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Functional, Beautiful, and Meaningful Products Designed To Be Loved …

Introduction

Creating well-designed products is key to differentiating a company from its competitors. Since consumers (here, the users) are charmed by attractive designs, companies in competitive markets integrate a mix of charismatic elements in their products. Among others, these include functionality, aesthetics, branding, meaningful symbols, and an element of surprise. How best can they be combined and packaged so as to appeal to customers? Designers certainly are at the heart of the design process but they are not alone in creating desirable products. How are business executives involved in design discussions? Many of them may not be sufficiently trained in discussing aesthetics and product meaning. Poor discussion around product proposals makes it a challenge to correctly anticipate or plan a product's appeal, and it often leads to unfortunate design choices and, in consequence, to a lack of commercial success. An overview of attractive elements in a product's design, therefore, makes sense to facilitate this discussion among designers and managers.

Professional and Research Context

The author is a senior professor in Innovation and Design at the Grenoble École de Management (GEM), a notable business school in France. The business education at GEM is influenced by the Hi-Tech and research environment of the Grenoble area. GEM therefore puts innovation and technology management at the heart of its internationally oriented business management programs for undergraduate and graduate students.

　　The author's doctoral thesis focused on the process of developing expressive, meaningful product design. The Offenbach theory of product language turned out to be a significant tool for the definition and discussion of »meaningful product design.« As part of the research, she interviewed individual members of product development teams to discuss how they go about creating expressive design. To facilitate these interviews, she replaced the original terms used in the Offenbach approach with a more general vocabulary; and also adapted the model's structure to more closely match the interests and concerns of business executives.

Product Aesthetics and Product Meaning

In the Offenbach theory of product language, the functions of product language are divided into two categories: firstly, formal-aesthetic functions, which represent a product's aesthetics and correspond to the grammar of the product language;

and secondly, semiotic functions, which basically means the signs that stand for the content of the product language. These semiotic functions are divided in turn into two sub-categories: indication functions, which explain the product's nature and functionality, and symbolic functions, which are rooted in the associations that spring to the user's mind when looking at a product.

As outlined above, two adjustments were made to the Offenbach product language model in order to facilitate interviews with members of product development teams. Firstly, the vocabulary was simplified so that it could be used without further explanation. Thus, the term

→ formal-aesthetic functions was replaced by product aesthetics and the term
→ semiotic function by product meaning.

Product Identity, User Identity, and Company Identity

A second adaptation consisted of a division into categories more relevant to the business context. Product managers are rarely specialized in the artful grammar of design – the product aesthetics – but they do have to deal with product meaning, namely the many aspects of the content of the product language that are linked to marketing. Securing a product's functionality, understanding user experience, and building brand value are important steps in product management. Product managers have to address all aspects of product meaning. In the updated model, the term product meaning is therefore divided into three subcategories; product, user and company identity.

1. **PRODUCT IDENTITY** messages about the product itself
2. **USER IDENTITY** messages about the user of the product
3. **COMPANY IDENTITY** messages about the company and its brand(s)

As a result, the adapted product language model consists of two principles components: product aesthetics and product meaning. Product meaning is then further divided into three subcategories that convey messages about the product, the user and the company. ❶
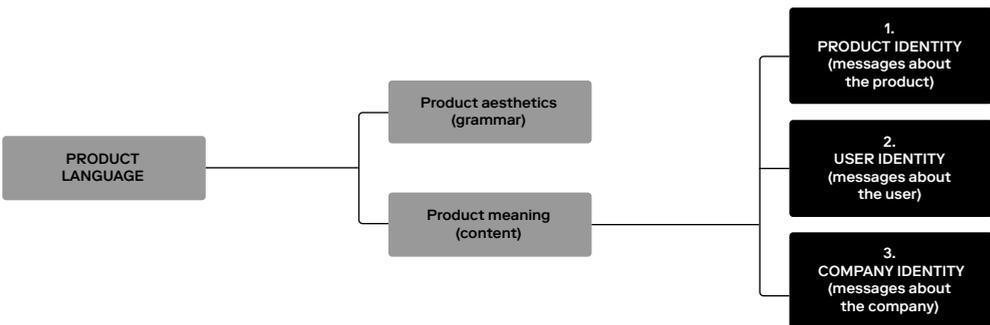
❶ Product meaning with its three sub-categories: product identity, user identity, and company identity

