ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND THE SEMIOTIC AUDIT

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Abstract

The online environment offers to companies the possibility of opening virtual offices where they can provide information about the products and services available to the interested public. The architecture of the site, the chromatics, the tips, the icons and symbols used are a part of the firm's identity and contribute to the formation of its image. The semiotic audit is used to analyze the messages sent by the sender and the meaning that they get in the competition context.

Keywords: brand, semiotic audit, online communication, website, image

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I. Introduction

The development of brands, the expansion of multinationals, the fierce competition in all economic domains along with the accelerated development of the means of communication have determined the companies to be much more attentive to the way in which they communicate with the public and to the channels they use.

The public that the firm targets has diversified, the groups that were considered auxiliary have become more important, the providers, the employees, the banks etc.; and the image has become the obsession of the departments of communication especially because of its proteinaceous nature, determined by the variable features that contribute to the process of building it, as well as by the diverse theories that define it. Therefore, it is necessary to have a plan of communication that establishes the target audience of the company, which are the messages and by which channels it communicates.

The first stage of establishing a plan is the audit through which all the factors with impact on the image of the firm are revised and after the analysis a diagnosis is established.[2] One of the coordinates is the analysis of the way in which the sender addresses the receiver and the determining of the meaning of the message. Because online communication has gotten an important share within the corporation communication, I intend to analyze the website of the company Dedeman, especially the main page, from a semiotic perspective. However, in order to have a performant evaluation, it is necessary to have an analysis in the context of profile firms, that is why I enlarge the area of analysis through the parallel evaluation of the main pages of the websites of the competitive firms – Baumax and Praktiker.

II. Using the semiotics in audit

The semiotic audit is a part of the general analysis and is focused on the way in which the message is sent, stressing on the meaning of the generated signs, either by broadcast speeches (advertising, distributed documents, public relations actions) to the public through diverse channels (mass media, website, blog, social networks), or by iconic signs used by the firm, all establish the symbolic relation with the receivers. The meaning of the symbolic communication between the sender and the receiver is permanently negotiated, along with the primary significance, the denotation, the receiver can decode other multiple secondary meanings that influence or even modify the meaning intended by the sender.

The process of building a website has been considered for a long time a task for the IT specialist; he chooses the architecture, the chromatics, the iconic signs used, the font, the size of the font, without considering that this interface generates implicit messages that have influence upon those who visit this virtual location. Within the semiotic audit the meaning of messages that the sender is transmitting is evaluated, their form as well as their content, because they can generate some mental images that sometimes can differ from those that the sender wants to cultivate in the minds of the receivers. The analysis of the codes of expression and of their effects helps positioning the firm in the context of the competitive firms. Through the codes it uses, the organization creates several social representations in the receivers' minds, associated with a series of expectations. For example, the way in which the target audience perceives the possibility of learning to build a house by oneself and to arrange it, by training courses held inside stores or by the online guide, depends on the social structure and on its cultural representations.

The codes that are used for the online environment are linguistic and iconic, verbal and non-verbal. The meaning depends on the relation between the signifier and the signified, negotiation being culturally influenced. The interpretation depends on the personal encyclopaedia, on the inference processes that take place and on the social representations cultivated by society and acquired by the person. Taking into account that the iconic signs are strongly motivated, as in the case of photographs, for example, the signifier constrains the signified to a primary level of meaning, only to generate later multiple secondary meanings according to the experiences and the acquired knowledge. The image of the store Dedeman constrains the receiver, even without seeing the logo, to recognize it if he is familiar with this type of stores.

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[2] Thierry Libaert, *Planul de comunicare. Cum să-ţi defineşti şi să-ţi organizezi strategia de comunicare,* Ed. Polirom, Iaşi, 2009.

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III. Analysis of the website of the firm Dedeman

Internet has become a shared space for firms and consumers, and the websites are part of the organization's identity through architecture, chromatics and the provided content. We can include this type of communication in the category of mass communication, that uses codes that are restricted to a heterogeneous public, interested in the products of those firms.

The websites represent the place where the sender and the receivers share information. From the point of view of the brand's architecture, the website represents a virtual premises of the firm, and the indices level of communication is very important, for both the factual role and the relation it establishes with the receivers. The main page contains information considered essential for a visitor, wrapped esthetically in a view that would attract attention and would spark interest from a potential customer. From a semiotic point of view, this online meeting place can be analyzed from two perspectives: the one of the relation established between the sender and the receiver and the one of the content.

