The secret language of colour
“Colours are the mother tongue of the subconscious”. Carl Gustav Jung

Some people can hear, taste or even smell colours. These (admittedly rare) ‘synesthetes’ experience a rare neurological condition, which entwines two or more of the senses. For the rest of us with normal colour perception, however, colour remains a wondrous beauty. Colour is all-pervasive. It is language-neutral, but loaded with meaning. It’s completely overt, yet each person sees colour through different eyes, both literally and figuratively. Different cultures, different experiences, different meaning, different emotions are all loaded into the secret language of colour.

It is no wonder then that colour has a significant impact on the visual arts, of which print advertising, television/cinema, outdoor; web and in fact most advertising apart from radio, is of course, an applied form. Colour advertising is a relatively new phenomenon (although personally I consider the stained glass windows in early churches and monasteries to be one of the earliest forms of (beautiful colour) advertising. Colour print car adverts only started to appear in the 1920s, many of them beautifully illustrated, while others exploited the then novelty of colour photography. The first British colour television advert (for ‘Birds Eye Peas’) only flighted on 15 November 1969. South African TV ads were always in colour, given that marketers only gained this exciting medium in 1978.

Colour isn’t just art. Blame the malius-domestica cranial trauma (apple bouncing off the noggin), but ever since Newton got to grips with colour in 1666, it has become a lot more scientific. In 1810, Johann von Wolfgang Goethe published his book ‘Theory of Colours’. Not particularly well received by the scientific community, it was however, very well respected by philosophers and artists. Goethe’s greatest addition to colour science was how humans actually perceive colour. Thus the science of chromatics was born, starting the development of the body of knowledge so critical to effective visual communication. To quote perhaps one of the world’s most famous visual communicators, Pablo Picasso, on the complexity of colour science: “Why do two colours, put next to each other, sing? Can we really explain this? No.”

The critical question is how much do we as marketers know about colour and how much influence does it have on consumers? More importantly, how often do we let personal preferences overshadow a more objective approach to colour? Marketing research indicates that 80 percent of visual information is related to colour (Color Design Workbook, Stone. TL, Rockport 2006), yet in all the years studying marketing and the allied management sciences, the author can’t recall anything more than a superficial mention of colour.

Marketers do, however, all know Pantone, which started life in the 50s as a commercial printing company, before becoming far more famous for its proprietary Colour Matching System. So these days it is easy to

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define and specify a certain colour and try and make it our brands’ own. Just ask Cadbury, who have been vigorous in protecting ‘Cadbury purple’ (Pantone 2685C) and of course France Telecom’s definitive Orange™ cell phone brand, home to 193 million customers. Closer to home we are all familiar with South Africa’s ‘Red Bank’, ‘Yellow Cell Phone Company’ and ‘Green Bank / Assurer’.

What you might not know is that Pantone nominate a ‘Pantone colour of the year’. Recent winners include: Chili pepper (2007); Blue iris (2008); Mimosa (2009); Turquoise (2010).

So which colour should we pick for our brands? Who exactly decides which colours are ‘in’ this season and which are ‘out’? Unsurprisingly, the Pantone Color Institute is one of America’s most prominent colour forecasters. Color Association of America ‘CAUS’ is one of the oldest, while the Color Marketing Group – an international non-profit of over fifteen hundred designers is one of the world’s largest. The seasons’ colours on the catwalks of Europe certainly don’t happen by chance, but they certainly do influence other colour dependent industries and eventually trickle down to influence our brands.

The secret language
Colours are undoubtedly imbued with different meanings and associations, built up within the observer from culture, experience and what has been taught.

Red apparently enhances ones metabolism, respiration rate and blood pressure. In advertising, it brings text and images to the fore and stimulates quick decisions - perfect I am told, for ‘Click Here Now’ online buttons. Red is often used to evoke erotic feelings: pouting red lips, glossy red nails, “the Lady in Red”. So when marketers choose a colour (such as red) they are communicating more than just a specific hue. Every colour comes with a lifetime of accumulated associations in the collective minds of the market. Powerful stuff.

Of course marketers need to be careful to ensure that they don’t inadvertently build brand associations with colours which have negative connotations in cultures other than our own. Clearly this is critical for brands with future international ambitions, but equally important within the complexity of the ‘rainbow nation’. While black is often associated with mourning in Western culture for instance, other cultures associate a whole range of colours with this particular emotion.

Colours are also strongly associated with specific generations. As a result, they age. Just think back to the 60s and Peter Max’s cosmic posters. Or perhaps for most of us, think of the return of pastels in the nineties. Given the intended longevity of our brands, we need to choose our colour palettes carefully, with timelessness perhaps more important than ‘trendy today’. If you would like to know what colours are going to be hot next year, check out the Copenhagen International Fashion Fair (CIFF) Summer 2011 trend forecast.

From a marketing perspective, colours are also clearly competitive. Given that all our competitors have access to the same data on colour meanings and associations, there is all too often overlap in competitive corporates’ colours. A good brand design agency will naturally always conduct a comprehensive analysis of the spectrum of colours already used in a sector before recommending any change to a brand or corporate identity. That said, given that a number of significant brands were developed before Corporate Identity
was properly considered, there are some sectors which have collectively relied too heavily on a narrow colour range. Newer brands appear to favour distinct differentiation as a more important attribute than those attributes already imbued in a colour. They can then, given sufficient marketing budget, own the colour and build its own associations in consumers’ minds. Again, think red, yellow and green.

Finally, colours have political associations. Blue (especially dark blue) is apparently associated with conservative parties worldwide, emanating from their namesake in the UK. Green has moved well beyond an association to being the actual definition of Green environmental parties across the world. Anti-government protesters in Thailand are likewise defined by their Red Shirts. Anarchists remain defiantly nonconformist in black.

Does colour define advertising or advertising define colour?

Father Christmas, the jolly man in a red coat with white trim. A perennial image representing Christmas in Western society. First created by painter and illustrator Haddon Sundblom in 1930 on behalf of ad agency D’Arcy for their client Coca-Cola, Santa in red, formed part of a well-defined campaign to encourage winter beverage sales. The consistent depiction of this icon each year as the Coca-Cola Company brand expanded its reach (by the end of the war Father Christmas ads were appearing in forty four countries across the world) has forever entrenched Santa as red, all based on a single iconic brand’s colour.

Several more contemporary adverts leverage the glory of colour in its wider sense: Sony Bravia’s “Colour like no other” ads (bouncing multicoloured balls and vivid paint “fireworks” to a hauntingly beautiful soundtrack) really do get that brand claim across. Likewise Dulux’s (paint) “Let’s Colour” initiative – “a worldwide initiative to transform grey spaces with colourful paint”, needs nothing more than all the hues of colour paint to make the point.

So as professional marketers, we probably need to give colour a little more consideration and be a little more objective in the colour choices we make for our brands. It really doesn’t matter whether we personally like the colour. Rather, we should consider dispassionately: what does the colour mean to the target market? Is it differentiating? Can it be protected? Does it have any unintended consequences? And perhaps most importantly as the examples show, can our brand truly own the colour in the market?