

The Socio-Cultural Process of Branding: The Role of Promotional Literature in the Construction of “Reality” on British Transatlantic Shipping, 1919 – 1939

David Clampin

*Department of History,
Liverpool John Moores University, U.K.*

By the interwar period, all ocean liners working the Atlantic passage did essentially the same thing: they moved passengers from Europe to North America or vice versa. For the most part they did this safely, and notwithstanding certain notable exceptions, they took roughly the same time to make their passage. The challenge for shipping lines, in this case vessels operating under a British flag, was creating a strong brand identity that distinguished the nature of the space they offered from that of their competitors. This paper is concerned with how promotional literature for British shipping lines in the interwar period worked towards setting up a symbolic milieu which consumers would want to enter. It questions and analyses promotional literature contemporary to the period alongside more recent scholarship on “place branding”, social constructionism, and notions of hedonic consumption.

Source material

The material drawn on for this paper comes from a number of key archives: the Cunard Archive at the University of Liverpool; various shipping company papers held at Glasgow University Archives & Business Records Centre; and a wide range of promotional materials held at the Mariners’ Museum, Newport News, USA. The key focus has been on promotional brochures leaflets and other ephemera targeting American travellers making the eastward passage in the interwar period, 1919 - 1939. This has been read in depth to understand the efforts which these shipping lines went to in creating fantasy allusions, and understand how that was important in creating a distinct experience for passengers on that particular journey.

Discussion

For this paper, branding is considered an interactive, socio-cultural process establishing a lucid identity and spirit for the product. The interplay between producer and consumer establishes a distinct product, also setting up how those shipborne spaces are to be experienced. For Tasci and Gartner (2007) the manner in which a place or space is presented impacts on the way in which travellers then behave there. This is something that appears to have been consciously and deliberately cultivated in the period under consideration, with passengers being drawn into the “play”, helping to make the illusion “reality”. In effect, the marketing undertaken by these shipping lines suggests a move towards what, in modern terms, might be referred to as “social constructionism”. This is captured by Burr (1998) where reality is less of a given and more a series of events understood alternatively and attributed different meanings. All-in-all, the functional space that constitutes the ship can be called on to fulfil a variety of imagined scenarios. For example, Cunard advertised the *Queen Mary* as ‘a gay night club, a rendezvous for lovers of good food, a chic shopping centre, a sports pavilion, a quiet club’ (*Gracious Living*, c.1936). Whereas the *Franconia*’s cardroom was described as ‘an old Georgian Club in St. James’s, London’ (*The New Franconia*, c.1923). For Young, ‘In the context of tourism, one of the most important texts that explicitly attempts to imbue places with symbolic meanings is the tour brochure’ (1999, 375). An analysis of such texts becomes key in understanding how the Lines invited passengers to construct an (imagined) identity and then *perform* that once on board.

The “real”, as it is understood to be as the ship leaves port, becoming isolated mid-ocean, is set up, fabricated and constructed via the language of promotional material. With reference to Merttens (1998) Burr describes these as storied scenarios. These,

allow people to enter into a ‘dialogue’ with alternative values and ways of life through imaginatively casting ourselves into the storied scenario. By experimenting with different narratives, by telling different stories of who we are, we search for a narrative which empowers us to deal more effectively with our circumstances (1998, 17).

Cunard Line demonstrate this well in a brochure of around 1930 which ensures that those passengers privileged to travel First or Second Class (the latter also known as Tourist Class) were not merely a passive onlookers but rather active participants in whatever may be played out. Once on-board ship and underway, 'you're part of it, pushing your delighted course into unknown romance' (*You Can Do It Too*).

For the illusion to be carried it is essential for the consumer to "play along". Given that the ship interior is not actually what it purports to be the passenger is encouraged to suspend any disbelief and cast themselves into this alternative reality. Whatever the pretence, the *Queen Mary* was not a dignified English country home ("The Stateliest Ship Now in Being", c.1936). This becomes a circular process where "entering into the spirit of things" only serves to make the illusion more real. As Young (1999) identifies, places are socially produced, those attracting tourists do so by virtue of meanings ascribed to them. Within this process, brochures 'consistently present a particular image of place which presents an alternative, distorted view of people and place' (375). However, this is not mere game play but has important implications for the actual experience, especially where those fantasies are crucial as a distraction from the often uncomfortable reality of being mid-ocean. For Alba and Williams, 'what consumers believe or are told about a product can have a deep influence on the enjoyment and pleasure they experience upon consumption' (2013, 6). The marketer strives to play on consumers' fantasies, servicing their 'emotional wants rather than fulfilling utilitarian functions' (Hirschmann and Holbrook 1982, 94). As set out in the introduction, this was especially important in the highly competitive transatlantic market where shipping lines were keen to distinguish themselves.

