Strategic Design through Brand Contextualization

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Abstract: Providing meaningful customer experience is at the core of any successful business activity. Brands can function as vehicles to bundle the ingredients of experience together and give them structure by which consumers are able to understand and interpret products and services. To complement the technical and functional reality and experience, brands create particular narratives around products and services, within the realm of their use experience. This paper aims to contribute to understanding of strategic design and brand contextualization by looking thoroughly into a research-driven student project. The product-service design assignment given to seven teams of four to five post-graduate students was to design a new bike-sharing system, serving the sustainable urban mobility needs of the city of Gothenburg in Sweden. The task was accompanied by a request to create a fictive brand case and specific brand narrative, based on a thorough analysis of pre-selected existing brands. The paper discusses how the teams crafted their brand narratives and how different design and service elements were used to create specific and meaningful brand experiences. In addition to the contribution of the paper to design research and practice, we present a process that might be more widely useful for the education of strategic design and brand management.

Key words: Branding, narratives, storytelling, product design, bike-sharing

1. Introduction

In the highly competitive market environment of contemporary societies, the business performance of companies is increasingly dependent on their ability to create and sustain brands that provide consumers with meaningful and specific experiences. Brand experience comprises the cumulative brand impressions that consumers garner from their experiential, visual, and verbal encounters with products, services, and different communicative means put out by the company. These impressions, and the elements of experience, constitute a holistic brand narrative that, if intriguing and consistent enough, leads to increased brand recognition and loyalty.

In our paper, we address the topic of strategic design and brand contextualization by exploring data gathered from an experimental post-graduate student project organized at the Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden. The paper puts forth examples of brand contextualization and strategic design and discusses how the teams crafted their brand narratives and how different design and service elements were used to create specific and meaningful brand experiences.

Providing meaningful customer experience is at the core of any successful business activity. Differentiation between competing products, services and brands occurs more often through socially and personally meaningful

attributes and value. Therefore, Customer Relationship Management [14] and Customer Experience Management [15] are seen as key processes for a company. This is something that concerns not only the product but also the holistic service concept around it, and often the wider ecosystem to which the product and service is connected to. As a consequence, a more holistic service dominant logic is required, in terms of both marketing [12] and systemic approaches to manage the various experience touch- points between the customer and the service. Brands, and a particular set of meanings carried and represented by them, can function as vehicles to bundle the ingredients of experience together as a more logical whole, to bring seemingly distant touch points closer to each other. Brands can provide the product and service with particular meanings and give them the structure to being able to understand and interpret them. To accompany and complement the technical and functional reality and experience, brands create particular and relevant narratives around products and services, within the realm of their use experience. In the tightening battle for consumer attention, storytelling is becoming an increasingly important strategic activity [11] for companies. And narratives or stories are not uni-directional communication vehicles, but dynamic platforms on which meanings are co-created by brands in interrelation with their customers.

Creating and managing a narrative that makes a difference, is sensible, and provides intentional meanings for the prospected target customer and is thus a strategic act of utmost importance. Product and service design usually function as the key media of transforming such pre-defined strategic meanings into product experience. Intentional brand experiences can be powerfully mediated by strategic use of certain visual, haptic, and experiential design characteristics [1] [2] [16]. Coherent use of design strategies can bring clarity to complex systemic challenges that many product and service contexts typically entail [7] [8].

Potential meanings carried by any product or service are multifaceted and boundless. But a well-thought design strategy can help in contextualizing the brand; giving focus to the product and service development processes and providing the consumers with touch points for specific and meaningful experiences. Product and service meaning are intertwined within the brand narrative and together can lead to a powerful mix of associations that point to the core experiential aspects of the brand [1] [2] [3]. And product or service success is increasingly dependent on the positive meanings and associations communicated by the brand.

The challenge of successful design for brand experience is two-fold: the company needs a consistent and meaningful brand narrative and an effective and coherent way to communicate the narrative to the target customer. In terms of design, this requires proper definition of the key elements that function as brand meaning carriers, the "actors" in the narrative ("brand design cues" or "signature elements") and strategies to them with intentional meanings of arming them with potential interpretations [1] [2]. This is naturally a complex task in reality. Moreover, as management and design educators, we are concerned about how to teach these strategies and approaches to students, as their formulation often depends on products, industries, and other contextual variables. Utilizing reality-based simulations, industry-specific case studies, is a good way to approach the challenge. The project presented in this paper was such an attempt.

2. Explorative project

In the Autumn of 2012, seven teams of four to five design and engineering students were given a task was to design a bike-sharing system to the city of Gothenburg, taking the specific requirements of the city and sustainability aspects into consideration. The project was part of the "Visual brand identity and product design"

course of the Masters programme in Industrial Engineering running at Chalmers University of Technology. The aim of the course, in general, is to give an introduction to the concepts of visual identity, brand and market strategy, and to study visual identity from both the brand and the product perspective. Market strategy for the means of the course is focusing mainly on product differentiation and positioning, customer categorisation, brand development, and design strategy. In this annual course, different emphases, product categories, and brands have been used (for earlier examples, see [2] [4] [5] [9] [10] [13]).

The purpose of the course project is to apply the knowledge one has acquired in the course through lectures, workshops, literature reviews, case study visits to a reality related context. The project consists of two interrelated tasks: 1) Analysis of an existing brand in the area of automotive design with an emphasis on the visual branding theme. 2) Creating a new fictive brand (this could be a branch of the parent company as framed in task one) that specializes in sustainable mobility design beyond the classical borders of the automotive industry and designing a new product solution for this brand, according to the following project brief.

