Brand value by design

the use of three levels of recognition in design.

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The design of a product acts as a carrier of various symbolic meanings. These meanings are a result of experiencing all the specific design characteristics together in the complete product. The separate design characteristics will build up to a total image, which will evoke certain associations. Some of these associations are explicit, such as 'the angularity' of a product, and some of them are more implicit, such as 'a sophisticated design'. Those implicit values are often referring to the brand values of a company and the translation of these values is crucial for a company to develop a strong brand. However it is a quite difficult job for designers to evoke the right associations in products. Earlier research showed that the implicit values are the most important values to integrate in the product, considering the quality of the resulting designs. This paper will discuss a framework which contributes to a better understanding of the values of a brand and the translation of those values into new product designs. The framework was tested in educational practice, which showed that the improved framework will support young designers in the process of analysing, explaining and integrating implicit values into new iconic designs.

Key words: brand value, explicit design, implicit design, branding

1. Introduction

In our current 'experience society' it is more and more important to develop products with a strong, precisely targeted and distinctive character [1, 2]. There is an overwhelming choice in consumer product alternatives and therefore it is important for companies to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Companies are aware of the fact they have to distinguish themselves to be more outstanding, so branding is almost fully embedded in our society as a strategic asset [3-5]. A lot of companies describe their vision and mission on their website and some of them even use brand models to enlarge their brand experience towards customers. The outward expression of a company or a brand, including its name, trademark, communications and visual appearance is called the corporate identity and reflects how the brand wants the consumers to perceive the brand. If consumers are already composed to the brand in other ways of communication (for example viewing the website or an

advertisement of the brand), they are more confident of buying the product because they are more familiar with the brand [3].

Nevertheless the most direct part of contact between a brand and their consumers is the product itself. The appearance of the product has to be designed in such a way that consumers will immediately recognize the brand or the company, even without seeing the logo. Unfortunately there are still brands who only use logo's to differentiate the product from its competitors. The recognisability of a brand is probably much better when products have a clearly visible language of form. One way to achieve this, is to design the complete product, from the three dimensional form to the details of the product in such a way that it fits the design language of the brand. In this paper we discuss an initial Brand Translation Framework for improving the recognisability of newly designed branded products. The framework was tested in several industrial design engineering student projects, which has led to an improved version of the framework, especially targeting on the communication of implicit brand values.

2. Communicating Brand identity

The visual appearance of a product is communicating the brand values and they lead indirect to the core values of the brand. Even for products in an environment that is less prone to aesthetic quality, the design language is very important. The functional aspects of the two chopping balers in figure 1 are comparable, but the design is quite different. The designers of Lely clearly paid more attention to the appearance of the baler compared to their competitor. They created a more fluent form-language and also emphasized the 'compacting' functionality of the baler with a funnel shape in the silhouette, highlighted by the grey panels.

Figure.1 chopping balers with the same functionality but a different appearance

The appearance of this product as a whole evokes a more active association and looks more well-thought than the rather sturdy look of the competitor. This will contribute to the vision of the company, which is "innovators in agriculture", and its associated core values: innovation, passion and progress.

In some cases consumers pretend they don't care about the appearance of the product and they will only focus on the functionality of the product. However, in these cases the appearance of the product certainly plays an important role in evaluating the functionality of a product. As Norman called it: "Attractive things work better" [6]. The appearance of a product will (unconsciously) influence consumer perception of products and therefore their success in the market [2, 7].

So, to distinguish yourself as a brand from your competitors, you will have to develop a consistent portfolio. Through design consistency, a brand can develop a solid base to create new recognizable products [8, 9]. As a matter of fact when the designer is able to integrate the corporate identity of the brand in the design of its products, this will result in a more consistent corporate communication, and therefore a stronger reputation of the brand.

3. The role of the designer

Designers play a decisive role in styling products for a specific brand. As discussed by Crilly et al. [10] the designer is in-between the consumer and the brand or company. He discusses a basic communication model where on the one side the design team is responsible for the design of the product and on the other side the consumer perceive the product by sensory perception accompanied by an affective and behavioural response. Crilly focuses more on the different variants of responses of the consumer in perceiving the product, meanwhile the other side of the scheme is rather underexposed and would be quite interesting to investigate. How is the communication between the company and the designer and how will the design process be performed by the designer?

