Sonic branding

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Whether it reflects the phenomenal rise of ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response)—the spine-tingling sensation caused by hearing certain sounds—or the quest for yet another medium through which to define a product, distinctive sound is becoming an important part of brands’ repertoires.

In September 2019, Coach published a series of Instagram posts to mark the opening of its Coach Originals pop-up shop in New York. The videos—all tagged #ASMR—highlighted the noises associated with Coach, from the “always satisfying sound” of its Turnlock bag fastenings to the clink of its metal buttons and the whirr of a sewing machine stitching one of the brand’s pieces.

And Bao Bao Voice, an installation by Bao Bao Issey Miyake at the 2019 London Design Festival to showcase the brand’s Bao Bao bags, transformed the famed geometric designs into musical instruments. The exhibit is on show at east London’s Protein Studios until September 23, 2019, and the house describes Bao Bao Voice as “an interactive, multisensory event that demonstrates the playful nature of Bao Bao Issey Miyake.” Visitors to the installation can move the bags to make different sounds—based around a human voice, bird, drum, guitar, and a piano—and generate visual projections of the bags’ textures and shapes via sensors in the designs. The four bags can produce over 100 sounds, together creating a melody.
Bao Bao Voice by Bao Bao Issey Miyake
Sound artist Manabu Shimada devised the composition, sound design, and sound software development for the Bao Bao Voice installation, with creative and art direction by Anyhow Studio. Shimada believes that the rise in popularity of voice assistants and podcasts means that “opportunities to get information visually are decreasing.” He says that companies must expand their sonic branding now, to “stimulate emotional amplification. Our ears have unconsciously been disciplined in Western music’s harmony, so when listening to music in a minor scale, we are likely feeling sad.”

Shimada has also been working with Chinese car company GAC Motor to create almost 50 sounds for its electric cars, including the AVAS, or acoustic vehicle alerting system. This allows pedestrians to better hear electric cars approaching. Shimada says that, alongside its safety application, the AVAS will also be important for “sonic corporate branding.”
Indeed, BMW has tapped composer Hans Zimmer to create the sound for one of its electric cars, BMW Vision M Next, in partnership with Renzo Vitale, acoustic engineer and sound designer at the BMW Group. The partnership was announced in June 2019 and Zimmer and Vitale have developed the BMW IconicSounds Electric series of sounds. The brand says that its aim is to address the “gap in the emotionality of the driving experience” when driving a silent electric car. “We want to get BMW IconicSounds Electric in position for customers who value emotional sound,” said Jens Thiemer, customer and brand senior vice president for BMW. “With BMW IconicSounds Electric they will be able to experience the joy of driving with all their senses.”

HSBC worked with composer Jean-Michel Jarre in early 2019 to create its new sound identity, which it described as “a bespoke piece of music that will help people instantly recognize the bank.” Seven different edits of the track have been used across HSBC’s platforms, from apps to branches, Campaign reported. The article adds that positive response from consumers means “the brand is now exploring other ways that it can appeal to customers’ senses, such as through touch and smell.”

In February 2019, Mastercard unveiled a new sonic brand identity. Mastercard describes it as a "comprehensive sound architecture" and explains that it was created to bridge experiences, as brand touchpoints diversify across physical, digital and voice environments.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wbh8btP5Tfg
Drinks campaigns are highlighting sound, too—Bacardi’s current “Sound of Rum” campaign captures clinking bottles, shaking ice, and a cocktail being poured in a soundtrack created with artist Swizz Beatz.

Craig Richard, professor at Shenandoah University and the author of *Brain Tingles: The Secret to Triggering Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response for Improved Sleep, Stress Relief, and Head-to-Toe Euphoria*, told *European CEO* that he believed “the rise and awareness of ASMR is shifting some advertisers away from loud, frenetic and overstimulating ads to ones that are quieter and more relaxing. The rise and popularity of ASMR has highlighted that many people want less Sturm und Drang [storm and stress] in their content and more peacefulness and relaxation.”

Expect an increasingly nuanced approach to sound from brands in the future, as well as a strong auditory focus.

*Main image courtesy of Bao Bao Voice by Bao Bao Issey Miyake*

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