Generating Ideas

by Richard J. Pratt

Generating a variety of good ideas for a communication problem can be a difficult task. Traditional methods of idea generation, such as brainstorming and mind-maps rely on chance or unusual juxtapositions to trigger new concepts. While these methods can be useful at times, they do not push artists and designers to use a variety of conceptual forms and fail to provide a systematic approach for idea generation. It is not unusual for students to go through a series of visual solutions, searching for ideas, without looking at fundamentally different ways that the concept may be communicated. A strong method of idea generation should expand the techniques a communicator considers and be able to provide a systematic approach to communicative problem solving. By providing this kind of system to work within, a structured process can help creators avoid creative blocks and provide techniques to help jump-start creativity.

Semiotics

To explore the ideas needed to ensure variety and provide structure to idea generation it is necessary to focus on how visual communication works, which involves the study of the sign. The study of signs (also known as semiotics) has traditionally been approached through one of two schools of thought. The more widely known direction begins with the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and almost exclusively focuses on language. Later philosophers would build upon Saussure's work and apply his theories in many ways, but because of their starting point in language his theories do not sufficiently approximate what happens with the nonlinguistic signs of visual communication.[1] It is not surprising that his work has a strong presence in areas of study that focus on

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[1] For a basic comparative analysis of Saussure and Peirce see Gérard Deledalle, "Semeiotic and Semiology: Peirce and Saussure," in *Charles S. Peirce's Philosophy of Signs: Essays in Comparative Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

linguistics, but it is important to include more diverse modes of representation in discussions of idea generation.

A stronger method for analyzing visual communication is through the semiotic ideas of Charles S. Peirce. Peirce's theories focus on a sign made up of three parts and then analyze the varying relationships these parts can have with each other[2]. In contrast Saussure envisioned a sign made up of only two parts which are held together through one kind of relationship, the arbitrariness of culture and language. With a closer look at Peirce's work it will become apparent that in a number of ways Saussure's system of thought can be seen as mirroring a smaller subset of Peirce's ideas. It is worth noting that both individuals were working on their system of signs around the same time without any overt knowledge of each other.

Peirce's theory of semiotics defines a sign as anything that stands for something else to someone. These signs are made up of three parts, the representamen, the object and the interpretant. The representamen is the first part of the sign and is the initiator of the process by which one object or event stands for another. The representamen can either be something abstract or concrete, a single entity or a group or a process, as long as it results in the individual thinking of something else. The second part of the sign, called the object, is what the representamen points toward or refers to, and encompasses all the meanings the repre-

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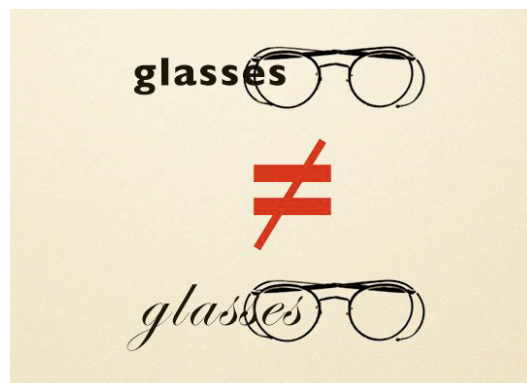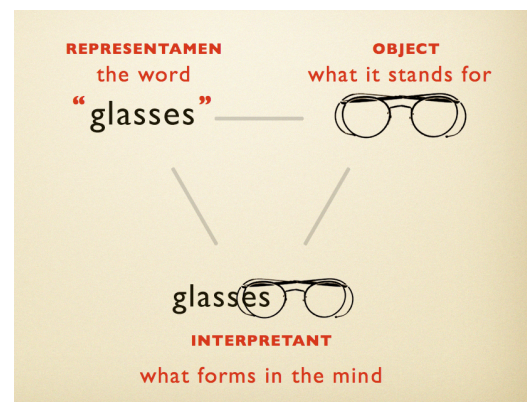
2. All discussion of Peirce's work is derived from his collected papers and in particular Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume 2: Elements of Logic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932):134-173

sentamen can have. The final part of the sign is the interpretant, the idea that forms in the mind of the individual as a result of the representamen and the object. It is not just a duplicate of the object in the mind, but an amalgamation of both it and the representamen. To illustrate this distinction imagine examining a word that has been typeset in two drastically different typefaces; one a bold sans-serif and the other a graceful script. In both cases it is the same word with the same meaning (object) but the result is two different interpretants, two different concepts formed in the mind, each being influenced by the varying attributes of their representamen. One is the word with a broad heavy connotation due to its bold typeface and the other is the word with a graceful, delicate connotation because of the attributes of its type design.

