

The designer's role in building strong brands

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Introduction

The growing complexity in markets as a result of increased numbers of products and possibilities for multi-channel marketing has created both awareness and tiredness of commodities among consumers (Cooper and Press, 1997). They are not only searching for satisfaction of a material need, but also for an experience or an identity. In order to survive in the market, companies need to communicate their vision clearly and efficiently by building brands (Rijkenberg, 2004; Aaker, 1996). The designer will play a vital part in brand building, and while the communication needs involved presents new opportunities for designers, it also presents new challenges. One of these challenges is to identify the role of the designer in the process. Some designers do not see branding as a part of their field but rather in the field of economics and management studies, and in the theory it is hardly mentioned. Others see branding as the core of what design is, since working as designers they are constantly working with brands. What is the nature of branding and the role of the designer in the building process?

Different views on design and the designer

In *Emotional design* Donald Norman claims that everybody is a designer (Norman, 2004). He says that every time we decorate our homes or organise the tableware for a dinner, we all change our environment, and we become designers. The designer's role in his view is both about planning and decorating. The book *Science of the Artificial* is written from a computer engineering point of view but is still pertinent for its view of what design is. It claims that in every profession the knowledge of design is needed. In his view, design is in every discipline, and not a discipline unto itself. Design, he says, is not only a thought in engineering schools. Design is the core of all professional training as each and every individual is concerned in the process of design (Simon, 1981).

Others explain the role of a designer by differentiating it from other disciplines (Dormer, 1993; Pye, 1968). Dormer, in his book *Design since 1945*, says that some may think that the difference between the engineer and the designer is that the engineer will test and test, while

the designer works more intuitively (Dormer, 1993). He also says that it is important to be aware that designers also have a responsibility in what they design. Dormer also makes the distinction between the craftsperson and the designer as the craftsmen can leave the translation of the product to the consumer.

Design is viewed as the art and science of putting technical, financial, operational and emotional aspects together. Design competencies are also seen as an activity for formulating and implementing change in the organisation. These implementations of ideas often lead to innovation in the organisation.

Design as problem solving is perhaps an accurate description of its perception at Scandinavian schools. Design in this sense is concerned with planning and finding the best solution among different choices. The competencies of the designers are related to the logic of how to design a satisfying product according to cost, accessibility and the shape of the product (Pye, 1968). Design is thought to have the power to change and instruct a company's image and corporate identity. The problem-solving approach is notable. It is problem solving through both being explorative, creative and its interdisciplinary nature.

Design is also about communication (Dormer, 1993; Frascara, 2001). For example, Dormer says that for designers communicating an intention is explicit – communication is the heart of design. This view is also pointed out by Frascara and Moholy Nagy. Frascara said that designers focus on the aesthetic itself and forget what they wanted to communicate (Frascara, 2001). One of the really important industrial designers when it comes to theory and development of the field, said that designers were too aware of the technical aspect of the product, forgetting about their social responsibility and ability for communication. In literature on Design Management, design as a process is often mentioned. In short, the process must be managed, and as such it opens the design process to corporate intervention. Seen from the opposite point of view, designers must relate to the structure and communication processes in companies and projects.

Design Journals

The field of branding is in the field of research called Design Management, situated between management and design research. Most of today's established literature in the field comes from management research. One exception is the *Design Management Journal (DMJ)*, where both designers and managers publish. It is mostly practitioners who publish in *DMJ* and the papers may be characterized more as guru speech than as academic research. Once a year, a volume with papers from academics is published.

Looking into what has been published during the last year in the *Design Journal* and *Design Issues*, two of the leading journals in design research, only a few papers published related to design and brand identity. The essence of one of these papers was how to develop a strategic tool to build a consistent brand in products (McCormack, Cagan, and Vogel, 2004). Another contribution to the field is Toni-Matti Karjalainen's dissertation *Semantic Transformation in Design* (Karjalainen, 2004), that takes a closer look at Nokia and Volvo design strategies and how they work to transform their identities into products.

Design thinking and design as strategic tools are often linked. In order to help the organisation to achieve goals, design can be used as a method. Design thinking includes also a designer's ability to focus on a specific case, and the user in particular (Bruce, 2002). Design

understands user needs, translates them into strategies for product development and coordinates the development process.

From quality assurance to living the brand

The history of brands started with cows, and the need to recognise both quality and product origins. Brands in such a context, is an understanding of a trademark that has gained commercial recognition (Oxford Dictionary, 1997). Back in the eighties, working with brands for a designer was about designing a logo or a corporate identity profile. Wally Olins' books then developed a strategy for how to build a consistent graphic profile (Olins, 1989).

When professional brand builders and academics discuss branding it is much more about the theory of how an organisation should think and act. This view comes across as too limited. Strong brands have gone beyond being just recognisable trademarks. They have managed to build what Aaker calls a brand identity; "Brand identity should help establish a relationship between the brand and the customer by generating a value proposition involving functional, emotional or self-expressive benefits" (Aaker, 1996:78). The brand in this understanding is no longer only a name a customer can rely on, but an added value.

