when their purpose is no longer to convey a message but to communicate words as words (pure play of sounds) or visual forms as pure forms. It is a characteristic of affluent societies that the messages of the marketplace can become self-referential, too. Goods that do not satisfy needs or fulfill a practical purpose, such as gadgets or objects of fashion and luxury, are self-referential signs whose value exists only within the system created by the market. Consumers buy such goods not because they need or enjoy them, but because the market dictates their value and prescribes their purchase as a necessity.

The semiotic implications of affluent markets determined by such principles of economic self-reference have been the topic of the ideological critique of Baudrillard, which culminated in the argument that goods under such circumstances are signs whose signified is abolished in favor of a pure “play of signifiers” in which “the signifier becomes its own referent and the use value of the sign disappears to the benefit of its . . . exchange value alone. The sign no longer designates anything at all. It approaches its true structural limit which is to refer back only to other signs” (1973: 127–128). Irrespective of their use value, goods whose brand connotes nothing but status, prestige, or fashion, are signs that have become mutually exchangeable according to Baudrillard (1972: 64): “Dissociated from its use value, the object can now just as easily be a vase or a refrigerator, or, for that matter, a whoopee cushion. Properly speaking, it has no more existence than a phoneme has an absolute meaning in linguistics . . . . It finds meaning . . . in difference,” in a “code of significations.” With this ideological critique of a consumer society in which the use value of objects is no longer determined by the consumers’ needs, but by the tyranny of the market and a semiotic system that produces needs which are only needs of the market itself, goods are no longer true signs, but simulations of a sign relation in which the signified is “abolished in favor of the sole profit of the play of signifiers.” In the end, “the signifier becomes its own referent, and the use value of the sign disappears leaving the benefit of its commutation and exchange value alone. The sign no longer designates anything at all. It approaches its true structural limit which is to refer back only to other signs” (Baudrillard, 1973: 127–128).

See also: Marxist Theories of Language; Saussure, Ferdinand (-Mongin) de (1857–1913); Semiotics: History.

Bibliography

Until fairly recently, the web has primarily delivered information and services using visual interfaces, on computers equipped with displays, keyboards, and pointing devices. The web revolution had largely bypassed the huge market of customers of information and services represented by the worldwide installed base of telephones for which voice input and audio output provided the primary means of interaction.

VoiceXML 2.0 [VXML2], a standard recently released by the W3C [W3C], is helping change that. Building on the market begun in 1999 by the VoiceXML Forum’s VoiceXML 1.0 specification [VXML1], VoiceXML 2.0 and several complementary standards are changing the way we interact with voice services and applications by simplifying the way these services and applications are built.

VoiceXML is an XML-based [XML] language, designed to be used on the Web. As such, it inherits several key features common to all XML languages:

• It leverages existing Web protocols such as HTTP to access remote resources.
• Any tool that is able to read or write XML documents can read and write a VoiceXML document.
• Other XML documents can be embedded in VoiceXML documents and fragments; similarly, VoiceXML documents can embed other XML documents and fragments. This the case with SRGS and SSML, which are described later.

As mentioned above, VoiceXML 2.0 is one in a number of standards that the W3C Voice Browser Working Group is defining to enable the development of conversational voice applications. The specifications making up the Speech Interaction Framework are the following:

• Speech Recognition Grammar Specification 1.0 [SRGS]
• Speech Synthesis Markup Language 1.0 [SSML]
• Semantic Interpretation for Speech Recognition 1.0 [SISR]
• Call Control Markup Language 1.0 [CCXML].

This article provides a short introduction to VoiceXML, as well as SRGS, SSML, and SISR, for building conversational web applications. CCXML is an XML-based language exposing telephony and call control functionality for such applications as conference call bridges and call routing. CCXML, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

Building Conversational Applications using VoiceXML

Menu Element

Most VoiceXML dialogues are built from one of two elements. The first of these is the <menu> element. A VoiceXML menu behaves much like a collection of HTML links.

A VoiceXML menu has a <prompt>, which contains SSML content, and one or more choices, each identified by a <choice> tag. Each choice consists of a phrase indicating what the user can say, as well as a link to the next VoiceXML document to be executed.

Consider this <menu> example:

```xml
<menu version="2.0" xmlns="http://www.w3.org/2001/vxml">
  <menu>
    <prompt> Say one of: <enumerate/></prompt>
    <choice next="http://www.example.com/sports.vxml">Sports scores</choice>
    <choice next="http://www.example.com/weather.vxml">Weather information</choice>
    <choice next="#login">Log in</choice>
  </menu>
</menu>
```