The original overall structure of the product language theory was retained, certainly, but the more everyday vocabulary and structure of the redrafted model facilitate discussion outside the academic world. The following three paragraphs contain details about the subcategories; product, user and company identity.
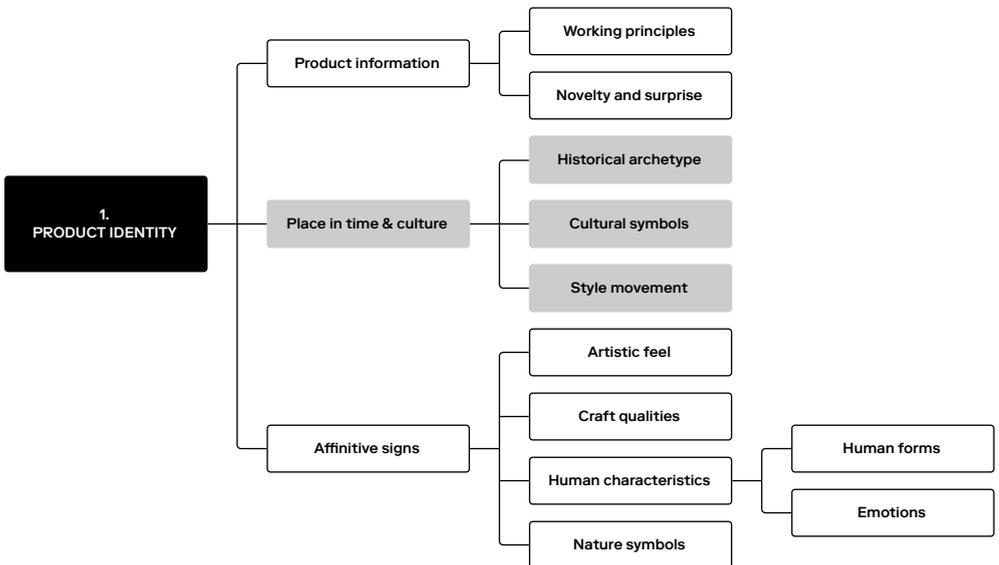
Product Identity

The term product identity corresponds to the indication functions in the Offenbach product language theory. In the adapted model, the product identity ❷ is divided into three group messages:

a)   product information
b)   place in time and culture
c)   affective signs – signs that inspire an affinity with the product.

→ a)   Product information relates to the product's working principles – how, where, and when to use the product – and also gives some indication of the product's quality and performance. Furthermore, novelty and surprise in a product may add value to it, because a sense of innovation, discovery, originality, and exoticism may appeal to (prospective) users.

→ b)   Place in culture and time refers to elements that historicize and contextualize a product. For example, a product may be presented as part of a style movement from a past, present, or future era, or may reference local or foreign, specific or universal cultural symbols. These elements are often authentic. They may show the user's own roots, be recognizable or have historical significance for users. Associations with historical and archetypal, hence familiar forms may bring users reassurance.


❷ Product identity and its different messages

→ c) Integrating affective signs in the design of a product is another way to give it identity. Knowing that an object has been created by artistic means and with craftsmanship adds honesty, human value, and warmth to the product. An artistic feel or craft quality adds uniqueness and luxury to an object, and this in turn valorizes the uniqueness of its user. Additionally, human characteristics in a product's design inspire an affinity with the product. We can further distinguish here, between anthropomorphic designs based on human forms and designs that conjure associations with human emotions. Human characteristics in a design contribute to a product's personality. In other words, they make it come alive in order to capture users' interest.

Lastly, the use of elements that conjure a sense of the natural world may serve as a reassuring counterbalance to the realities of our industrialized world. So-called nature symbols are inspired either by the organic forms and patterns of plants, flowers, and other natural elements, or by animals. All of these have the potential to contribute to product charisma. Wood, for example, a natural material with a distinctive smell and haptic, may be perceived as a warm and living element.

User Identity – Being the Same or Different

The second theme in product meaning relates to the user identity suggested by a product. A user may use a product to communicate his or her personality and also to communicate social position – ›to have is to be‹. ❸

a) By using a product, a user may manifest characteristics such as gender, age, and personality. For example, fashion may be an expression of its user's personality, taste and individualism while a sports car may lend its owner a dynamic image.

b) A product may be used also as an expression of social characteristics: it may be a status symbol that demonstrates its user's success in life. Or it may reflect its user's ambitions, values, and beliefs. The user may choose to look or act the same (i.e. affiliate to a group) and use a product as an expression of a particular lifestyle; or may choose to stand out and be different from others.
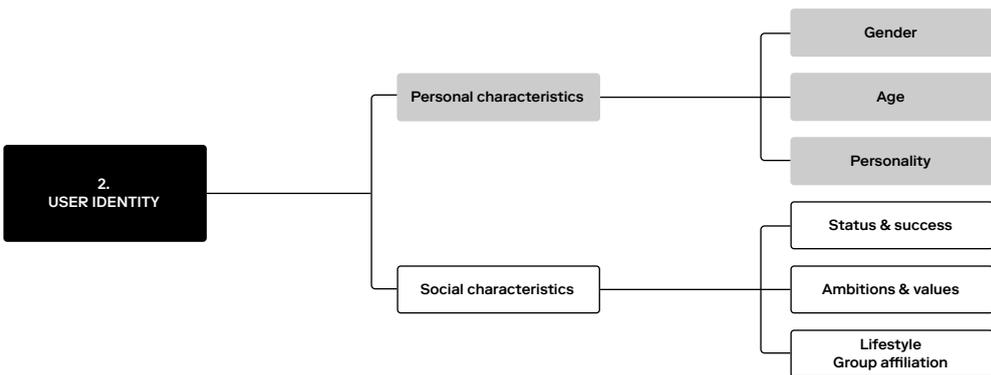
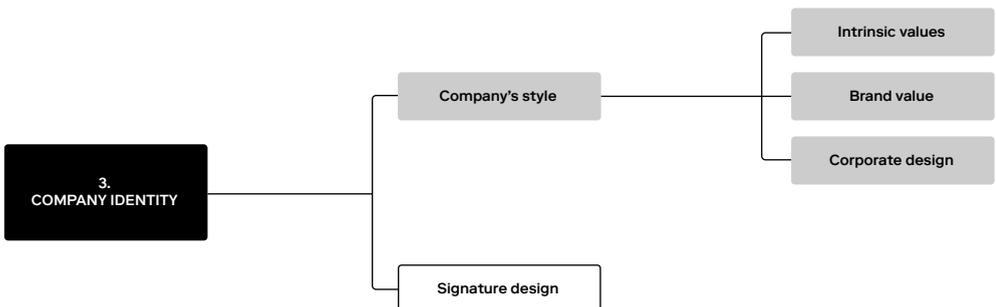

