

The forgotten bond: Brand identity and product design

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Abstract:

It is evident that products (and brands) have an irrational, emotional appeal, but it is questioned whether it is possible to manipulate this appeal; to design products that will contribute toward a desired brand image. The relationships among people, their emotions and their products are expressed as concerns, standards, attitudes, objects and agents. An analysis of Oce Technologies, a Netherlands-based document reproduction and management company, shows how designers, as members of the product development team, can exploit the profile, proportions, interface and even the color of Oce machines to convey and maintain a reputation for reliable professional equipment.

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CASE STUDY

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The question is: How can the design of products communicate brand values? Guido Stompff distills answers from a case study about Océ Technologies, a

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Netherlands-based document reproduction and management company. His analysis reveals how designers, as members of the product development team, exploit the profile, proportions, interface, and even the color of Océ machines to convey and maintain a reputation for reliable professional equipment.

What do we talk about when we talk about branding? Logos, usually-and brand names, packaging, interactive branding, and advertising. There are frequent references to products, but products are always the subject of a brand, never its object! Still, products, the most basic marketing tools, do communicate-and not just through their function or through the way they are used. They arouse emotions, create experiences, age, and break down. Identity and brand are strongly influenced by the emotional response of people who use the products. This article discusses the way a product elicits emotions and thus affects brand image. It will then show-through a case study-how brand values can be translated into product design.

A theoretical framework: Products and emotions

We all have products we like to use every day-even though they may be worn out-and occasionally we find ourselves buying things for which we have no actual need. Why do we believe that a certain product is better than all the others, even though we have never tested the alternatives?

It is evident that products (and brands) have an irrational, emotional appeal, but is it possible to manipulate this appeal, to design products that will contribute toward a desired brand image? Let's get to the basics: the relationships among people, their emotions, and their products, expressed as concerns, standards, attitudes, objects, and agents (figure 1).

Concerns are the more-or-less-stable personal preferences of an individual. These can be goals one wants to accomplish, either basic ("I want to eat") or more elaborate ("I want to make the school debating team"). Concerns can also be standards, in the sense that they are beliefs about the way things should be, such as "Products should be simple to use." Concerns can also be attitudes-for instance, "I'm crazy about B movies." Concerns are personal, but they can be shared among many of us. Consider such subjects as the benefits of democracy, the problem of environmental degradation, and so on.

And here's where product design comes in. Consider a product as a stimulus. It can be viewed as simply an object ("What a beautiful chair!"), but just as easily as an agent that represents something else: a company, a social group, a beloved one. People tend to use these products because of the sense of belonging they give (let's face it, no one buys a Rolex just because it is reliable).

Emotions can be considered as mechanisms that signal when events, things, or persons are favorable or harmful to our concerns. Emotions related to products can be either pleasant (for instance, desire or amusement) or unpleasant (disgust or boredom). All emotions are preceded and elicited by appraisal-the unintellectual and direct judgment of a stimulus for its effect on one's well-being.

Because they stem from the concerns of an individual, emotions can differ quite a bit from person to person. Indeed, occasionally they are mixed, since it's quite possible to have concerns that contradict each other.

Brand, products, and emotions

What is the relevance of this framework in relation to branding? Emotions signal when events, things, or persons are favorable or harmful to our concerns. These emotions surely contribute to a brand's identity. However, it is hazardous to claim that a design will generate the emotions a designer or marketer wants, and thus create a certain brand identity. The model in figure 1 explicitly demonstrates these limitations. Concerns are individual and constantly changing, and consequently so are emotions. Emotions generated by a product can be numerous, not only between individuals but also within a single person. End of the story, then? No. This framework does afford some interesting starting points for designers and brand managers in understanding how products can contribute toward a desired brand image. For example:

Which client concerns are universal?

Is the product appraised positively as an object, or does it actually represent something else?

Which design features contribute toward this favorable emotion?

Case study: Océ

Océ, the 125-year-old international company for which I am a product designer, has its headquarters in The Netherlands. It changed its core business several times before limiting itself to the development, production, and supply of services, software, and equipment for the reproduction and management of documents (figure 2). It is a business-to-business company, entirely oriented toward large clients-companies, government authorities, universities, and so on. The company develops professional products for the office market and is the leader of the world market for engineering/CAD environments and for the high-speed printing market. The company has a strong reputation due to its brand values-- reliability, productivity, and user-friendliness.

It is always hard to pinpoint a corporate culture, but Océ's could be described as nonhierarchical, responsible, truly customer-oriented, and a bit nonconformist. These values can be seen in, for instance, the color engine at the core of its imaging technology products. Instead of superimposing the classic four colors to produce all the others, the engine uses seven colors arranged in adjoining dot patterns. (I can hear readers thinking, "So what?" but these differences were not solely invented to keep R&D busy. They confer several advantages, such as the ability to use heavier papers or specially coated papers, or the ability to fold prints without cracking or flaking thick layers of toner.) In short, Océ lacks the size of a Xerox or a Canon, but it still chooses its own direction, because it feels this serves its clients better. This essentially sums up our corporate culture.