Appeals along these lines are what Hirschmann and Holbrook would call hedonic consumption, 'those facets of consumer behaviour that relate to the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of one's experience with products' (1982, 92) They write,

hedonic consumption is tied to imaginative constructions of reality... hedonic consumption acts are based not on what consumers know to be real but rather on what they desire reality to be (Hirschmann and Holbrook 1982, 94).

As such, symbols and the symbolic become crucial in setting up the marketing proposition:

Using a hedonic consumption perspective, products are viewed not as objective entities but rather as subjective symbols. The researcher is concerned not so much with what the product is as with what it represents. Product image, not strict reality, is a central focus; consumer emotive response, rather than just semantic learning, is a key criterion (Hirschmann and Holbrook 1982, 93).

This is well captured by Anchor Line:

It is popular to call these big ships floating hotels. We always prefer to think of them as floating country homes. Greatly expanded, of course, as to size, but still with a definite personal point of view. They have, altogether, that very gracious and well-bred atmosphere which only a clever hostess can establish...rather than the cold impersonality of the hotel (First Class, Cabin Class via Anchor Line, 1935).

In their marketing these shipping lines were florid in their descriptions and implored their passengers to deploy their imagination and suspend a strict adherence to reality in striking up romantic and emotive connections.

Conclusion

Examination of marketing materials produced by British shipping lines for their transatlantic services between 1919 and 1939 absolutely correspond with what contemporary opinion believes to be crucial techniques when it comes to place branding associated with travel and tourism. In an effort to distinguish the service of one shipping line over another, elaborate efforts are taken to set up each ship as a unique space, a space imaginatively constructed and elaborated rather than simply being what it actually is. Further, the passenger is asked to wholly throw themselves into this proposition to complete the effect. Thus, the journey in terms of how it will be experienced begins well before the passenger even sets foot

on-board. The promotional literature creates fantasy allusions and sets up alternative realities. Bearing this in mind, codes of conduct are established before the ship has departed. By the interwar period, these British shipping lines were concentrating their efforts on satisfying emotional wants over utilitarian function in selling their product.

References

- The Art of Dining by Darius* (1927) D1092/5/3, Cunard Archive, University of Liverpool
- First Class, Cabin Class via Anchor Line (1935) UGD 255/1/23/120. University of Glasgow Archives and Special Collections.
- Gracious Living at its Best by "Connoisseur"* (c.1936) D42/PR3/19/57, Cunard Archive, University of Liverpool.
- The New Franconia* (c.1923) D42/PR4/33/1, Cunard Archive, University of Liverpool.
- R.M.S. *Queen Mary*. "The Stateliest Ship Now in Being" His Majesty the King (c. 1936) D42/PR12/1/21, Cunard Archive, University of Liverpool.
- You Can Do It Too* (c.1930) D42/PR3/10/43, Cunard Archive, University of Liverpool.
- Alba, Joseph W. and Williams, Elanor F. (2013) 'Pleasure principles: a review of research in hedonic consumption', *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2 – 18.
- Ballantyne, D. and Aitken, R. (2007) 'Branding in B2B markets: insights from the service-dominant logic of marketing', *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, vol. 22, no. 6, 363 – 371.
- Burr, Vivien (1998) 'Overview: Realism, Relativism and Discourse' in Ian Parker (ed.), *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism*, London: Sage, 13 – 26.
- Hirschmann, Elizabeth C. and Holbrook, Morris B. (1982) 'Hedonic consumption: emerging concepts, methods and propositions', *Journal of Marketing*, vol 46, no. 3, 92 – 101.
- Merttens, Ruth (1998) 'What is to be done? (with apologies to Lenin!)' in Ian Parker (ed.), *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism*, London: Sage, 47 – 58.
- Tasci, Asli D. A. and Gartner, William C. (2007) 'Destination image and it functional relationships', *Journal of Travel Research*, vol. 45, no. 4, 413 – 425.
- Young, Martin (1999) 'The social construction of tourist places', *Australian Geographer*, vol 30, no. 3, 373 – 389.