



Q&A

## Aradhna Krishna, professor and sensory marketing expert

Alec Foege, 27 March 2013

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One of our [10 Trends for 2013](#) is Sensory Explosion, the idea that with more of life virtual and online, we'll place a premium on sensory stimulation, and in turn marketers will look for more ways to engage the senses. While researching this trend, we reached out to Aradhna Krishna, one of the leading academics in the field of sensory marketing. Krishna held the first academic conference on sensory marketing, in 2008, and runs a sensory marketing research lab at the University of Michigan's Stephen M. Ross School of Business. Her new book, *Customer Sense: How the 5 Senses Influence Buying Behavior*, argues that companies can greatly enhance the appeal of products by making small changes that trigger subconscious responses. She explains here how sensory marketing has evolved in recent years and how marketers can cut through advertising clutter with some carefully formulated sensory cues.

How do you define sensory marketing?

In my book, I have defined sensory marketing as subconscious triggers that affect how people make purchase and consumption decisions. With advertising, the marketer is claiming that their brand is good or that their potato chips are crisp or that their cologne smells very masculine. The consumer may then feel that the marketer is deliberately trying to influence them; they may react by saying, "Well, sure, they just want to sell the product, so they're trying to say their product behaves in a certain way. How do I really know?" Whereas if the product itself is giving that message through sensory means, it's a much more persuasive message. It is a more subconscious message.

What's the best way to approach sensory marketing?

It has to be done in a very systematic way. When I do my consultancy work, I focus on identifying the sense or senses and the sensory message that would work for a brand. You don't want to just hype up every sense, which is unfortunately what many sensory marketing consultants are advocating these days. You need to understand what would really work for this product.

What some people are doing instead is saying, "Let's make this product smell better, and let's make it feel better, let's make it look better ... let's just try and make it as 'multi-sensory' as possible." But what one needs to figure out is what sensory elements are really consistent with this product? Let's say you wanted to make a potato chip appear very fresh and crisp. Not only would the chip have to make a loud sound when it was bitten, but the packet too would need to make a loud pop when it was opened. The potato chip may not actually be that fresh, but when the bag makes that pop sound, one associates that with freshness.

Firms have been practicing sensory marketing for a long time in the same way as firms have been doing advertising forever. But the question is, have people been thinking about it in systematic ways? There are very few examples from the past where people were indeed thinking about sensory aspects of their product. **Singapore Airlines** is an exception, where very early on they created a signature smell. This smell is still used by them and is identifiable in the plane and in their lounges. While it is not strong in concentration, one can smell it sort of subliminally, and it seems to connote luxury and comfort.

But it's only recently, in the last two or three years, that people have been focusing more explicitly on sensory marketing. They realize now that that's the way of the future to make the product more appealing.

What are some of the drivers behind this renewed interest in sensory marketing?

People are realizing there's a lot of clutter in the marketplace in terms of deliberate advertising. And so they are saying, "How do I cut through this clutter to make my product intrinsically appealing?" In my book, I have hundreds of examples of how companies have used creative ways to engage the customer. There's the example of the potato chip: Why is the potato chip made bigger than the mouth? Why do you have to bite it to make it fit in the mouth? One reason is that when you bite it, you hear the sound and you think it is extremely crisp. The other thing is that when you're biting it, other people around you hear it and they get more excited to also eat that potato chip.

There is lots of research which connects the sound of the potato chip to the freshness—there are beautiful experiments where people were put into little booths with headphones and they had to eat these potato chips, and for some people, the sound of the potato chip being eaten was magnified. For the people for whom the sound was magnified, they felt the taste of the potato chip was much more crisp and fresh. It's directly linking the sound with freshness.

What's a more recent example of smart sensory marketing?

Let's talk about the iPod Touch. Just the fact that they called it the "Touch" made the consumer much more involved with the product. If they had called it some alphanumeric name—let's say, RXD2—they would not have had the same sort of success. Just calling it the Touch really made people much more engaged with the product—they wanted to touch it, to interact with it, and felt closer to it. Their advertising too was a play on Touch and emphasized it. So it was very beautifully done to engage the consumer.

Are you seeing a growing interest from marketers in sensory marketing?

I organized the first sensory marketing conference in 2008, where I brought together academics and industry people. Research was being done in scattered ways on all the senses, so that some people were working on smell and others on touch, but they were not conversing with each other. People hadn't got together and said, "Look, there is this whole thing of sensory marketing, which is extremely important to marketers."