The DIY firm Dedeman represents a powerful competitor on DIY[3] market, a fact proved by the statistics in the domain.[4] The success of the firm is also due to the way in which it communicates with the receivers directly and online. The main page can be sliced horizontally in three sections that differ at first sight by their different colors. The first section has two differently colored stripes, one on top of the other, and the information flow allows the reader to follow it from left to right. The first stripe is dark blue, a strong color that draws attention; the color is associated with depth, expertise, stability, it transmits importance and trust.[5] On this stripe the logo of the firm is applied on the left side, at the beginning of the row, an orange colored square, that surpasses the dimensions of the two successive stripes, and in the middle there is the name of the firm with printed letters dark blue on white, followed by the symbol of a dark blue head of a dog wearing an orange helmet. The orange combines the energy of the red with the joy of the yellow, resulting in a warm, bright, optimistic color that we associate with the sun, with summer, joy and tropical exuberance.″[6] In this code of colors the orange signifies enthusiasm, fascination, happiness, creativity, determination, attraction, success, encouragement. The orange behaves as a stimulent for the human psyche because the human eye perceives this color as being hot (it is the color closest to the color of fire), the orange gives a strong sensation of warmth in any combination it is used.[7] The association dark blue - orange is not randomly chosen; alternating cold with hot draws attention and helps fixating in the memory the logo image, but also the architecture of the stores, that is the same in any location. The white border that accompanies the letters of the name and the head of the dog has the role of emphasizing both the name and the symbol of the firm and to separate them from the background color.

Continuing to study the main page, the direction of reading would be the following: **Welcome to DEDEMAN, AUTENTIFICATION, LOG IN, SUPPORT, CUSTOMERS 02334 525 525**, then the name of the firm on the logo, the head of the dog (which is turned to the right)– **CHOOSE THE STORE / ONLINE ORDERS / MAGAZINE / DEDEMANUAL / SERVICES / CAREER / COMPANY / CONTACT**. In this context, the head of the dog symbolizes a close friend (the dog being man's best friend), who protects you and guides you through the labyrinth of the website. You get to the Dedeman store, he greets you at the door and accompanies you on your entire virtual visit. You have the freedom to choose which is the room you want to visit.

In an urban environment people take their dogs out for a walk, as a sign of care and friendship; here, the dog walks you around, presenting to you the products and the services offered by the firm. Culturally, the relationship man-dog is positively valued, and the image of the animals has a key stimulus role, attracting the viewer's attention. The meaning of the logo is that of close friend, who helps you build your own home, garden etc. – this is the Dedeman store. As a conclusion, this superior part of the page is directly addressed to the visitor, providing an offer of products and services. You can choose from the chain of stores the one that you want to visit and you have the

[3] Do-it-yourself
[4] www.Capital.ro/ 12 aprilie 2013.
[5] www.VreauCuloare.ro/culori
[6] Idem.
[7] Idem.

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opportunity to order online, from the comfort of your own armchair at home, with a minimal effort, you can see the offered prices, and if you want to become yourself an artisan, the dedemanual provides you with all the necessary information to finalize successfully the activities you want to accomplish. The title of the manual was personalized especially to underline the involvement of the firm in helping the clients. After you become familiar with the products they offer and with the production process, you can find out information about the services offered by the firm, using qualified and motivated staff. We discover in the zone entitled CAREERS that the employees represent an important resource for the firm and that there are investments in their professional as well as personal development.

The text that is shown in the „room" dedicated to career uses the following vectorial reason: the company's management is similar to the Western one (win-win, the employees in whom it invests win – the clients win – the firm wins), the proof is represented by its presence in the charts of the Capital magazine, and at the end of the paragraph there is the information that the firm functions with autochthonous capital and it is one of the biggest employers. In the context where the big Romanian firms are fewer and fewer, an employer of such range deserves the support of the Romanian public, even more when it doesn't practise a management of win-loss type, but win-win. Motivating 6700 employees represents a winning advantage for clients and for the firm too, but also for society, by the example it creates. The number of employees is clearly specified, to underline the size of the firm, but also the importance of every employee, as a big family.

After CAREERS there is a description of the company, COMPANY, in which there is information about the beginnings of the organization and its evolution in time, the same as on the main page.

On a vertical direction, starting from the logo there is a succession of labels written in big font letters, blue on white, of the „rooms" where we can enter by a simple click: **ABOUT US / DEDEMAN SERVICES / FINANCING SOLUTIONS / SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY / DEDEMAN NETWORK / CLIENT SUPPORT SERVICE / CONTACT**

A part of the labels are repeated, being contained in the horizontal bar too, on top of the page, others are new and interesting for the clients – the financing solutions, the chain of stores and the support service for clients are included in the next stage; in the first stage you have a look around, you analyze, you find out how to apply, you learn about the services you can benefit from, then you establish the possibilities of financing or if you have questions you can contact the specialists of the firm at the support service or contact. There is an „empty" room – Social responsibility, where the firm doesn't have a strategy yet.

