



Touch

The powerful
untapped channel.

Haptic perception

Of all our senses, touch is the only one that is dispersed across our entire bodies yet its influence on how we appreciate the world around us is often overlooked. Scientists are now uncovering many of the secrets of “haptic perception” and finding that it is possible to harness the body’s incredible natural sensitivity in order to communicate specific feelings and impressions.

This has profound implications for marketers looking to influence how and what people think about their products.

What is haptics?

Haptics is the study of how neural mechanoreceptors in the skin detect frictional forces when we touch something, instantly sending signals to the brain to create our sensory experience. In short, this is the process of “feeling” slipperiness, velvetiness, moistness, stickiness, roughness or a million other sensations and it shapes our cognitive perception of the world.



How haptics shapes your feelings

At one level, touch is a defense mechanism developed by evolution. But research has shown that its influence is much more subtle than simply “hot equals danger” or “slimy equals bad”. In experiments, LE Williams and JA Bargh demonstrated that what we touch influences what we think about completely unrelated things¹. So in tests, for example, holding a cup of something warm made volunteers more friendly and compliant while holding a cold drink made them “cooler” and more distant. The bottom line is that what we touch heavily influences what we feel.

This idea was taken a step further in research carried out by M Plitt, R Savjani and D Eagleman². By studying MRI scans, they showed that the same parts of the brain “light up” when a person thinks about a corporation as when they think about a person. So it’s not surprising then that marketers talk about “brand personality” or “brand character” – because customers develop very personal ties with all the brands they encounter.



Making business sense

Associating a brand, therefore, with a particular touch or feel can reinforce its brand character in the mind of the consumer. What's more, giving the consumer a tactile experience has an additional advantage: People remember things better if they have touched it. According to F Jabr, "People understand and remember what they read on paper better than what they read on screen. Researchers think the physicality of paper explains this discrepancy"³. So the relationship between a reader and the medium he or she is looking at is very important.

Take catalogues for instance. Increasingly, companies are returning to printing them rather than only having them online because customers respond much more positively (i.e. they make more purchases) when given a physical, tactile catalogue to browse instead of being given an onscreen experience.

Clearly, the way our senses influence our feelings has major implications for marketers selling products – whether online or off.

Senses drive buying decisions in the store

Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman established that our brain switches between two thinking systems: autopilot and intentional⁴. We are on autopilot in the supermarket where we see the same brands and the same products along the same aisles every time. But adding a haptic experience creates a “wake-up call” for our brain, switching it to manual control and making us engage more. And, according to Lindstrom⁵, those brands appealing to multiple senses will be statistically more successful than brands that focus only on one or two. Many actually credit Lindstrom with coining the term “sensory branding.”

Terry L Childers went on to find that, when a point of purchase sign encouraged shoppers to touch the packaging using phrases like “feel the freshness”, shoppers would purchase more impulsively⁶. What’s more, Underhill suggests that almost all unplanned shopping is a result of touching, hearing, smelling or tasting something in the store⁷ – something that shoppers love to do. Research by Aradhna Krishna (University of Michigan) and Maureen Morrin (Rutgers University) found that the haptics on drinks containers even impacted the perceived taste of a drink⁸ – and, ultimately, the shopper’s willingness to pay a premium price for it.

... and online

Our senses play an important role in packaging for online shopping too. As e-shopping becomes more and more important for brands, the only moment they have to physically connect with their audience and create an experience is through the packaging they send. According to Dieline⁹ “People are now purchasing their everyday items online so buying something online besides your routine staples adds a whole new level of consumer expectations. E-commerce packaging also gives brands a new environment to experiment and innovate: the consumer’s homes and social feeds.” In short, if brands don’t have e-commerce optimized packaging, they are missing a huge opportunity.

Harnessing the power of touch to build brands

Peck and Shu found that simply touching an object increases the feeling of perceived ownership: “We find that merely touching an object can increase a non-owner’s feeling of perceived ownership and consequently object valuation.”¹⁰ Today, more and more brands are recognizing how powerful this tactile experience can be when it comes to marketing their products. Famously, Apple “pays as much attention to its packaging as it does to its products”¹¹ because they appreciate that consumers don’t just want to buy a product but a brand experience – and are willing to pay top dollar to get it. Simply touching the smooth white card of an immaculately designed Apple box gives the consumer a delicious, sensual feeling of the pleasure they will go on to derive from the product inside.

Frost also highlights how tactile appeals are used particularly by cosmetics and fragrance brands¹² who go to extraordinary lengths to differentiate their containers – even designing the perfume bottle before the perfume itself has been created.





Developing customizable touch sensations

Haptics scientists at Covestro have devised a method to map different touch sensations and create unique fingerprints for anything from smooth and velvety to hi-tech and rubbery. By defining tactile experiences in this way, they have come up with special coatings which can be applied using traditional printing techniques to give conventional packaging a unique and distinctive haptic feel. These coatings are now helping companies around the world to make their cosmetics, food, electronics and many more product types stand out from the crowd and really stick in consumers' minds. As branding gets "louder" both on- and offline, it's harder and harder for brands to grab attention but employing haptics expertise is a proven way of raising customer awareness and long-term loyalty. According to Lindstrom¹³ by using all the five senses "a total sensory experience would at least double, if not triple, the consumer's ability to memorize the brand."

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¹Please see the "Guidance on Use of Covestro Products in a Medical Application" document.

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