

Would you like umlauts with that?

By Bruce Campbell

What do Hard Rock, Ice Cream, and Do-It-Yourself Furniture have in common?

Über-retailer IKEA recently published “the unböring manifesto” as a supplement in trendy shelter and fashion magazines *Dwell*, *Metropolis*, *Vogue* and *Wallpaper*. IKEA posters plastered on construction fences across North America ask, “What is unböring?” Well, if the question is intriguing, it isn’t from the supplied answer – more of the company’s low-cost, fun and funky furniture – but from the appearance of that little double dot perched jauntily atop the “o.”

That double dot is popularly called an “umlaut,” although more precisely it is a “dieresis.” It is rarely used in English, yet here it is adorning obviously English phrases. What gives? In fact, IKEA’s is only the most recent umlaut in the history of advertising. Its presence tells us a lot about how marketers manipulate and how our brains cooperate with the manipulation.

Obviously, the creative directors, in this case Crispin Porter & Bogusky of Miami, Florida and Venice, California, are using the umlaut as a little orthographic joke, one that is quickly assimilated by a certain target demographic.

The incongruous umlaut forces a double-take on the phrase. It looks odd, thus stops the eye. Then we reread the word “unboring” — which is an unusual word, but follows the rules of English in being an adjective modified with “not.” Then we try to assimilate the umlaut. Is this a foreign word, like “schadenfreude” or “weltanschauung”? Well, IKEA *is* a Swedish company, maybe that’s a Swedish word in an English phrase? Well, maybe and maybe not (it actually isn’t, but more on that later). Either way, it has achieved the first goal of marketing, to make us stop and consider the message. It has amused us.

There is a theory of humor that states that humor arises from incongruity, as when the stand-up comic starts to make a banal statement and adds a twist at the end. (Yes, it is incongruous that grown-up academics are paid to study this sort of thing, but let that ride.) Henny Youngman’s classic, “Take my wife... Please” starts with indicating the

wife, and ends with disposing of her. IKEA's headlines start out with "boring" ordinary, banal furniture and with two little steps end with "unböring," fun Swedish furniture.

On another level entirely, we could say the linguistic trick models the real world transformation IKEA would like us to take: toss out that old stuff and bring in some funky new (Swedish) stuff. That is one meta-message that we can get from the headlines.

But there is yet one further level on which the umlaut works and it arises from a second theory of humor, this one invented by no less a philosopher than Thomas Hobbes, author of *Leviathan* (in case you thought I was making this all up). Hobbes says, "Laughter is a kind of glory" in the sense of self-glory, as when we laugh because we are superior to someone. This is called the "superiority theory of humor," or we can refer to it as the Three Stooges Effect. In the case of "unböring" it comes from the self-satisfaction we can feel at a) identifying the umlaut as referring to Swedish, and b) feeling superior to those saps who wouldn't get the joke. The second meta-message of the headlines: you are urbane, sophisticated city-folk, you are aware of the larger world, you think you know what "schadenfreude" means. You are in fact IKEA type of people.

So IKEA has achieved a second goal of marketing: to make us feel good about ourselves and our association with their brand. This is not the first time that the umlaut has been used in just this manner. That happened first in 1961 with the introduction of another product with ostensible Scandinavian roots: *Häagen Dazs* ice cream.

The name *Häagen Dazs* was the invention of New York ice cream maker Reuben Mattus who was naming his new premium line of ice cream. He was looking for a European cachet to imply "old world craftsmanship and tradition" and justify a premium price. *Häagen Dazs* is a totally fictitious name, with no meaning in any European language. Mattus included an outline of Denmark on the early labels, to reinforce the Scandinavian theme. (Interestingly, there is no umlaut used in Danish.) The double *a*'s and the *zs* are also ostensibly foreign and work with the umlaut to create a vaguely Euro-feel for a Bronx-born product.

It worked. *Häagen Dazs* now dominates the super-premium ice cream category in the US and is sold in 54 countries. Mysteriously, although the company has 700 stores around the world, it has no stores in any of the Scandinavian countries.

This is what advertising researchers refer to as “foreign branding.” (Not the same academics, and their conferences are perhaps less fun than those of the humor researchers.) Advertisers use foreign branding to associate their products with laudable qualities linked with foreign countries. Many skin-care products use French names and phrases because consumers equate France with exceptional knowledge of beauty (and clear skin, no doubt). Research shows, for example, that the French product *Clarins* gets substantially more positive consumer response when it is accompanied by French phrases and sprinkled with random accent marks than when presented *sans* its French heritage.