At the core of a successful brand are both rational and emotional values and a vision. The values are defined by the company and they are trying to project this to the customers in four different ways. The four ways are 1) brand as a person, 2) brand as an organisation, 3) brand as a product and 4) brand as a symbol. Brand as a person is the personality of the brand. Several brands choose pop stars or other famous people to represent their brand. Brands as symbols are logos, symbols or fonts or colours, which represent the brand. Brand as an organisation is strategy and people working in the organisation. Brand as a product is what they are manufacturing (Aaker, 1996:78).

This holistic approach is used in several published papers concerning brand and design (Karjalainen, 2004; McCormack, Cagan, and Vogel, 2004), and is also what this paper builds its argument upon. Branding in this sense is not only about communicating the quality of a company but about building customer relations by communicating an identity or emotional values. In order to communicate the brand efficiently it needs to be expressed in the organisation as a whole, by people, strategy and products.

Why brand building may be hard to accept for designers

One of the most important dictums which can make it hard for designers to accept branding and communicating identity is the dictum: "Form follows function". It was first coined by the American architect Louis Sullivan in a paper in 1896. The dictum gives strong guidelines for what design is and how to work as a designer. For the designer this means that everything which is superfluous in the form has to be cut away. It also indicates that every function has its natural form, and that the goal of every design project should be to find this form. This view does not exactly collaborate with design as a tool for communicating a brand identity.

One question raised at the Nordcode seminar in Trondheim May 2005 was if designers were a part of a brand fascist system. Another important question raised was the ethic in brands, and which role designers should have in building up this type of consumerism. Naomi Klein have criticised the strength of branding and the holistic approach discussed in this paper (Klein, 2001). Designers as aestheticians may be caught in the middle. Some feel that working with

brands is unethical; that designers are actually those designing the products. There are several discussions important to be aware of but organisations that are value driven are more vulnerable to critics. Their customers can decide if they want to be a part of that set of values or not, if the company does something opposed to these values they also risk harming customer relations.

Why designers are brand builders

The designer's role in brand building could be explained from three different perspectives. The first perspective is to see the designer as a carrier, a problem solver or a decorator — how should brand identity be represented in products, commercials or graphics (Norman, 2004; Pye, 1978)? The second is to see the designer as a strategist, and the third to see the designer as a promoter of social values (Cooper and Press, 1997).

One of the most successful design companies in the world is Frog Design who managed to carry their vision into their products. It was established in 1969 in Alsteig, Germany, and made its name in 1982 (Sweet, 1999). Their philosophy in design can be summed up in the company slogan: 'Form Follows Emotions'. The design should give an unexpected experience, identity or entertainment to consumers and to manufactures. They have managed to add value to their products and communicate it successfully to their audience. The audience is not only buying a product, but an identity, a story or an experience.

In the introduction to *Design since 1945*, Dormer mentions Japanese design and its use of a designer's competencies (Dormer, 1993). This is interesting since it delves directly into the competencies required for effective branding. In Japan, design has two separate — but related — functions. Firstly, it is used as a strategic tool to plan the manufacturing and shape its marketing. Secondly it can make a product desirable for consumers.

Growing awareness of corporate social responsibility also opens up this possibility. This brings a new dimension into the debate if the designer's role according to branding should be to bring a social responsibility into the brand. But one important question in this debate is if the designers are the right people to give guidance in this debate, or whether our knowledge becomes too superficial to answer these questions.

Do designers always build brands?

Designers' skills are fitted to branding for several reasons. Firstly, branding is about communicating an identity to people (Aaker, 1996; Ellwood, 2002). Design is about communicating; one of the most important design skills is that of visualising a message into three-dimensionality (Dormer, 1993; Frascara, 2001). For a company this is extremely important in branding since it allows the building of a customer relationship. Secondly, branding is complex and in order to communicate a message efficiently you need to communicate with a variety of disciplines; design is interdisciplinary in its nature.

The role of the designer is to be a designer, which as Dormer says can be a chameleon undertaking (Dormer, 1993). Design is a product of changes in society. The role of designers today is perhaps to communicate strong brands. Our strength, though, is an interdisciplinary approach to problem solving and communication. In the case of brand building we have tools for analysing companies, communicating visions and values, and at the same time we have tools for visualisations. Strategic documents can be brought to life. Designers are the ones that

are able to relate visions, values and the product, and this is crucial to survival in today's global market.

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Sammendrag

Denne artikkelen ser på designeren sin rolle i forhold til merkevarebygging. Artikkelen er skrevet i begynnelsen av doktorgradsarbeidet og tar derfor bare for seg litteraturstudier. Kommunikasjon av visjoner og verdier er det sentralt i merkevarebygging og dette skal kommuniseres ut i alle deler av organisasjonen, produktet og symboler. Artikkelen deler designeren sin rolle i forhold til merkevarebygging i tre. Den første rollen er designeren sin rolle som den som visualiserer verdiene igjennom produkter og visuelt materiale. Den andre rollen som designeren har som strateg og hvordan denne egenskapen kan brukes for å implementere verdiene. Til sist diskuterer denne artikkelen designeren sin rolle i forhold til å være opptatt av sosiale verdier. De sentrale egenskapene ved designrollen som går igjen i alle tre rollene er designeren som kommunikator og designerenes tverrfaglige tilnærming til problemløsning.