

**WHAT THE SNEETCHES TEACHES:
DR. SEUSS AS A MARKETING TEACHING TOOL**

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents a discussion of how the genius of Dr. Seuss can be used as an effective teaching tool in many contexts. It specifically addresses how "The Sneetches" can be used to help students understand the dynamics of cross cultural marketing.

Long before I began to consider an academic career as a marketing academic, and in what seems like a former life, I was a teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL). I taught conversational English in language training schools in Taiwan, where the students were native Mandarin speakers, in New York City where the student body represented several continents and languages. My biggest frustration was that the ESL texts were contrived, uninteresting, irrelevant, and just plain boring.

Instead of having students memorize meaningless drills, I began to experiment by having students sing children's songs. While all of my English speaking peers were able to sing the alphabet or 'I'm a Little Teapot' by heart, none of us could easily recite periodic table of elements. This would seem surprising, since we had learned the elements far more recently than the alphabet. Thus, I reasoned, these musical ditties might just have some staying power as learning devices. You can imagine my glee when conducting a round of "Row-Row-Row Your Boat" among a classroom of adult, 'r-' and 'l'-challenged Japanese students. Suddenly, the accents seemed to vanish as the rhythm and rhyme took over.

Knowing that I was onto something, I began to examine my past to find appropriate and useful reading materials to help my students learn English naturally, the way children do. As a tail end member of the Baby Boom generation, I grew up not only on Sesame Street (I remember the FIRST broadcast) but was nourished on the real classics of my time: Dr. Seuss stories. Pretty soon, I was leading groups of Malaysian, Japanese, Korean, and Brazilian students through a litany of 'would-not could-nots' as we debated the culinary merits of Green Eggs and Ham. Certainly, Dr. Seuss was a linguistic and poetic genius.

My faith and fervor for the (Zeus-like) Seuss was re-awakened more than a decade later while teaching

global and cross cultural marketing. Like most disciplines, marketing textbooks have become fairly uniform in content and pretty consistent in their ho-hum presentation style. I had been teaching global marketing for eight years and was bored with the same tired examples. Then, one day, I was discussing issues of standardization and adaptation with my students. We were discussing the countervailing, simultaneous needs for people to assimilate while maintaining individual identity. I was using all of the classical examples articles like Levitt's (1983) "The Globalization of Markets" and Douglas and Wind's (1987) "The Myth of Globalization."

In their seminal paper, 'The Myth of Globalization', Douglas and Wind (1987) assert that cultures are at once becoming more similar to one another, while at the same time people living within a single culture were becoming more heterogeneous. The example I usually give is as follows. If I had visited Italy 100 years ago, my food choices would most likely be limited to different regional Italian Cuisines. However, in present day Italy, it is fairly easy to find Sushi, Chinese Food, and Big Macs. This is an example of the increase of variety within a particular culture – namely Italy. It also illustrates the cross cultural convergence between, say the US, Italy, and Japan. In all three countries, it is easy to find Sushi, Italian Cuisine, and McDonalds.

Nonetheless, I was bemoaning the fact that if you can get the same selection of foods, goods, services and experiences anywhere in the world, what is the point of traveling to get the same stuff you can get at home? While the upside to this standardization is increased access to everything for everybody, the downside seems to be that places and cultures begin to lose their identities – that which makes them special and interesting, and worth visiting in the first place.

Another, more concrete example I use focuses on the introduction of the Euro. While European governments agreed that moving to a common currency would strengthen Europe and make cross-border transactions more efficient, most French believed that the Franc would be the most appropriate currency while the Italians preferred the Lire. Indeed, the British still hang onto their pounds sterling.

Suddenly, I thought of the perfect illustration for this point: the Sneetches. While one of the more obscure Seuss tales, the story of the Sneetches seemed to capture the point I was trying to make. The Star Bellied Sneetches had bellies with Stars. They were the in-crowd that enjoyed all of the finer things in life – like Frankfurter roasts on the beaches. They lorded their superior status over the Plain-Bellied Sneetches – those who had none upon ‘thars’. One day, a smart marketer, Sylvester McMonkey McBean came to the beach with his new invention – the Star-on Machine. The hapless Plain-Bellied Sneetches each paid one dollar to go through the machine to have a star placed on their bellies.