Häagen Dazs was so successful that it spurred imitators, a sort of umlaut war. One of the first was *Frusen Glädjé*, a now-moribund brand of premium ice cream. *Häagen Dazs* was so unhappy about this competitor, it sued unsuccessfully in 1980 to stop them from using a “Scandinavian marketing theme.” In a rare bit of linguistic reality in the world of foreign branding, “frusen glädje” actually means something in Swedish; it can be translated as “frozen happiness.” But, since Swedish doesn’t have an acute accent, the marketers are engaging in a little orthographic one-upmanship, a form of “accent escalation” in their marketing war. This happens often in the foreign branding game, as we will see.

The frozen milk-fat association with Scandinavia continues to this day. Out of Canada comes the very successful *Yogen Friez* frozen yogurt brand, started by two young men in 1989 and now a \$200 million a year multinational business. An up-and-coming competitor on college campuses is *Freshëns* frozen yogurt, whose umlaut-less basic name conjures up room deodorizing or feminine hygiene. One of their popular products is the *Smoöthie*. The umlaut wars continue.

Unlike other identifiable national competencies — German engineering skill (Mercedes-Benz) and French fashion sense (Dior, Yves St. Laurent) — what is the evidence for Scandinavian excellence in frozen desserts? Well, in a general sense, that evidence is *all* in the mind of the marketer and now in our minds. Surely Sweden has excellent ice cream and yogurt confections: Sweden is the third highest per capita consumer of ice cream in the world, following only the US and Australia. (And we don’t hear much about Aussie ice cream.) A common Swedish breakfast is *fil*, a type of yogurt

milk. But of course, most Americans' only association is with the high quality of that Bronx native *Häagen Dazs*.

Naturally, all these umlauts present a pronunciation problem for Americans. People with and without high school French are able to navigate by sight such words as *résumé*, which is also an English word with accents (although they are woefully inadequate at spelling it correctly themselves). But few are able to deal with the pronunciations of German, and even fewer the subtleties of Swedish. The simplest technique: treat the umlauts as decorations and ignore any possible effect they may have on the letters, words or sense. Just ignore their actual reading and embrace their connotative, evocative meaning.

English is promiscuous in its pronunciations: the classic “tough, cough, bough, though, through” with its variations of silent letters and diphthongs. Germanic languages are much more regular. The umlaut properly speaking is a sound, as well as the symbol for the sound. The umlaut (literally “around sound”) is a vowel that is pronounced differently because once upon a time it was followed by another vowel. The old vowel no longer appears in the word, but it still affects the remaining vowel. This process is also called *vowel mutation*. So the sound caused by *ai*, *oi* and *ui* mutated into umlaut *ä*, *ö*, and *ü*, alternatively written as *ae*, *oe*, and *ue*. A German example is the word *mann* (man in English), pronounced like “mahn,” becoming the plural *männer* (men), pronounced much closer to “mainer.” English has some Teutonic roots through Anglo-Saxon and the umlaut mutation explains how the plural of *mouse* is *mice*, *tooth* is *teeth* and *goose* is *geese*.

The double dot appears at the beginning of the age of printing. Most medieval texts were written in Latin, which has no accents and strict pronunciation. German was a vernacular, vulgar and primarily spoken language. The first books printed by Gutenberg and others were Latin texts and printed in the Gothic letterforms that mimicked monastic calligraphy, but the demand soon arose for texts in German, including Martin Luther's German Bible. People had been handwriting a small “e” above vowels to indicate the umlaut. The typographers who created the Schwabacher font in 1481 picked up this style and included a small “e” above their vowels in the type case. This simplified into a little open “o” in some font designs. The double dot likely originated from a long script “e”

that looked like two loops in handwriting and eventually became the standard symbol for the umlaut.

(Since we're considering type fonts, it is no accident that both the IKEA *böring* and the *Häagen Dazs* logo are set in a bold *Futura*, designed in Bavaria in 1928 by Paul Renner. *Futura* seems ideally muscular and, well, Germanic — tailored to the umlaut.)

While the umlaut is vestigial in English and not represented by an orthographic mark, its identical twin — the double dot dieresis — has a more ambiguous status. There are two uses for the dieresis, both nearly extinct. One is to force pronunciation of a vowel that might otherwise be silent, such as the *e* in *Brontë*. The other is over the second of two adjacent vowels to indicate that it should be spoken separately, rather than as a diphthong. *Naïve* is an example. Without the dieresis, the vowel sound would be as in *nail*.

This usage fares poorly in modern writing, both casual and formal. *Cooperate* is vastly more common than *coöperate*, *reenact* beats out *reënact*. Googling English language pages for *coöperation* turns up 48,100 results, paltry in comparison to the 4,080,000 returned by the dieresis-deficient version.