Icon, Index, and Symbol

With a basic understanding of the structure of a sign it is now possible to look at the relationship between its parts and use this information to provide a method for diverse idea generation. In particular the relationship between the representamen and the object needs to be examined. Peirce stipulates that there are three different forms this relationship can take and refers to them as iconic, indexical, and symbolic. In an iconic relationship the representamen shares some of its characteristics with what it refers to (its object). The most obvious example would be a form of graphic image: a picture of a building, a snapshot on an ID card, a caricature of a politician. In each case the representamen has qualities or attributes that are also found in what they are referring to—usually in the case of images this includes qualities of color, shading, and proportion. Other iconic examples do not need to be visual. Onomatopoeic words like "buzz" which are pronounced to sound like what they represent are considered iconic in their spoken form.

Another form of the relationship between representamen and object is called indexical. This relationship typically occurs when the representamen has some form of a cause-

and-effect relationship with what it refers to. Looking at a weather vane in motion can cause thoughts of the wind. The weather vane does not look like the wind and does not share its attributes, but it has a direct relationship with it and focuses the mind on its concept. Other examples of indexical signs include: footprints or tracks that are representative of the maker, a knock on the door bringing to mind a visitor, or the sighting of smoke producing thoughts of fire.

Because both icons and indexes rely on connections that are established through experience, they communicate regardless of language or culture (though secondary interpretations and connotations may differ from one society to the next). The picture on a driver's license will represent the idea of that person regardless of the language understood by the viewer and smoke will bring to mind the idea of fire regardless of the society. These are examples of the kind of nonlinguistic signs and relationships that Saussure's theories overlook with their focus on language. What Saussure's theories did focus on is the category of representamen/object relationship that Peirce called symbolic.

A symbolic relationship is one where the representamen and object are connected through arbitrary means that are often established through language and culture. In this case the object is related to the representamen strictly through connections generated by the viewer and his understanding of predefined rules. Obvious examples include almost all the written and spoken words of the English language. For a straightforward example of a symbolic relationship take the word "dog." It does not share any actual characteristics with the idea "dog" and is not in any way directly linked to it. Only through the vagaries of the English language do the forms of the letters d, o, and g mean the furry four-legged companion that they bring to mind. Though almost all language is symbolic in nature, other forms of symbolic signs exist. Examples include the dollar sign, some national flags and other cultural byproducts (like religious and organizational symbols).

With an understanding of these relationships it is possible to analyze the form that communication is taking in order to ensure a diverse range of techniques. A poster for a bicycle race can take advantage of a photograph of a racer, an image depicting bicycle tracks crossing a finish line, or the text "Bicycle Race" to communicate its subject. None of these are mutually exclusive, and the final product might involve all three, but exploring a variety of different relationships between representamen and object from the beginning ensures a set of results that vary in more than trivial ways.

Qualisigns, Sinsigns, and Legisigns

While analyzing the relationships between representamen and object can help create variety it does not by itself form a method of idea generation. To do that it is necessary to take an even closer look at the representamen. As mentioned before, a sign can be anything, including thoughts and concepts as well as objects and events. The representamen can take on a variety of forms and Peirce tried to organized these forms into three categories.

Peirce called the first form the representamen can take a qualisign. Qualisigns are qualities acting as signs and they form the building blocks of objects as we experience them. Each qualisign can only represent one characteristic, and because of this extreme monistic nature they can only exist as abstract possibilities in the mind. To be embodied they must be combined with other qualisigns and as a result they become a different form of sign. For example, the experience of "red" is a typical qualisign. You can imagine the quality by itself with no other characteristics, but you can only experience it in combination with other attributes and qualities, which cause it to no longer be a qualisign.

