

## The 'Truth' of Science and the Branding of Food Products and Organizations

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## **Introduction**

*“During the second half of the twentieth century, exciting new insights emerged that allowed for the development of foods and beverages with a claimed health benefit, based on scientific evidence.”(Weststrate et al., 2002: S233)*

*“It’s a very expensive food, but a very cheap medicine.” (CEO of Comvita Honey Products, New Zealand, August, 2008)*

Interest in the marketing of food has traditionally focused on understanding purchase choice rather than food consumption or branding. However, more recently the symbolic dimensions of food and the cultural context in which it is consumed, rather than the physical attributes of the product, are highlighted (Kniazeva and Ventkatesh, 2007; Berger and Rand, 2008; Thompson, 2004). From this perspective, food is understood as both a commodity and a metaphor (eg. Schlosser, 2001). In this paper we examine the branding of food and how organizations deploy a discourse based upon scientific truth claims in order to shift consumer understandings of food brands and the organizations that produce them. We propose that food science not only changes the process of food production but also changes the meanings that consumers attribute to food brands. Our analysis utilises Foucault’s (1988) theory of discourse technologies - including technologies of production, sign systems, power, and the self - to explore the use of scientific discourse in the branding of food products and food organizations (Motion and Leitch, 2002). The application of science may facilitate a discursive shift in which a product that was conceived as a food is rebranded as a nutraceutical or medicine and the organizational identity associated with the brand is similarly transformed.

## **Discourse Technologies of Food Branding**

A discourse is a system of meaning creation. Viewed through a critical discourse lens (Fairclough, 1992), branding may be seen as a set of discourse practices that aim to (re-)construct the commonsense understanding of an organization and its products. We will now explain Foucault’s (1988) four discourse technologies, which provide a conceptual framework

for our analysis of food branding and the ways in which it may impact on organization-consumer relationships.

#### *Technologies of Production*

Technologies of production were defined by Foucault as technologies that “permit us to produce, transform or manipulate things” (1988: 18). For example, food science may contribute to a material change within the systems of food production. Such changes may result in new or enhanced products or may lead to changes in manufacturing processes. Food science may, however, also be a source of symbolic capital when a new source of value is identified for an existing food. Such symbolic capital becomes a resource for the technologies of sign systems.

#### *Technologies of Sign Systems*

Technologies of sign systems were referred to by Foucault as technologies that “permit us to use signs, meanings symbols or significations” (1988: 18) to communicate. The strategies employed to produce and reproduce a branding discourse that meets organizational objectives may, therefore, be seen as sign system technologies. Such strategies may include identity-based attributions around issues such as ‘environmentally friendly’, ‘dolphin-safe’, ‘organic’ or ‘fair-trade’, which are now common-place in food branding.

#### *Technologies of Power*

Technologies of power, according to Foucault, “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination” (1988: 18). The technologies of power embedded within brands include attempts to establish and communicate normalizing truths in relation to brand value and utility (Leitch and Leitch, 2007). These truths strategically articulate with consumer identities and interests in order to drive purchase behaviour. Technologies of power therefore enable some brands to establish market dominance and achieve a price premium.

#### *Technologies of the Self*

Foucault proposed technologies of the self as those technologies which “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (1988:

18). Through the adoption of technologies of the self, consumers choose to use brands to communicate, augment, modify or transform their identities.

Next we explore the application of these four discourse technologies in food branding, with a particular focus on the role and use of scientific discourse.

### **Discourse Technologies and the Scientific Branding of Food.**

New product development has often relied on sophisticated food science (Fuller, 2004), with food companies increasingly looking for patent-protected products and processes (Juriaanse, 2006). However, until the advent of ‘functional foods’ this level of scientific involvement in the food production process was not always communicated to the consumer. Functional food has been associated with a shift in the use of science to market the health benefits to consumers of certain foods consumed in their ‘natural’ state. That is, food science is not applied to transform the raw ingredients into a processed food (e.g. potato fries), but rather deployed to communicate the functional attributes, particularly the nutritional and health benefits, of the unprocessed food (eg. Promoting the whole potato, including skin, as a ‘superfood’). This shift represents a major change in food branding and can be framed as moving from a push to a consumer pull involvement (Van Kleef et al., 2002). We propose that this shift in the use of science has changed the meanings of many food brands, and consequently the organizational brands of food companies, which has considerable implications for both product and organizational branding within this sector. We will now use the discourse technologies framework to explore how the use of scientific discourse has become so powerful in changing consumer understanding of food, food consumption and food organizations.

