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The village venus effect – prototype semantics at trade marks

A prototype is a first full-scale form of a new type or design of a construction. In semantics, the science of meanings, the term "prototype" varies between "best representative" and "best use of a word". We will try to build a bridge between prototype semantics and trade marks.

The fundamental human ability to categorize is based on recognizing common properties. Thus, we recognize a tree because it shows the characteristics defined for the category tree. This is not dependent on our deeper knowledge about trees. We search for necessary and sufficient conditions before we classify. The best specimen, the prototype, is not a unique one. A survey revealed in the fruit category that an apple would be the best example, however, the apple prototype, not a particular apple. Apple leads the ranking order representing fruit followed by plum, pineapple, strawberry, fig, and olive. The terms within one category are not equivalent, but defined according to a typical property. In Europe, the prototype for a bird, for example, is understood as a small example like a sparrow or a robin, but scarcely a duck, an owl, a peacock, an ostrich, or a penguin. We possess a stock of prototypes on different levels of notions. If we ask somebody to name spontaneously an example for each a colour, a tool, a music instrument, and a flower, the answers will probably be red, hammer, violin, and rose, however, if we ask for a (proto)typical rose, the answers will differ much more. Anyway, the typical rose will be described as red and not as yellow, white, or even black. If we ask for "plants" in the forest, the answer will most likely be "trees" although the terms mushroom, fern, oak, beech would have been correct as well. When we see a shepherd dog running on a meadow, we will describe it as "There is a dog running" although animal, mammal, four-legged, or shepherd dog would be correct, too. Obviously, there exist a hierarchy of prototypes and a preferred level. A very simplified model shows a classification on three levels only:

Upper level	plant	animal	fruit	beverage
Basis level	tree	dog	apple	coffee
Lower level	oak	shepherd dog	Granny Smith	espresso

The prototypes of the basis level represent examples of the natural environment, mostly referred to. They are psychologically most conspicuous and belong to the first words learnt in our childhood. As to cognition, the basis level is the most economic. When we compare "animal", "dog" and "shepherd dog" in respect of the information content, we see that most of the information is stored in „dog". „Animal" is restricted to few a general features while „shepherds dog" differs from „dog" by few a peculiarities. The categories on the basis level have the highest information density and differ strongest. We will leave the

basis level only if necessary, for example, in direction of the lower level if we want to speak about two different dogs. We can draw a typical dog or tree or a shepherd dog and an oak tree, but we cannot draw an animal or a plant without citing an example from the basis level because the upper level contains so many different examples that the representation by a single form is impossible.

Now to the trade marks. Which trade marks will you get in mind if you hear file folder, preserving jar, universal glue, skin cream, telescopic umbrella, paper handkerchief? German consumers will probably answer **Leitz, Weck, Uhu, Nivea, Knirps and Tempo**. These „First Call" names indicate mostly the market leader. New products should offer something useful like novelty, originality, snob value, solution of a problem. New things need new names, and a name will be accepted when it fits. If the trade mark name is no longer understood as the product name of a special producer, it will become independent and generic, thus a danger for famous names, possibly ending with the loss of the trade mark protection. The career up to the First Call includes the prototype step. The first on the market will be honoured by the customer. Even if a competitor brings a similar product into the market, the First will remain "best representative" with "best use of a word". This "Village Venus Effect" can produce a well-known or famous trade mark. Once upon a time, when neither motorcar nor radio or TV existed, people in small villages lived quite isolated. It could happen that the village venus was judged as the most beautiful woman at all. Even if the villagers were told that there was another beauty in another village or a strange beauty entered the village by marriage, they would believe that the second or third venus represented another kind of beauty. The original judgement remained stable because the definition of beauty was based on the established village venus with elder priority. Translated into trade marks, this means: eye opening innovation and speed will be honoured. The First will enjoy the reputation of higher competence. Sometimes it is even better to be first than better.

We select a name on the basis level for general dog food intended for bigger sales volumes. In case our target group is a pet dog or we aim at the big watch-dog, we have to be more special using the lower level.

The well known trade mark „NESTLE" means in German „small nest". To make it clear, the nest is the main actor; therefore, it is represented as a prototype nest filled with non-dominant prototype birds.

A good trade mark name should fit the product very well or - on purpose - very badly. To be impressive at a cursory glance, the name should be the only right key for the lock or something surprisingly different. Prototype or not, that is often the question.