❸ User identity: messages about a product's user

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Company Identity

a)   The third major theme in product meaning is the company identity transmitted by a product. ❹ A company's intrinsic values may be made visible through its products. For example, under its »Think different« slogan, Apple Computer Inc. distinguished itself from its competitors by being the first company to launch an innovative computer design in a range of bright colors. The iMac G3 product line conspicuously communicated its brand values. Swatch and Bang & Olufsen are further examples of companies with a clearly recognizable brand.

b)   In some cases, however, it is not the company brand that a product most predominantly reflects. Design-driven companies, such as Alessi or Kartell, also give space to external designers to further shape the brand by creating signature designs. The company then promotes these in its unique or »limited edition« product lines.

Using the Product Language Approach in a Pedagogical Activity

To encourage discussion of the meaningful aspects of product design among business students at GEM, an assignment with the name »Designed to be Loved … or Not« was developed. It draws on the tailored product language structure outlined above, i.e. the three subcategories: product identity, user identity, and company identity. Business students – future business executives – on design management courses not only need be aware of the impact of design; they also have to carry the creative design process (i. e. reflection on and discussion of a product) through to the constructive level. In other words, they must be able to translate an idea into a viable functional product. Giving quality feedback is therefore always vital to innovative teamwork.

    For the exercise »Designed to be Loved … or Not«, each student selects a product that does not leave him or her indifferent. It may be a highly appreciated or, on the contrary, a detested product. The important point is that the product does <u>not leave the user indifferent</u>. The reason the user does not feel indifferent may be that he/she is extremely pleased with a product's functionality or that the product is of personal value to him/her; but these are just two among many diverse reasons. Students prepare their analysis between classes and then present their reasons using the tailored product language structure as a guideline. The structure

❹ Company identity: messages about a company

allows students to reflect more precisely on a product's design. Was appreciation or rejection of a product caused by elements of its functionality, aesthetics, or meaning? Which elements of product identity, user identity, or company identity led to the user's appreciation of the product? The »Designed to be Loved … or Not« assignment, based on the adapted product language approach, supports this analysis and discussion.
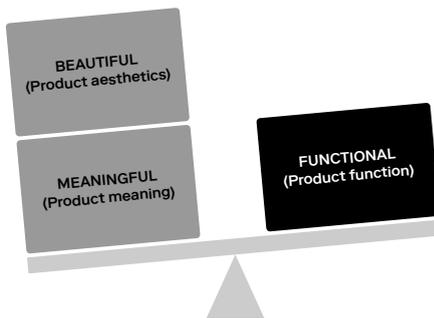
The Relevance of Product Language

What is the relevance of the product language approach today and possibly tomorrow? The product characteristics functional, beautiful, and meaningful are always present. Their weight changes over time, however, depending on the user's needs, the market competition (from similar or rival products), and the broader society's economic and cultural traits.

For example, the Bauhaus, the historic German school of architecture and design of the 1920s and '30s, based its design philosophy on the concept form follows function. This statement expressed a clear focus on functionality and yet even the Bauhaus style integrated meaningful symbols, too, which now epitomize minimalist modernism. A few decades later, the Italian Memphis movement contested this predominant emphasis on functionality, by producing provocative designs. With its position »less is a bore« it put playful flamboyant elements in the foreground. Hence, specifically meaningful elements gained in importance at the time. These two examples show a changing balance between aesthetic, meaningful and functional elements in a product's design. ❺

Will these three elements of product language – aesthetic, meaning and functionality – remain valued in the future? At present climate change, the scarcity of natural resources and negative effects of industrialization are creating a necessity and demand for environment-friendly sustainable solutions. These and other dynamics push society for change, as it recurrently does. Since good design is always focused on finding better solutions, it sees these changes as a part of the design brief and integrates the appropriate form of functionality, aesthetics, and symbolic meaning into its design.

The building blocks of product language, aesthetics, and product meaning have been valued at least since the start of the industrial revolution and still are. In all likelihood they will continue to be relevant for future design discussions and creation.

❺ The ›weight‹ of a product language and functionality depends on the needs of a society

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