The designer is dedicated to translate the corporate identity of the brand into a design language that will communicate 'the right message' to the consumer. The main task of designers is thus to identify and develop design features that evoke the right associations by consumers when they perceive the new product. However it is a quite difficult job to manipulate all the specific design features to elicit the 'right' associations. In the literature there are a lot of models that describe the brand and its brandvalues, like the *Brand Identity Prism* by Kapferer [3] and the *Brand Key* model [11]. However, there are few models that focus on the *process of translating* those values into new products [9]. In practice, translating the core values of the brand into new products is merely based on the experience and intuition of the designer. To support the designer in taking the right decisions in translating the corporate identity into a form language, the initial Brand Translation Framework is developed (figure 2). This framework will focus on the most important values of the brand and the way they can be translated into the design and styling of new products, in such a way that consumers will recognize the brand and its associated values more easily.

4 Graphical elements

The theoretical model behind our framework distinguishes three different levels in recognition. Consumers can recognize the three dimensional shape of a product to be typical for a specific brand, such as the same silhouette (3D). Besides this three dimensional form, a product can also be recognized as belonging to a specific brand by using a logo or a text (2D). Between those two levels, we identified a new area which we will call the graphical elements of a design (2,5D). Here, the two dimensional and three dimensional world meet each other in-between. These elements are somewhere on the borderline between two dimensional graphics and three dimensional form features. The most remarkable levels of recognition are visualized in the framework to get a better understanding of the brand and its product and to use as an inspiration tool in the design process. The consequent use of all the levels in the framework will lead to a design language that will better fit the corporate identity.

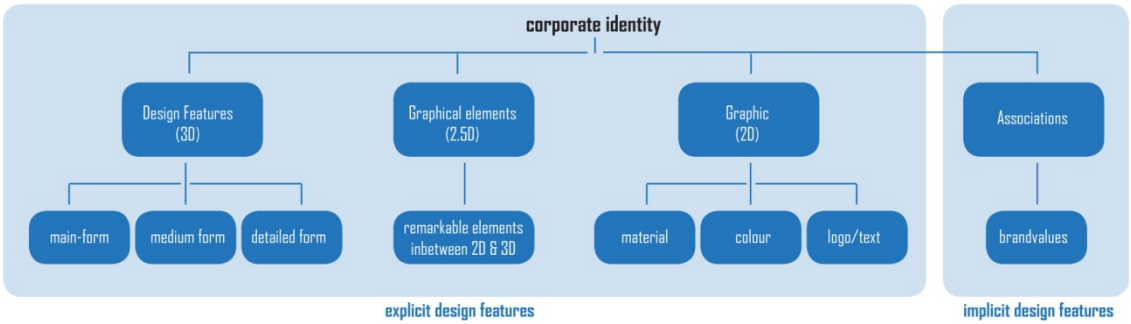

Figure 2. Initial Brand Translation Framework

4.1 Explicit and Implicit design cues

The design of a product combines both tangible and intangible characteristics, referred to as explicit design cues and implicit design cues [12]. The explicit design cues are the characteristics of a product that can be pointed out, such as the angularity of a product or a specific curve. These explicit characteristics are visualized at the left side of the framework. The implicit design cues are the combined characteristics that will lead to a specific association. These characteristics cannot directly be pointed out in the product, but are perceived by the consumer when experiencing the complete product. The implicit associations are often referring to the brand values of a company and the translation of these values into the product is crucial for a company to build a corporate reputation and is necessary to develop a strong brand. In the framework they are separated at the right side. The separate explicit design characteristics in products will build up to a total image, which in the most ideal situation, will evoke certain associations that corresponds with the implicit design associations [9]. That's because these associations are a result of experiencing all the specific design characteristics together in the complete product.

Our previous research showed that when the translation of the design language is limited to the explicit characteristics, the resulting designs are valued less [13]. Therefore the framework we developed will contribute to a better recognition and translation of the *implicit* associations of brands and their brand values into specific explicit characteristics.

5. Support

In interviews with five different designers, specialized in corporate identity, it became apparent that there is a lack of support for the integration of two dimensional aspects within a product, in such a way that they will strengthen the implicit values of the brand. The focus of the designer is mainly on the three dimensional form of the product and in a lot of cases it seems that in the end they just place a pre-defined logo of the company or a specific product name on the design. These names and logos are often designed by separate graphic design company's which focus on designing a logo for stationery or for a website. In most cases the 2D logo is not immediately appropriate to apply on a product. Besides that, the integration of the 2D and 3D part can enlarge the core values of the brand. In figure 3 for example a triangle chess clock shows us the direct use of a 2D logo. The logo was especially designed to use for the website or advertisements and therefore the visibility of the logo integrated in the product is not very good. We cannot see all the details and the location of the logo is not optimal.