#### *Technologies of Production*

The use of food science to produce symbolic capital was exemplified in the quotation at the beginning of the paper in relation to the New Zealand honey company, Comvita. Increased scientific understanding of the anti-bacterial attributes of Manuka honey has changed the perception of Comvita, as the following comments from their website indicates:

At Comvita, we are on a path to change perceptions of natural health with fresh thinking, scientific knowhow and innovative product delivery. Our difference is our origin, our attitude and point of view. .... Comvita Manuka Honeys for both the table and the first aid cabinet are tested for the unique antibacterial properties which make New Zealand Manuka honey famous. ([www.comvita.com](http://www.comvita.com))

For Comvita, Manuka honey is no longer just a food to spread on toast (UMF® Active Honey), but also a cosmetic to spread on the face (‘Huni’ range, packaged in a honeycomb shaped bottle) and dermatological skin creams and dressings (‘Medihoney’) to spread on vulnerable skin and burns. As part of the technologies of production associated with such scientific food branding, the organizations are not only interacting with their traditional food suppliers, but also with scientific organizations. Thus the organizational brand of Comvita has been intertwined with that of scientific research organizations. For example, Comvita uses a scientific accreditation from a honey research institute as part of its table honey branding:

The NZ Honey Association has registered UMF® as a trademark so that the antibacterial activity of Manuka honey cannot be misrepresented. The UMF® number comes from a laboratory test for antibacterial activity, with the honey being compared with a standard reference antiseptic (phenol) for potency. UMF® 20+ would be equivalent in antiseptic potency to a 20% solution of phenol. Manuka Honey which is tested and proven to have the UMF® (Unique Manuka Factor) is labelled accordingly. Only honeys with a UMF® rating higher than 10 can use the UMF® trademark. ([www.comvita.com](http://www.comvita.com))

This quote combines the two distinct discourses of science and marketing with the science discourse producing legitimacy for the brand.

### *Technologies of Sign Systems*

The sign systems of science constitute a powerful source of symbolic capital for the rebranding of food as a health or medicinal product. For example, the use of scientific terms on the Comvita website, such as ‘laboratory test’ and ‘phenol’, are powerful symbols that transfer the truth claims associated with sound science to Comvita products. Branding texts may also be enhanced by visual signs which, in the case of Comvita, included an image of a scientist in a white laboratory coat holding a product alongside some scientific testing equipment. The scientific discourse may also flow through to the packaging, in that some of the products are sold in bottles that resemble medicinal rather than food containers, and may be purchased in pharmacies rather than supermarkets. All of these images and placement decisions reflect the use of the symbols associated with scientific discourse intended to communicate the transformation of Comvita from a food producer to a source of high quality health and medical products.

### *Technologies of Power*

The ability of scientific discourse to transfer legitimacy to food products and organizations is a result of the inherent epistemic power base of science (Motion and Doolin, 2007). Through the use of scientific discourse, organizations are able to establish the legitimacy of their health claims in relation to functional foods and thereby produce a boundary between ‘normal’ food and that which has been ‘scientifically categorised’ as pure, healthy or medicinal. In the following example, scientific claims are embedded within a product blurb intended to establish the relative brand value of a water brand.

**antipodes  
Sparkling**

To be at your table today this water has been brought to the surface from the deepest water aquifer in New Zealand. It has spent decades under enormous pressure in vast underground canyons more than 300 meters below the surface. The pressure from within the aquifer creates a natural filtration process that has led to antipodes being scientifically categorised as the deepest, highest quality artesian water in New Zealand. It has then been bottled at source, providing a purity, clarity and taste that can only found deep down at the end of the earth. Gently carbonated with the finest bead, antipodes is the perfect partner for fine foods.

DRINK CHILLED, DRINK OFTEN, LIVE WELL.

(Label from a bottle of antipodes sparkling water, New Zealand, 2008)

The asserted scientific claim that the product is of the ‘highest quality’ provides the basis for the significant price premium that is charged for antipodes water. The blurb also attempts to position antipodes as a an elite brand associated with the experience of fine dining.

*Technologies of the Self*

Consumers interact with branded products in ways that may augment or enhance their own conceptions of themselves. When scientific discourse is used to transform the meaning of food products, it may also change the ways in which consumers make use of the brand to communicate their identity. For example, a food product is not solely about nutrition but may also be about self-improvement and concern for healthy life-styles. This can be seen in the last line of the water branding, whereby the consumption of the scientifically proven pure antipodes water, will enable the consumer to ‘live well’. The brand blurb invites consumers to improve themselves through healthy and pro-active food consumption, resulting in a more active engagement with the brand.

Although motivation research has assumed that people’s likelihood of changing their behaviour in response to a health-related appeal depends on their perceived severity of a risk-related condition, experience has shown that increased information and awareness do not

necessarily lead to behaviour changes (Berger and Rand, 2008). Berger and Rand's (2008) research suggests that decisions are made also with respect to the identity that a given choice communicates to others. In the case of food, the selection of a scientifically proven healthy food, is an indicator of identity-based consumption but does not necessarily suggest that a major change in behaviour is required, given that food must be consumed as a matter of course. Thus the use of scientific discourse in the branding of food, not only influences the perception of the brand identity of a food organisation but also the identity of the food consumer and the relationships between the consumer and the organization.

### **Conclusion**

In this short paper we have briefly explored the innovative use of scientific discourse to transform organizational brand identity in the food industry. Food science provides a potent source of symbolic capital for organizations and consumers to mobilize their identity. Science provides organizational and product brands legitimacy and power because science is seen as a system for the production of truth. Science offers consumers confidence by providing supporting evidence for their brand choices and for the use of brands to reinforce, transform or communicate their identity.

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