When qualisigns are combined together, they form the objects and events of experience. When these objects/events become representamen Peirce calls them sinsigns. Sinsigns are the form of representamen that is normally thought of when discussing

signs. Words on a printed page, the stop light on the corner, and the clothes you wear all act as sinsigns. Sinsigns are made up of a variety of different qualisigns and can be combined with other sinsigns to form even larger, more complicated sinsigns.

Sinsigns can also be grouped based on which qualisigns they share. For example, all tables share a certain number of qualities between them which allow them to be considered part of that group. Once grouped by someone the sinsign can then either represent itself or it can represent an abstraction of the the group. When a sinsign acts as that abstraction, a representamen pointing toward the group concept, then it becomes what Peirce calls a legisign. Legisigns are abstract concepts that are constructed through "laws" (hence legi-) that determine what is and is not considered a quality of that group. These laws can be created by an individual or a culture; language being an example of one such set of laws. All the words on this page can be considered either sinsigns or legisigns depending on how the viewer focuses on what they represent. If the focus is on the word's individual aspects, like whether it is misprinted, blurry, or slightly deformed, then it is acting as a sinsign (or a single sign, hence sin-). But if the word is treated as just one example of many instances of that word then it is acting as a legisign and is representing the word's abstract meaning or concept. All mental concepts are a form of legisigns that are constructed by the individual or society. If you think of the idea of "table," there is set of qualities being used to define that group and it is that defining set that forms the concept. When an actual table is examined it brings to mind either aspects of itself (as a sinsign) or aspects of the group it belongs to (as a legisign).

When thinking of the categories that make up Peirce's representamen it can be helpful to focus on their dependencies. Sinsigns are made up of groupings of qualisigns. Legisigns are made up of groups of sinsigns determined by their qualisigns. In the end, all these divisions allow us to create methodology for idea generation. Any piece of communication is just a complicated series of sinsigns. Some acting as legisigns, some acting as sinsigns but all can be broken down into qualisigns. Because of this dynamic, visual communicators can develop a system that allows deeper exploration of communicated messages.

Methodology

As a final example, take the previously discussed bicycle poster. An artist or designer needing to come up with a visual design for a bicycle race can first make a list of the qualities that would be useful in communicating their message about the race. This list may include qualities like "fast" and "energetic," but also might include color palettes and visual techniques like blurring. They would also make a list of concepts they want to communicate. The concept of bicycle and racing are obvious directions but they might also include ideas like competition. The creator could then experiment with the different forms that these concepts can take. Each can be either iconic (using an image), indexical (pointing to the concept indirectly), or symbolic (using text or symbols from the culture). In all cases the same qualities can be applied to the direction. The same color palettes and
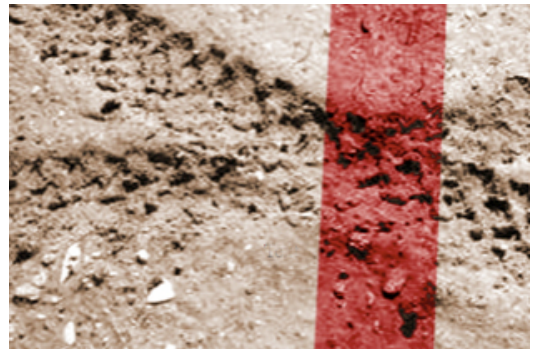
techniques can form the image of the racers, the bicycle tracks on the finishing line, and the letterforms that create the words "bicycle race." Each piece that makes up a part of the final artwork can be analyzed on its own or in relationship to the rest of the design.

While the background and foundation to this methodology is complicated its implementation can be straightforward. At its most basic this process simply involves applying qualities to various concepts that take three different forms: direct imagery (photos or graphics of the concept), indirect imagery (photos and graphics that imply the concept), or cultural symbols (text). This formula can be repeated for all parts of the message and the resulting communication can be as layered and complex or as quick and straightforward as needed.

It is worth noting that this method is inherently medium independent. The example used above takes the form of printed matter, but the same conceptual framework can be used with any form of communication. The advantage of having a methodology grounded in a broad philosophical framework is that it does not require medium specificity. Sounds and motions can embody qualities (warm, cool, fast, slow), communicate concepts, and become iconic, indexical, and symbolic in the same way that other modes of communication can be. Creators constantly moving from medium to medium and tool to tool can approach any communication context with the same systematic approach, assuring themselves a dynamic method of creating variety.

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