Figure 3. DGT- logo on product and packaging

It would be interesting if the three dimensions will be combined in the beginning of the design process and will not only be used in the end. An example of such an integrated design is visualised in figure 4, where we see an optimum in integrating 2D and 3D forms. In this example a fragrance bottle

for Puma is showed. The student decided to develop a range of four fragrance bottles that will form the logo of Puma when carefully placed together. The use of the bottle is not just for a single moment. It is meant to fit your active lifestyle throughout the whole day (7 AM – get up fresh, 12 AM – take a break, 5 PM – sport and be active, 10 PM – Go out and seduce). The use of the logo in a more three dimensional shape in this design, is crucial in recognizing the brand. This example goes beyond just copying the logo in the design, it integrates the brand values, the logo and the three dimensional form into a new “graphical element”.

Figure 4. Use of logo in three dimensional form (designed by M. Zwart)

6. Testing

The framework was tested and elaborated on in 15 student projects, designing brand extensions. The students were asked to design a bicycle for a specific brand. First they have to make an analysis of the brand by using the framework (figure 5) and dividing the brand in different dimensions. Subsequent they have to design the bicycle fitting the brand the best. The framework can be used as inspiration.

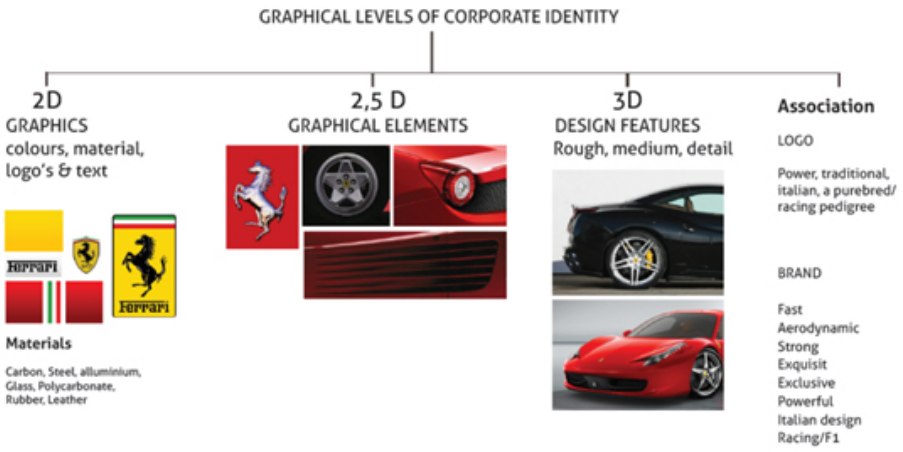

Figure 5. Framework of Ferrari by Gerrit Witteveen & Richard van Schouwenburg (2011)

As mentioned before the students that only translated the explicit cues of the brand into the new product did not succeed in designing a recognizable product. In figure 6 two different Ferrari designs are visualised. The left one integrates some of the explicit cues but they also translated the implicit features of the brand, such as the power and speed of the brand Ferrari. The other design team has focused too much on regenerating the explicit design characteristics such as the rear lights of the car, but also the almost exact copy of the line in the body of the bike frame. In fact they forget to take a step back and get an overview of the design. They only integrated all the explicit design cues into the design of the bike.

Figure 6. (left) Ferrari-bike emphasizing the implicit cues; (right) Ferrari-bike emphasizing the explicit cues

7. Adapted framework

We concluded that the framework assists designers in analysing the different levels of a brand, but the difficulty to translate the implicit values of a brand into a new product, remains [14].

As a matter of fact the designers with better design skills used the framework but they also made a lot of decisions ‘in their head’. As stated by Dorst more experienced designers will make a lot of decisions based on their ‘gut feeling’ and intuition [15]. In an evaluation after the course they mentioned that it is hard to explain exactly what they have done, but they just know this is better. It was just the most logical step to make based on their intuition. In the end however, they reported that using the framework helped them to explain their design decisions to the audience.