The two sides, horizontal and vertical, that contain the labels with information frame three successive photographs that switch at the choice of the visitor, by clicking a button. The first image is of a Dedeman store and by its chromatics it has an active role and a referential one by the information it provides. The flags with the logo of the firm in front of the store, the building painted in the two colors – blue and orange show that there is a DIY store Dedeman. Our attention is drawn by the multitude of cars from the parking space that denotes that the store has a big parking space where we can leave our car, and at a connotation level, it emphasizes how popular the store is. We have clues about the size of the store too, and behind the building we can see other buildings, the towers of a church and blocks of flats, as well as cranes that make us think of new buildings that are under construction with the help of the store. The image also has the role of fixating in our memory the exterior aspect of the DEDEMAN stores that is the same no matter the location.

The other two images belong to the office of the firm from Bacău and which contrast with the first image by sobriety. There is a block with many levels, metallic grey, and the logo of the firm appears on white in contrast with the rest; only the helmet keeps the colour of the logo of the firm. The meaning of this group of photographs is that of a firm that doesn't want to impress: the office is simple and sober, but the stores are very comfortable for clients, according to the company motto – *Dedicated to your plans*. This conclusion is also sustained by the vectorial reason of the welcome page, the eyes slide down from the photographs toward the text that is written simply in black on white and that describes synthetically the company's story. It starts by mentioning the people who founded the business, the year, the type of business and to whom it is addressed.

The second paragraph describes the starting point and the present result, specifying to whom the 100% Romanian capital belongs; it appeals to the national pride of the majority of clients.

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However, it mentions the fact that the most important resource is represented by the employees. "The company has expanded in a constant and fast rhythm, but aside from calculations and numbers, the most important capital of the business example Dedeman is the human one. The employees who work in the 36 stores of our retail chain are like a family: dynamic, pragmatic and always attentive to the demands, the plans and the needs of our customers and partners. "[8].

In the next paragraphs we find out about the products that we can buy from the stores, their origin and the services that clients can benefit from, and finally, the target audience is mentioned: "Along with counseling and consultancy, the assistance and logistics services transform the visit to Dedeman in an invitation to return anytime to a friendly, attentive and flexible environment, dedicated to the plans of hard working and practical people.."[9]

In the final area from the bottom of the page of dark blue color there is a list of contents with information for those who are interested in learning details about the company, communication with mass media, staff recruitment and possibilities for professional development.

IV.The semiotic audit in the context of competition

The company Baumax has another strategy of communication. The welcome page of the website relies on images in diverse bright colors and focuses on people. In the top area of the page there is the logo of the firm, placed on a bright red border, the color of blood and fire, which we associate with pure energy, with life, passion, love, force and determination. It is, at the same time, the most dynamic color, inspiring movement, speed but also agitation.[10] The presence of this color on the website signifies an active, dynamic environment.

On the same border, to the left side, there is the eye that searches for the categories of products that exist in the stores, with the possibility to search in Romanian and English language too, showing the international openness of the firm. Also on top of the page there are the flags of the countries where there are stores of this firm; on a denoting level we can consider that the firm informs about its multinational quality, that it has a long chain of stores, and on the level of connotations we can imagine that it wishes to transmit to receivers that it offers opportunities of professional progress to those who are interested, but it also shows respect for the countries where it functions, displaying their national symbol on the website. It represents a visual sign that becomes an index according to the cultural level: the eye is attracted by the chromatic diversity which has the role of drawing attention and sparking interest from the receiver who has information about those countries and their symbols in his personal encyclopedia.

On a central spot there is the image of a glass building, with a futuristic architecture, on which there are the logo of the firm and four photographs with persons who show the products from the categories sold by the Baumax stores. The people are cheerful, the color of their clothes and of the background is attentively chosen and the entire building is projected on the background of a luminous sky, the light being reflected by the glass of the building walls. The background colors of the pictures that appear on the front of the building along with the logo are blue, violet, red and green and they highlight the products that the store is offering. On a level of secondary meanings we can consider that the intention of the sender was to transmit to receivers calm and relaxation, states of mind that the green color transmits; "the light red makes us think of passion, love, sexuality, the joy of living; the violet combines the stability of the blue with the energy of the red and symbolizes power, nobility, luxury and ambition. It transmits welfare and extravagance. Blue is the color of the sky and of the sea. It is often associated with depth and stability. It symbolizes trust, loyalty, wisdom, intelligence, faith and truth."[11] On the whole everything radiates cheerfulness, the joy of shopping, relaxation, completed also by the images of smaller dimensions under the main picture of the page. In these photographs the employees of the firm appear in three different situations: in the department of a store, in a meeting and during the training activities. Each of the three images highlights different features of the employees, with an effect on the image of the firm.

