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## Understanding Space

Over the years the world of marketing and branding has come a long way in understanding how color and images combine to shape the brand experience, and the importance of considering these points when dealing with an array of cultural norms and expectations. We know red is an auspicious color in China, but is often interpreted as being too aggressive and agitating in the US. We know that choosing symbolically discordant images and colors can have a strong impact on the viewers psyche.

What hasn't been touched on with the same degree of interest is Proxemics, the understanding that how the use of space, either literally or in visual representations, can have a dramatic effect on the person experiencing the brand. It isn't enough to understand the impact of lighting on cognitive processes of the brain, nor is it enough to understand what messages certain colors convey in different parts of the world. To truly build a lasting brand presence, we need to understand how the consumers to whom we are marketing distinguish a "place" from a "space," and what meanings they invest in a physical setting.

Proxemics is the understanding of space in the holistic sense, as well as the cultural association we place upon space. It is the study of how an environment, at the interactive and interpretive level, is bestowed with meaning by people in daily life. The term "Proxemics" was coined in the 1950s by Edward Hall to address the study of our conceptualization and use of space, as well as how various differences impact our experiences within a given area. In other words, Proxemics is the study of place and space from the cultural vantage point.

Proxemics, in its simplest understanding, is broken into two wide areas. The first is physical territory, such as why desks face the front of a classroom or why front yards in America rarely have a privacy fence. The second broad area is that of personal territory, the space we carry with us. It is the space we keep between ourselves and the person with whom we are speaking. In both cases, having a solid understanding of how these dimensions manifest in our modes of communication is pivotal to a successful branding effort. But first, what are we talking about when we say Proxemics as it relates to a brand?

### **Of Industrial Landscapes and Natural Space**

Human perceptions of space, although derived from sensory tools that all humans share, are shaped and patterned by culture. This means that differing cultural frameworks for defining and organizing space are internalized by all people at an unconscious, usually shared level, and can lead to serious failures of communication in cross-cultural settings. At the macro-level, these sensibilities shape cultural expectations about how streets, neighborhoods, groceries, retail settings, and essentially every environment we interact with should be properly organized. This also means that settings can and do take on a "personality" depending on how they relate to cultural archetypes we

posses about a given spatial frame. For example, the living room archetype has specific elements of light, furniture and furniture placement, color, and wall decoration that signal the space is a living room. These spatial cues are very different from what we expect in a archetypal board room setting. When used in a retail or business environment, how space is used impacts how customers interpret what that space is “:supposed to” be. In some cases these spaces can typify and inflate the cultural frame, in others they are in some way disruptive.

The Apple Store exemplifies a somewhat discordant but positive and memorable experience by stripping away elements of a tech-centric environment and replacing them with features associated with a non-technology focused world. Open space is used liberally and allows patrons to scan the store with few obstructions. Computers are displayed on countertops, not shelves, along the outer walls. Tables fill the central space. Only accessory items are stacked, which allows the eye to easily scan the interior of the store. Warm, natural colors are used rather than loud or cold materials, making the store more inviting.

When all these pieces are put together, the environment signals both a sense of inclusion and exploration that is lacking in most computer stores. Everything comes together in the physical space to create a distinct personality that is mirrored in every other aspect of the Apple brand, from the website to TV ads. The reasons are a combination of biological and cultural principles. The eye follows basic evolutionary principals of horizontally scanning the horizon to gather information about the environment. Rather than focusing on vertical scanning, as in done in most computer and consumer electronics stores, horizontal scanning also promotes eye contact and person-to-person interaction instead of interaction exclusively with the products. Stools are available at display stations and invite patrons to sit as one would at home, rather than stand. The cultural signal is that we are in a home rather than a store. Products are de-commoditized and given a warmth that is normally lacking in the cultural understanding of technology.

Contrast this with the layout of most computer/PC stores where items are stacked on shelves, the materials used in displays are sterile and cold, and the focus of the experience is on the technology, rather than how technology fits seamlessly into a consumer’s life.

## **Personal Space**

Moving beyond public space, another important aspect of Proxemics, and one a business frequently has less control over, is the use of culturally constructed personal space. Briefly outlined are the four areas that Americans intuitively respect and use to define personal territory:

1. Public Space ranges from about 12 to 25 feet and is the distance maintained between the audience and a speaker giving an address.
2. Social Space ranges from 4 to 10 feet and is used for communication among business associates, strangers using public areas (such as in a retail setting).
3. Personal Space ranges from 2 to 4 feet and is used among friends and family members, and to separate people waiting in lines. Not surprisingly, this is also the distance assumed in certain retail setting where a greater degree of intimacy is to be conveyed (e.g. a lingerie store).

4. Intimate Space ranges out to one foot and involves the possibility of (and sometimes probability of) touching. This is reserved for people with whom we are very close or for secretive actions such as whispering.

Personal Space varies dramatically along cultural lines and can have an enormous impact on how a brand is received. As an example, when visiting Dubai, you might find yourself almost nose to nose with a business associate because their social space equates to intimate space in the US. You would probably find yourself unconsciously reacting by backing away trying to regain what you view as appropriate social space while your associate unknowingly pursues you across the floor trying to maintain what is the norm for him. The result is that you assign negative meaning to that behavior, considering it rude or odd. Now, imagine this happening in a retail setting, a car dealership, or greeting card store. The result is a negative or awkward experience for the consumer, though they may have difficulty defining what feels wrong. By extension, the consumer then transfers the sensation of discomfort to the brand as a whole. Ultimately, whether the meaning you assign is negative or positive, you assign meaning to it, and thus to the brand as a whole.

How personal space is used in messaging and advertising is equally important. While you are viewing an ad, rather than participating in an experience firsthand, you still register what is and is not “normal” for those pictured in an ad. So, for example, beer ads frequently make a point of significantly reducing personal space between men and women, while increasing the distance between men. The subconscious registry is one of increased intimacy and sexual cues. However, when these ads are run in parts of the world where sexual norms and rules around inter-gender behavior are different, these images signal improper use of space.

### **From Space to Place**

What all of this means, is that cultural differences in how we interpret space and our physical environment, both public and personal, literal and symbolic, can have a enormous impact on how a brand is perceived.

Clearly, investing in the right location with the right amount of space and the right demographic mix for your target audience is incredibly important. Equally, so is the sound, temperature, amount of “clutter,” color palette and lighting. But first and foremost, understanding how space becomes a place and thus, a major aspect of brand, begins by defining an environment by its cultural standards. It includes determining rules of interpersonal interaction with the staff. It even involves determining how space will translate in ad collateral.

Ultimately, spatial studies can be a remarkably powerful tool in determining how a brand will manifest itself and be assigned meaning in a range of environments. Or a retailer can simply continue to scream about its low, low prices. Unfortunately, that only gets you so far.

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