When the newly minted (former Plain bellied) Star Bellied Sneetches proudly arrived to take part in the festivities on the beach, the original Star-Bellied Sneetches were horrified. They had lost their distinctive competitive brand advantage. Seeing yet another opportunity, McMonkey McBean offered the original Star-Bellied Sneetches the use of his star-off machine for three dollars per Sneetch. Now, it became fashionable to be plain bellied and the new plain-bellied Sneetches could once again feel superior to their adversaries.

To make a short story shorter, this led to a frenzy of star application and eradication all day long. By the end of the day, there was no telling who was star bellied or plain bellied – the brand(s) had lost of their meaning and the Sneetches had lost all of their money.

Lest you think that I was the first to see the marketing implications of the Sneetches and other Dr. Seuss Stories, a paper by Steven Dann (2000), entitled Green Eggs and Marketing Plans, shows how the Cat in the Hat is illustrative of service Failures, Green Eggs and Ham talks about promotion and product adoption, and the Sneetches illustrates branding, image transference, and social meaning.

While I was thrilled to have found a like-minded marketing scholar who recognized Seuss’ inherent marketing genius, I was at once disappointed that someone else had beaten me to the punch. However, although Dann had found some very good lessons in the Sneetch story, he hadn’t found all of them. I hadn’t really thought too much about the lessons pertaining to branding and the importance of exclusivity in order for the brand to be desirable, although I agree that these are indeed good lessons. Rather, I focused more on the social meaning of branding as it pertains to global marketing and market segmentation.

McMonkey McBean may seem like the villain in the story of the Sneetches. Indeed, he exploits an opportunity and winds up with all of the Sneetches’ money in the end. Some might think of this as unethical behavior. I present a different take on McMonkey McBean for my students to consider. McMonkey McBean is an EXCELLENT marketer because he understands the fundamentals of market segmentation. People struggle both to become part of a desirable social in-group while, at the same time, they strive to distinguish themselves from those belonging to other groups. While it makes sense for Italians, Swiss, Germans, and Irish to consider themselves economically European, they also desire to maintain their own national identities. McMonkey McBean merely caters to the needs of his customers. He is neither invested in the importance of the star brand, or his absence, nor with Sneetch society in general. What he recognizes is some very fundamental human behaviors and the profitability of meeting customer needs.

There are plenty of other lessons that the Sneetches teaches us. Certainly, the message that everything old becomes new again is one lesson. This is especially true when thinking of trans-generational market segmentation. As they strive to distinguish their identities as separate from their parents, teenagers and twenty-something consumers eschew the brands, styles, and products favored by their outdated parents. Instead, they adopt new, trendy, and oftentimes shocking new fashions and products, if for no other reasons, to annoy their parents. However, yesterday’s hip-hugger bell-bottomed teenagers are now the grandparents of a whole new generation of hip-hugger, bell-bottomed ‘retro’ teens. Thus, while Dann (2000) sees the Sneetches as primarily a lesson about the value of brands (and how they can be devalued when they become commonplace) there is another branding lesson to be learned: brands can be reborn, especially if nostalgia is a powerful motivator for buying products that once were in style.

Many students often comment that marketing is just common sense. Indeed, many of the principles underlying the science of marketing are grounded in common sense. Dr. Seuss’ wisdom springs from his understanding of the human condition. Consumer behavior and marketing, although they are business disciplines, are merely one type of human behavior. It shouldn’t be surprising, then, that Dr. Seuss can teach us much about marketing.

The main point of this essay, however, is not to explore every lesson that Dr. Seuss and the Sneetches have to teach us. The main point is that these classic works of children’s literature are

extremely effective teaching tools that we, as marketing educators, can use in our classrooms. Although I would like to think that students will read their texts diligently, internalize, and retain all of the marketing theory and concepts they learn in my class, I know they probably will not. What they will probably remember, though, is the day I pulled out my copy of the Sneetches and READ to them the story that so clearly and elegantly captured one particular marketing concept. The one thing that Seuss perhaps understood best is that serious lessons are often best taught – and remember-- using humor, rhythm, and rhyme. And he didn't even work as a creative for an advertising agency.

References

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