Concern: Are You professional?

Understanding the concerns of clients can provide insight into their preferences for specific brand values, resulting in a product design that communicates these values. Companies and organizations do not normally consider their document management as a core business activity; consequently, they look for partners who can provide adequate solutions. The main users of Océ products are equipment operators, whose greatest concern is that their equipment be reliable. International test reports frequently refer to an Océ product with remarks such as "a sturdy workhorse," "looks like a tank, built like a tank," or "very plain-looking; simple interface"-not comments designers normally enjoy hearing! However, Océ has won more than 40 design awards since we started counting, about 10 years ago. Apparently, the company's designers are able to create products that communicate an important brand value-reliability-without relinquishing quality in product design.

But a reliable appearance is not enough. Océ clients also expect a professional attitude from their business partner. And that implies that the company presentation needs to be professional, as well-suffusing not just the brochures, showrooms, and Web site, but the products too, of course. There are a few rules of thumb here. First of all, "family resemblance" is preferred above the distinctive appearance of individual products. That is, you buy "an Océ," not "a 3165," just as you might buy "a BMW," "a Sony," or "an Apple." Second, the best way to look professional is to choose an independent design policy instead of following trends. These explicit design choices even gained importance during the last decade. Océ products were originally stand-alone products-that is, they were copiers, and only copiers. Nowadays, solutions for Océ's clients include several printers, scanners, copiers, and applications. Combined, they create an image of Océ, rather than of each product separately. Although the individual products were developed by several R&D establishments at Océ, together they have to present a well-- considered total solution.

Innate attitudes: The things we all like

Per the definition at the beginning of this article, attitudes are a species of "concern" that involves personal preferences. Because attitudes are so individual, it is hard to use them as starting points for design. However, some attitudes seem to be innate and common to most human beings-for example, the affinity for symmetry. For instance, people whose appearance is very symmetrical are generally regarded to be more attractive than others.

Designers are well aware of these innate attitudes, and product design reflects this. Small cars tend to have relatively high bodies, large headlights, and small wheels in order to elicit nurturing, affectionate feelings. Babies, after all, have similar proportions. At Océ, the designers work with a carefully developed system of dimensions that are multiples or divisions of 12. In addition, the Océ designers use repetitive proportions in our products, from the smallest part to the entire product-symmetry in the classical Greek sense. (Although it is a great story with which to impress other designers, I have not yet spoken to anyone at Océ who has actually noticed this independently!) But Océ products are often described as "calm, restrained, tranquil, balanced"-exactly what the Océ designers think is appropriate for professional products, equipment that is used all day long. People are well able to sense implicit order and to value it. Above all, this symmetrical inclination has proved to be a very strong instrument for producing an instantly recognizable family relation among different products-even when the development of those products happened 10 years apart! In a way, it is almost like Océ's DNA-an integral part of all the members of this company's product family (figure 3).

Learned attitudes that are shared

Attitudes can be learned, in the same way that one acquires a taste for beer or red wine. Such attitudes are personal to individuals, but cultural influences can also lead to similarities in attitudes. Research we carried out concerning consumer perception of our products and competing products showed that noticeable "modularity" in products reduces their confidence significantly. People are well able to recognize products that are composed of different modules, and to mistrust them. The most likely reason is that we have all learned that products that are an assembly of modules simply are not as good as dedicated products.

Océ products do not look like an assembly of modules. Our designers favor a basic, strong contour with clear lines, into which all modules "snap" (figure 4). Indeed, in the case of CAD printers and scanners, where competing products are supported upon a tubular frame that has nothing to do with the design of the product itself, Océ products have a robust support that blends harmoniously with

the actual printer or scanner.

Appraising products as such

Again, returning to the discussion of concerns and their different manifestations, consider that concerns can be experienced as goals or objectives, and that a product can be evaluated in terms of its use in accomplishing those goals. Thus, at Océ, functionality is an everpresent issue, as we determine which tasks our products should be able to perform. The digitalization of our products and the introduction of new software applications present a host of new possibilities: scaling in different directions, mirroring images, optimizing for photographs, and so on. Interestingly, many—even most-of the new functions possible are never incorporated into our products, simply because our clients don't really need them. When a user copies a document carrying photographs, he or she prefers a product that recognizes the inclusion of photographs and automatically provides that optimization. Restraint requires endless discipline, but without it, gimmicks would otherwise clutter our interfaces and our image.

A product can be appraised for its usability Does it intuit the promised functionality? How many actions or clicks are required? Is the result a logical one? People can be truly disappointed if they fail to access a product's functionality because the interaction is too complicated. Just consider the introduction of the handheld assistant for the Palm Pilot. It immediately made all its predecessors obsolete. Here is a prime example of excellent usability being recognized instantly.