Once I had the conference, I got a tremendous number of calls from consultants who wanted to enter the area of sensory marketing. Even now I get a lot of calls from consultancy firms that have taken on assignments but are finding it a little difficult to approach them. While people are excited about the area, they don't have too much expertise. As firms get in-house training, the expertise will build up and you will see more and more ability to engage consumers through sensory aspects of products.

Do you have examples of new sensory experiences that have successfully captured the interest of consumers?

Are you familiar with Dippin' Dots? Dippin' Dots is a completely new sensation. They are these little pellets of ice cream that melt in your mouth. The ice cream company can charge much more per ounce compared to other ice creams.

You can also reformulate a product to make it sensorially more appealing. An example from my book is **Hershey's** milk chocolate. You can have it as a flat slab. Or, as they decided to do, you can make this same product sensorially more appealing by transforming it into the Hershey's Kiss. The Hershey's Kiss is extremely sensorially appealing in many ways. It feels very good in the mouth. The shape looks very good. When you are unwrapping it, you're unfolding the flag. It's also like unwrapping a present. It's very creative.



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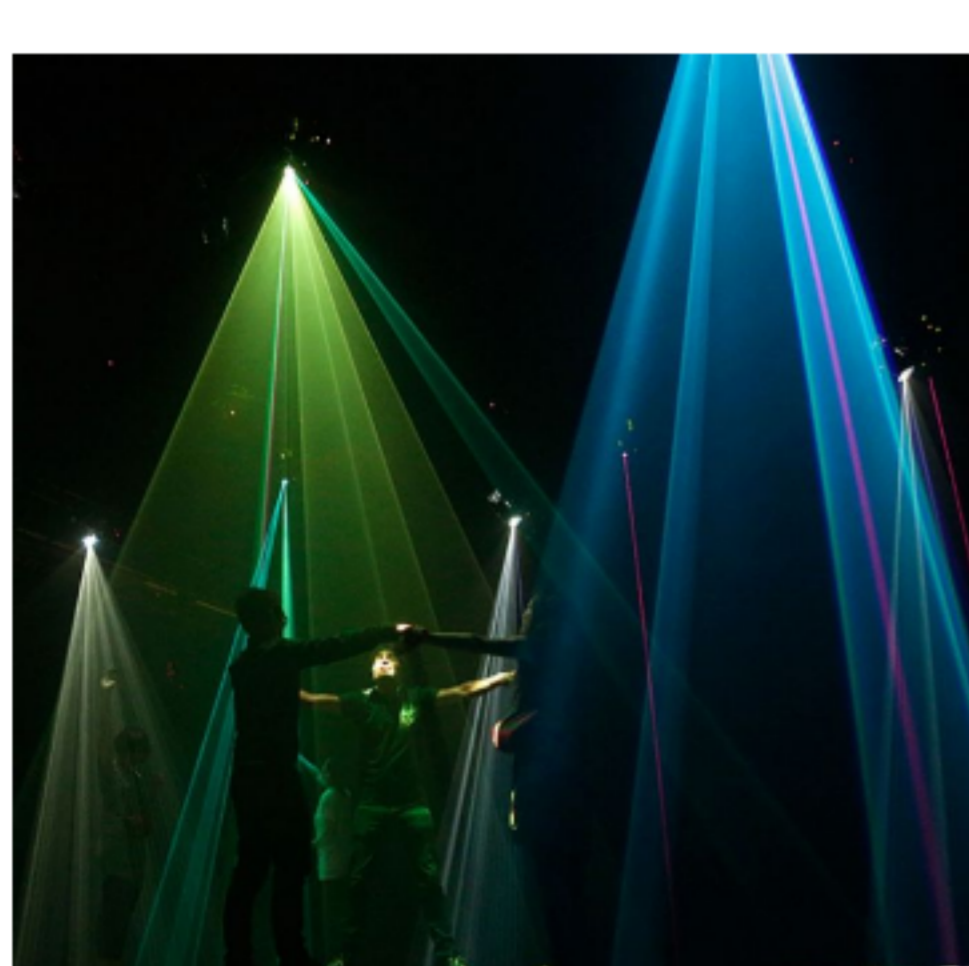
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