Based on the above discussion the frameworks shows it is functional, but it can be more effective when it will also focus more on how to translate the associational terms of the brand into the physical

characteristics of the brand. During our research we transformed the framework into a triangle where the values are placed in the top of the triangle (figure 7). In the triangle we introduced three layers which will explain the steps from the core values to the physical characteristics

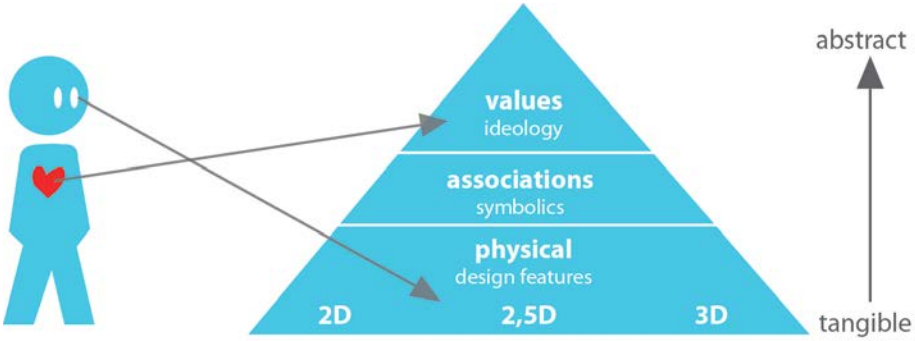

Figure 7. adapted Brand translation framework

In an explorative study we asked two students to test this framework. Both students designed a watch for a specific car brand. The design of a watch combines the graphical world (2d) with the three dimensional world and is therefore a good example to cover the different levels of recognition. First they analysed the car brand which was Volvo, secondly they designed a watch that fits Volvo as a brand extension. The results of one of the students are visualised in figure 8 and 9. He first analysed the portfolio of the brand by visualising the different levels of recognition (2D, 2,5D and 3D) and subsequently he enumerated associations from the first order such as ‘cock-pit’ and ‘shield’.

Figure 8. Analysis portfolio of Volvo with first order and second order associations.

Figure 9. Summary of most important implicit design cues

These associations were evoked by observing the physical design features. The first order associations are based upon the 2D and 3D features of the car and are direct links to objects that are associated with the visual appearance. The second step is to associate further on the visuals by enumerating second order associations like ‘technical’ or ‘protective’. These associations are related to the first order associations but are a bit more abstract. They are formed by describing the features and the first order associations on a higher level of abstraction. Finally the associations of the second order can be compared, and reduced to a set of associations that are most mentioned. In figure 9 the three most important implicit values which are discernible in the design and styling of the cars of Volvo are visualised.

The analysis of the portfolio is used to fine-tune the most remarkable implicit values of the brand, visible in the product portfolio. Because this student described which features of the brand lead to which implicit values, it will support him also in taking decisions in the design process. In figure 10 the final design of the watch is visualised. The first and second order associations are used to explain the design of the watch to the audience. The designer states: “*The rims hold the glass. The gap between the rims enhances an embraced feeling of the glass. It is a hint to protective; one of Volvo’s values. It had also a reference to the shoulder line*”. The word ‘shoulder’ is used here as a first order associations and is linked with the second order association of ‘protective’. The designer also uses the words ‘embraced feeling’ referring to the second order association protective in a more explanatory way to make his statement more clear.

The final design shows the translation of an explicit feature (the typical shoulder-line of Volvo cars) in a more dedicated way in order to enhance the implicit feature of ‘protective’ as mentioned before.

Figure 10. design of a Volvo watch combining explicit and implicit cues

8. Discussion

Although the framework supported the students in their task of identifying and translating all the explicit and implicit design features, it is difficult to measure and quantify the influence of the support. We have just a limited set of projects yet, thus we will continue to work with the improved framework, both to have more design results of different designers and of different types of products and brands.

We also tested the framework with students, which is both positive and negative. The educational setting is of course different than design practice, but on the other hand the students act as novice designers, without much experience. Especially for such designers, guidance and support for complex design tasks is profitable [15]. Novice designers are also more inclined to use frameworks and methods. A next step in the development of the framework for application in design practice could therefore be

the adaptation into a workshop for more experienced designers, targeting on creating insight in the theory.

9. Conclusion

The improved framework assists designers in making a connection between the physical features of the brand portfolio and the main core values of the brand. Because designers are forced to think in first and second order associations, the link between the physical forms of the brand and the implicit values is more clear. Furthermore, this framework helps designers to explain their designs more easily to their customers, improving the acceptation of more daring design concepts. In this paper we made a reasonable case that the improved framework will support young designers in the process of analyzing, explaining and integrating implicit values into new iconic designs.

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