

Reflections on a Russian street pole

 By [Paul Williams](#)

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In my kitchen I have proudly hung a street pole sign I 'gleaned' from a building site in Irkutsk, Russia, when I stayed there in 2008. It always reminds me of how basic advertising actually is. It's a metal directional sign in the shape of an arrow head, painted a shade of nondescript tan brown with the word "Bread" written in big black Cyrillic Russian letters right across it (pronounced ghleb).

Fascinates me

It fascinates me because, in our society, I have never seen a sign quite like it.

We don't react to signs that direct us to a place because we supposedly could purchase "bread" at that venue. You would probably be most unsurprised and unresponsive to a sign that simply announced "BREAD". It would hardly make you want to walk down the little alley it was originally pointing down, just to reach a little shop with quite normal, down-to-earth loaves of brown bread and a couple of packets of rolls.

In fact, you would not be blamed for being a little suspicious of a simple sign like this directing you down a side alley. It contains shades of the scam-artists' signs announcing "THIS WAY TO SUCCESS & HAPPINESS".

It fascinates me on another level, though, because it's the type of advert every one of us in advertising dreams of creating - one word, grabs your attention, relevant to the audience, and effective in sales. Perhaps it lacks a bit of creative zing, but one has to remember the category is advertising.

Asking a little much

Other than one advert I saw, where a particularly long baguette and two round bread rolls had been strategically and anatomically positioned with the wording "Staff of Life", I can't say that bread has offered me the most creative advertising experiences. I've never really walked down the street, or drove down Sandton Drive, and looked up and went: "Now that's a creative bread ad", and I think the chances of finding creative communication for the simple hard black Russian loaf, especially during the Communist times that this sign was commissioned in, might be asking a little much.

No. In South Africa, we don't really advertise bread. Well, we might see the odd piece of puffery declaring the delights of some dainty white loaf, but I can't say that it has swayed me to choose one loaf over another.

But the reality is that that sign with one word "BREAD" existed in Russian society until the pole it was attached to, was torn

down in 2008. That means that, while we were becoming blind to signs like that one, people in the little corner of the city of Irkutsk, Russia, relied on that sign - and others like it - to direct them to outlets across the city that sold basic items. And they reacted to those signs for decades and got the basic items they needed, mostly.

I can imagine others. In fact, I don't need to imagine much because they still exist in the suburbs of the city. Signs that say "SHOP" and point this way or that. Others that say "PRODUCTS" and show the way down a little lane, or behind a building.

An anomaly

To you and me, those signs are anomaly. We would not know how to react to a sign like those. They seem too simple and too random for our 'sophisticated' viewpoint. We need signs which catch our attention, which shout out at us. Signs which are specific, well-branded and attention-grabbing. We don't want signs that say "Bread"; we want signs that say "Bakery" or "Patisserie".

Signs with hints of French-style and slightly podgy men in white aprons and a toque, surrounded by hot, piping fresh crispy loaves and melting butter on soft steaming scones. They must entice us and leave us breathless. They must peak our desire and give us no option but to drive kilometres out of our way, to pay hugely inflated prices and leave the store with enough calories to send my dietician into a coma, and enough loaves to feed the local pigeons for weeks after we have had our fill.

We recently did directional signage for one of our clients, directing people towards their outlets from busy roads into the suburbs. Not a majorly challenging job, but in doing this I realised how amazingly insightful the Russian sign I had on my wall is.

Our directional signs needed to contain so much information simply to address all the perceived needs of the customer and get them to take note of the fact that there was an outlet of their favourite brand around the corner:

- it needed colours to communicate the brand of the outlet group and to grab the passing drivers' attention
- it needed a logo, instantly recognisable due to years of meticulous strategic brand-building and well-focused media planning
- it needed directional arrows, an estimate of distance to reassure people how close they were to the outlet, and
- it needed telephone numbers in case people still could not find the outlet or simply wanted to place an order telephonically as they sped past the area.

Have we got it right?

As I considered all that information, I wondered whether we had got it right.

We invented brands to create simple, easily recognisable entities which communicated so much more than the products they represent, and which do so effortlessly. Brands represent a whole gamut of values, personality, features and reasons to prefer, among other things, and yet we still need so much information on our communications, just in case.

Our one little sign, which had to do the simple job of alerting people to the presence of an outlet in the area, almost seemed to be working so hard just to say "Hey, come visit. We've got what you need and prefer!"

Russians are notorious for their blunt comments, and their signs are no exception. I remember a slightly overzealous hairdresser who had literally commissioned the word "HAIRDRESSER" in lights, down the whole side of a 10-story building above her shop in the city.

Lessons for directional signage

I am not saying the Russian sign is to be preferred to our Western sophisticated signage. But I am noticing the lessons, when considering directional signage:

- Keep it simple and to the point - point in the direction and then tell the customer what's to be found at the end of the trip
- Be single-minded in your goal - the job is to get people into the outlet, not to offer them a brochure of your services and products
- Let the product do the selling - the proof of the promise declared by directional signage still comes down to the "taste" of the product available at the outlet
- Clean design stands out - remember, in a cluttered street, too much info is just more clutter, and
- Always remember the audience - the Russian sign was perfect as it spoke to the people of a product of real value in a world where brands were not prevalent, thus products were important, cars were scarce and people walked everywhere, cellphones were not known and bread was a key staple for most

The Russian sign needed just one word to communicate effectively. May we find ways to create advertising that is as single-minded and effective.

ABOUT PAUL WILLIAMS

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