[8] www.dedeman.ro/despre-noi
[9] Idem
[10] www.VreauCulori.ro/culori
[11] Idem

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The first image shows us two employees dressed in suits in a flower department; both the man and the woman are very neatly dressed, the man wearing a dark blue suit, business casual color, the woman has a neat hairdo, wearing earrings, in a lilac suit, from which we can assume that they are not simple employees, but are part of the management of the firm. Both of them are smiling, a smile that shows joy but also kindness, availability, attention to the other's needs. These meanings are strengthened by the coordinator of recruitment's affirmation, who selects the staff for the entire company, that recruiting is done according to the social skills of the future employee, which is the essential quality.[12]

In the second photograph, which is probably from a company meeting, we can notice the discipline of the employees who participate to the meeting, casually dressed, shoulder to shoulder, like a big family. If we click on this image we find out more about the principles of the firm, and the violet color of the speaker's desk sends us to spiritual meanings associated to this color, together with the first principle of the firm stated as follows: The Christian ethics is our spiritual foundation, our attitude and actions being guided by Christian values.[13] News and novelties complete this main page of the website of the Baumax firm.

The website of the company Praktiker has a simple welcome page that relies mainly on the visual code. The central image, diversely colored, brings information about the discounts available in this period. The focus is on the benefits brought by the use of the fidelity card and on the payment facilities. The text has a factual role; it is addressed directly with an offer for the potential customer – **At Praktiker discounts have personality**. This message is followed in the direction of reading by the number 15, largely enhanced and the smaller sign %, on the background, and over the percentage there are three young people, a man and two women, pleasantly looking, dressed specifically for working activities: gardening, painting, woodwork; they are cheerful, relaxed, eager for action. The final meaning of the image remains for each viewer to decide, maybe it is that anyone who will buy whitewash or gardening materials will look as good as the people in the image, at least as a state of mind, and the workers will be respectful, the young man in the picture saluting with his hand to his helmet. The colors used are light blue for the background, blue, dark blue and yellow for the frames and text. Associating these colors generates a state of calm, relaxation, confidence, both colors stimulating intellectual activities, and the dark blue being a masculine color; studies show that it is men's favorite and it suggests knowledge, power, integrity and seriousness. Dark blue is associated with depth, expertise, stability, it transmits importance and trust, therefore it is the color of corporations and police uniforms, it is connected to intelligence, stability, unity and conservative attitudes.[14]

The horizontal bar from the top of the page informs us about – **CLIENT SERVICES – HOW IT IS DONE – YOUR OPINION**, this is considered the most important information from the company's perspective. Unlike the Baumax firm, Praktiker offers consultancy to the clients, in order to be able to use the purchased products by themselves: by saving labor money one can afford to buy more and to have the satisfaction of doing something with one's own hands. It is a social example that the Dedeman firm has acquired too, with their dedemanual that can be consulted on the website. In our culture there is a tradition that the man should build the house for his family. This practice is exemplified in our society also by such DIY firms. Returning to the website, all this ensemble of chromatic, iconic and linguistic indices suggest to the visitor that the Praktiker firm offers the clients products and services of good quality, in a pleasant environment.

V. Conclusions

The semiotic analysis of the websites of the three competing firms Dedeman, Baumax and Praktiker highlights similarities and differences determined by the economic and commercial experience, but also by the cultural representations. On the whole the architecture of the website, the colors and the iconic signs do not transmit joy, the euphoria of shopping, but seriousness, simplicity taken to austerity, the photographs radiate almost sadness, a world in transformation, as the Romanian society. In the first picture the cars from the parking lot of the store are carelessly parked, the logos

[12] Sabina Fabian, recruitment coordinator, Klosterneuburg headquarters, http://www.baumax. com/ro/cariera/
[13] http://www.baumax.com/ro/despre-baumax/principiile-baumax/
[14] Idem.

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from the flags have different colors, even though they have the purpose of drawing attention to it and fixating it in the receivers' memory; in this context, the effect is the opposite, of disorder. There is no consistency in the use of the logo, it appears either colored in white, or dark blue on white with an orange background, which means that there is no respect from the firm for graphic signs that they wish to fixate in the public mind. The text placed under the photographs, about the history of the firm, by its font, size, color, gives the impression of something temporary.

Although there are clear references in the displayed texts about the importance that the employees have for the firm, however there are no pictures with the employees or their opinions, as we find on the websites of Baumax and Praktiker. We can conclude that Dedeman is a company oriented more towards the buyer than to the internal public that is the staff. This is confirmed by the empty page that corresponds to the label SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, which, although announced on the vertical border of the main page, it has no content. We can't know which is the meaning that the company gives to this phrase, social responsibility, but its presence on the content list means that either the strategy for this domain is under construction, or it was displayed to improve the image of the whole; there is more and more talking about the implication of the companies in society, but it isn't a priority yet. To conclude, our cultural representations are reflected in the architecture and the interior design of the website.

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