Products can also be appraised for their aesthetics, for the way their appearance makes you feel. This is personal, but sometimes there are design features that arouse similar reactions in a variety of people. One Océ example is the use of color. Five years ago, we decided we needed to develop a new range of colors. At that time (to paraphrase Henry Ford), you could have office equipment in any color, as long as it was beige. The Océ designers decided to use a color range based on a fresh green and gray; it was tranquil, fresh, and sufficiently different from the light brown everyone else was using. Moreover, we designed the colors of our Graphical User Interface (figure 5) to fall in line with those product colors, thereby creating a coherent product feeling. It worked out better than anticipated; not only do the adjacent PCs look old-fashioned, but so do competitors' products that are, quite frequently, situated close to the Océ products. The Apple color revolution of the past few years has also been an unexpected benefit to us!

Appraising products as representative agents

Some products just naturally lend themselves as agents that represent something—a designer, a company, or a social group. If your peer group is wearing jeans two sizes too large, you end up not only buying, but also really liking, those shapeless jeans! Copiers, printers, and scanners would not seem to lend themselves to this kind of thinking. They are professional products; you would expect that choosing them over another product would be mostly a matter of functionality. At least, that is what I thought until two years ago. At that time, Océ introduced a high-- end product with a separate Control Station, designed to be used by someone who is either standing or sitting (figure 6). After the initial introduction phase, a visit to one of our clients showed us an unexpected side effect. They had placed the product near the entrance to their repro room, to show off their skills in using this high-tech device. The product served as an agent for the "IT worker" as opposed to the "engine operator." It is something to keep in mind-- professionals enjoy being able to demonstrate their skills.

A product can also be an agent for a story. That is, when they purchase a particular product, people may really be buying the stories, legends, and emotions surrounding that product. If you want to feel free, you buy the symbol of freedom—a Harley-Davidson. Océ discovered that a story should be based on your true nature, your identity.

Océ products also signal a particular identity. For instance, while our print technology guarantees excellent print quality, it also means that our products are bulky—noticeably larger than competing products. Our designers dealt with this issue by using height. Océ modules are sometimes

positioned on top of each other. This creates immediately recognizable product contours, as well as improved ergonomics. Of course, some stories work better with our products than others. Just as being "high-tech" is often associated with smaller products, being "independent" fits well with the larger, and recognizably contoured Océ products.

Designing identity to fit culture

This case study may give the impression that brand values were the starting points for Océ design projects—that our designers "just knew," but the opposite is nearer the truth. The Océ designers are part of Océ R&D, where all our products are developed. They developed the company's design language through practical experience, experience that is constantly evolving and gradually adapting the brand's DNA. The design of both products and interfaces proved to be capable of communicating Océ brand values (figure 7).

This demonstrates one of the main conditions for design for brand identity—a long-term relation between the designers and the company. The designers need to understand the position of the company or brand. They need to breathe and absorb the culture, to feel "how we do things around here"—they need to become the brand. This can be achieved in two ways: through having an in-house design studio, or through a long-term relation with a designer or a design office. Using new designers for every new product can result in the creation of an array of beautifully designed, award-winning products. However, eventually, you risk losing brand identity—unless, of course, being trendy is one of your values.

Corporate design for products should be a direct translation of the culture for which a company or brand stands. Océ products developed in the early '80s are still in use. Trying to create a brand image that is different from a product that is still in use will very probably be perceived as a superficial effort. It is better to "tell stories" that are in line with what you are, and strengthen these through design. Consider Harley-Davidson again. Most likely, Harley's idea of what a motorcycle should be (and how it should sound) is what attracts Harley's fans, and that idea says: Don't be like the others. The story came later. When you choose to embed the design of products in the culture of a company, you never send the wrong message.

Summary

Products arouse emotions—occasionally even mixed emotions—that contribute strongly toward people's feelings about a specific brand. Emotions are individual, as are concerns, and they are always changing and developing. Therefore, it is hazardous to claim that a design will generate specific emotions and therefore create a certain brand identity. Nevertheless, there are interesting starting points. Find the common concerns of your customers. Understand why a product is appealing. Is it because of the "object" itself or is it an "agent" representing something else? Find out which design features evoke favorable emotions and use them to develop your own "brand DNA." Last but not least, product design should be rooted in the culture of a company to ensure a consequent message—because, if they're any good, products will outlast any brand identity campaign.

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Suggested readings

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After completing a master's degree with honors in industrial design at the Delft University of Technology, Stompff initially worked for two small design offices before joining the Océ design team. He is also a guest lecturer at the Delft University of Technology and at the Technical University in Eindhoven and a member of the advisory council for Advanced Industrial Design Engineering at the Delft University of Technology.

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