



Sensation transference - Part 1

How patients can be confused by your environment.

By Anne Levitch, B.Ind.Des, FDIA, AIMM

When I first came across the concept of ‘sensation transference’, a lot of what we do every day fell into place for me. The term was developed by Louis Cheskin in the 1930’s to describe a phenomenon. How was it that by changing the colour of a wrapper, you could double or halve sales?

With a little experience in understanding how Slavic men think, I was not surprised to discover he was Ukrainian. The view of an outsider can be advantageous. First, a little background to the man. Louis Cheskin was born in the Ukraine in 1907. He migrated to the USA and in the 1930’s he started on what became a life long obsession to understand, quite simply, how our perceptions motivate behaviour.



Facades to dental facilities. The reaction to each one couldn't be more different. This sensation is transferred to the whole experience.

He was one of the first to notice that people’s perception of a product or a service was directly related to aesthetic details of the design. He spent most of his life investigating how design elements could significantly impact perceptions of value, appeal and relevance. His notion was that sensorial cues in the packaging and environment in which a product or service is delivered (imagery, sounds, textures, etc) impact the impression they have of the offering - regardless of intent or accuracy. He coined the term “Sensation transference” to describe what was happening.

Louis died in 1980, however, the concept remains a strong factor in marketing awareness. He worked with great American companies like Disney, Ford, McDonalds, Phillip Morris and 3M to more accurately predict the success of their products.

One of his most famous achievements was to give newly intro-

duced margarine some weight in the 1940s. Based on consumer feedback, he suggested changing the colour from white to yellow and the waxed paper wrapper to foil. The simple modifications dramatically improved the product’s sales. Every subsequent brand of margarine followed his advice on colour.

Cheskin employed the scientific method in marketing, testing his hypotheses of product acceptance by observing customers. His methods focused on understanding what consumers felt, desired and needed, rather than trying to ask them what they thought.

In the 1950’s, Cheskin was contracted by Phillip Morris to help reposition Marlboro from a cigarette for women to one targeted at men. Cheskin’s recommendations were to redesign the package to denote masculinity. His recommendations underlie everything from the ‘Man-Sized Flavour’ advertising campaign to the masculine and virile Marlboro Man himself.

Cheskin’s work was not just focused on appearance. Often his research led to changing the product or service offering in valuable ways. Initially McDonald’s operated burger-stands designed for walk-up service. Cheskin’s research showed that these configurations were uncomfortable for families, accounting for low sales to these customers. Cheskin was able to show that tables, chairs and a semblance of walls helped these customers feel safe and comfortable visiting and eating on-site.

Cheskin’s innovative insight was that impressions created in customers’ minds, based on experiencing products sensorially, transferred directly to concepts of value, price, quality and emotion. These, in turn, created and fulfilled expectations of satisfaction. Cheskin’s research didn’t always explain why these associations existed, but confirmed the important role in both customer choice and satisfaction.

A patient sees a website, a building sign, makes an appointment, comes into a dental practice and sits down. By then he or she has a feeling of what to expect in terms of price, value, quality. The sensations felt will be transferred to the service experience. The stage is set...

In Part 2 of this article, we will look at further examples of this confusing reaction we have to sensory information.

About the author

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