In England, *Fowler's Modern Usage* disparages most use of dieresis, preferring a hyphen as in *co-operation* — which gets about half as many hits on the Web as *cooperation*. *The Oxford Dictionary of American English* calls the dual vowel usage of dieresis “archaic.” Speaking of archaic, *The New Yorker* insists upon the dieresis, almost alone among publications. (Of course, one might expect a certain accent attentiveness from a publication owned by *Condé Nast*.) This can lead to amusing results, as in a recent article written first person in street slang with the word *Coördinator* adhering strictly to style, like a Duchess at a wrestling match.

The operative rule, according to one source, is that the dieresis sticks around when words are newly coined or borrowed into English from a foreign language and there might be confusion over pronunciation. After a time the word becomes naturalized and the dieresis can be dropped (unless you're *The New Yorker* and all your readers have just arrived from Mars.) Finally, just for completeness, you should know that the dieresis or umlaut should not affect alphabetization in lists or indices. Except for Swedish, where an umlaut over an initial capital calls for it to be listed after the lower case *z*. Got that?

If the umlaut is essential to frozen confections, it has also become critical to a quite different endeavor: heavy metal and punk rock music. So widespread is the umlaut in this particular subculture that it was parodied in the 1984 mockumentary “This is Spinal Tap.” The logo for the world’s loudest band is rendered in a metallic black letter font with an umlaut placed prominently and parodistically — *above the “n”!*

The umlaut first appeared in the English music world in 1972 with Long Island rock group *Blue Öyster Cult* whose hit “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper” reached the top of the charts in 1976. Guitarist/keyboardist Allen Lanier is credited on the band’s web site for the umlaut. Thus was born a rock cliché.

Subsequent generations of rockers witnessed the arrival of *Motörhead*, *Mötley Crüe*, *Hüsker Dü* (two umlauts!), *Queensrÿche* and dozens of lesser talents. There is *Mudvayne*, the band hailing from Peoria, Illinois whose members are named: Chüd, Gütüg, R-üD and Spüg. And let’s give special mention to *Umlaut*, a Finnish punk rock band whose name says it all (except of course that they didn’t put an umlaut on *Umlaut*).

Someone has suggested that the umlauts and the black letter fonts used in the logos for these groups are meant to suggest their old-world devotion to the fundamentals — a runic, totemic image for the roots of rock-and-roll. Maybe, although they seem to refer mostly to each other as evidence of their toughness, the way frozen yogurt companies jockey to have that Scandinavian cachet. If the original umlaut bands had been Celtic folk performers, the metalheads might have turned to more obscure Icelandic diacriticals like the *eth* or *thorn*. Umlautization can backfire in embarrassing ways: a member of *Mötley Crüe* told of the performance in Germany where the entire audience started chanting “Mutley Cruh!” Oops.

Hard Rock, Frozen Milk-fat, and Dorm-Room Furniture: the umlaut rules. It has bested the breve, the macron, and the circumflex in our hearts and minds. What next in its plan for world domination? Well, German engineering would seem a natural. Remember *Fahrvergnügen* (driving pleasure), the Volkswagen ad campaign of a decade ago? However, given the history of the umlaut in marketing, it is far more likely that another country will appropriate the umlaut to *imply* German engineering in a — shall we say — less-than-German product. There was a small taste of that in a recent Honda campaign

where a German voice-over (ostensibly off a language lesson CD) queries “Was für auto ist das?” leaving the impression that a German (even one 5” across made of plastic) would be suitably impressed by the Honda’s engineering.

But before fitting your logo with an umlaut, be aware that there are dangers for serial orthographers. Britain is getting stricter in its approach to foreign branding. Their Advertising Standards Bureau is forcing a kitchen manufacturer in Manchester, England to remove the double dots from all its advertising and some 200 showroom signs. Seems they were selling under the name Möben until someone complained that they were passing themselves off as a German company. The company’s defense was naïveté itself: a) the dots aren’t an umlaut, they’re merely decorative, b) besides, the umlaut isn’t exclusive to Germany but is used in “Austria, Switzerland and Liechtenstein” (where, presumably, they make really crappy kitchen furnishings), and c) the salesclerks in the showrooms weren’t putting on Monty Pythonesque accents *so der people voodn’t be misled into thinking it vas a Cherman product.*

Marketing manipulates our language and through language our desires. You like European products for their quality and their tradition? Okay, float a few accents over the logo *et voilà*, same product, Instant Euro. There are two languages we are learning: English, an increasingly simplified and narrow language, and Market-speak, a diverse and growing international mongrel tongue with neologisms, grammar-challenged slogans, and inappropriate, often random accents. The abundance of money and time is stacked on the Market-speak side of the ledger.

Pity poor Hanno Möttölä, the first Finnish player to join the National Basketball Association. Even his official NBA web page dropped all three of his family umlauts. Scandinavian basketball? Nah. He should have stuck with making ice cream.

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