2.1 Project brief

Urban planning and design for novel ways that promote more sustainable mobility patterns and improve societal well-being is the key to reverse the alarming energy over-consumption, the environmental degradation, and the negative distributional impacts associated with today's car-intensive cities [6]. This concerns urban transport systems such as bike-sharing. A bike-sharing system functions through bicycles that can be picked up and dropped off at numerous points across a defined urban area, and involves appropriate transport infrastructure built to accommodate their use. Bicycles are available to the general public for short-term use, for free or for a small fee, and provide it with a fast, convenient and flexible inner city transport alternative. The concept has been widely embraced in Europe and is generating considerable interest in the rest of the world as well.

More specifically, public bicycles have the potential to increase the acceptance of cycling as a legitimate urban transport mode in cities. Recent European experiences suggest that public bicycle systems can act as a "door opener" for increased bicycle use. In cities that already involve high cycling mentality is already, such as Gothenburg, a competent bike-sharing scheme adds a valuable element to existing mobility services by providing low cost transport and encouraging intermodal travelling.

In the project, the key task was to design a new bike-sharing system that would serve the increased urban mobility needs of the city of Gothenburg and encourage a more sustainable modal share. The product and service design task was accompanied by a request to create a fictive brand case (either a sub-brand or a totally new one) and specific brand narrative to give the bike-sharing concept a specific identity and differentiate the "competing" student works from each other. The fictive brand cases were based on pre-selected automotive brands. Students needed to focus on the basic idea of the product and, in particular, on its visual design features that support the underlying brand narrative.

2.2 Brand analyses

In part one, preceding the bike-sharing design and brand creation task, students spent considerable effort in analyzing their assigned car brands; their narratives and essential meanings, as well as product-service experience and visual identities. The results of the analysis were then applied to the fictive brand and concept creation.

The objective was to analyse the identity of the chosen car brand (selected by the course moderator) by using the various frameworks and approaches provided by lectures and course literature. Students were free to use

methods and tools that they found the most feasible and applicable to their needs. Moreover, they were encouraged to develop them further in a creative way and come up with their own approaches in digging deeper into the brand meanings and narratives. Within the limited time of the course, students were advised to focus on locating the essential aspects of the brands and their meaningful visual ingredients.

The analysis consisted of two overarching questions: 1) What do the brand and its products and services stand for? 2) How is the brand's strategy reflected in (visual) product and communication design? In terms of the first question, teams were asked to find out and reason about: what are the brand's core values and brand essence by which the brand is recognized and differentiated from competitors; how is the brand positioned against its major competitors; what are the main visual identity elements of the brand; how does the brand define their target customer group/s; what is the role of heritage for brand identity; what is the brand policy for sustainability; are the brand's products designed with a focus on sustainability?

For the means of answering the second question, concerning the visual identity of the brands, students investigated: how does the brand define its product identity and how is this identity visible in the products and services; what design features constitute the brand's visual product and communication identity (explicit and implicit cues); what is the role of the brand's design history in the current strategies; have any values of sustainability been incorporated in the brand's visual identity, and if so, how, when and by what means?

The material for the analysis was acquired through publicly available resources, such as the Internet, companies' brochures, magazines, literature, retailers, fairs, advertisements, and so forth. In addition, the course consisted of methodology and data collection workshops in which the brands were more systematically analysed. Moreover, students run their own studies involving fellow students and other people through questionnaires, interviews, internet surveys and focus group discussions.

2.3 New brand and product development

In the second part of the project, each group was asked to start a thorough branding /re-branding process (with focus on sustainability) and to create and design an improved public bicycle scheme for the city of Gothenburg, according to the project brief.

Each group was free to choose between the options of either creating a sub-brand that is differentiated from the parent company analysed in the first part of the group project or developing a new fictive brand that is clearly differentiated from the analysed brand. Based on this decision, the groups were asked to address two overlapping work assignments: 1) Creating a fictive brand and a meaningful narrative for it. 2) Designing a public bicycle scheme for the new brand.

The first assignment involved naming the brand, formulating an identity strategy for the brand (essence, positioning, target customers, etc.), and defining the visual design philosophy for the brand. In the second assignment, teams were advised to advance with design solutions that are innovative yet realistic and manageable in terms of complexity. Furthermore, and in particular, the created solutions should be clearly representative of the identity of the new brand. The developed bike-sharing system was meant to be an upgrade of the current rent-a-bike system in Gothenburg. To achieve a true upgrade, special attention was on sustainability, usability, integration with other means of public transport, social inclusion, safety, and costs.

In assessing the quality of the design work, the primary point was to view how well the created design philosophy and solutions supported the brand values and narrative. In addition, attention was paid on the

marketability, functionality, and formal aesthetic qualities of the developed solutions. In terms of marketability, the checklist included: How unique is the solution? Does it touch the key buying/decision factors amongst its target audience? Is it an attractive system to use for the people of Gothenburg? Is the concept easy to understand? Is the design limited to a specific user type? How the public bicycles scheme's actual design features could be used to promote the system itself?

The key functionality concerns were: Is the product/PPS (Product Service System) easy to understand and use? Does it offer a new user experience? Is the solution easy to embrace for the user? Is the design limited in functionality and applications? Does the product/PPS offer a new approach and solution to an existing situation (why this is a better system than the one already in place)? Does the solution help users to live and act more sustainable? Can the usage of the product create long-term sustainable behaviors?

And finally, formal aesthetic points of focus comprised: Is the design aesthetically attractive and of high quality? Is the design easy to replicate (from a manufacturing viewpoint)? Does the form factor support usability? Does the product take a contemporary form? Does the product demonstrate innovation and creativity? Does the product design reflect the brand's policy on sustainability?

2.4 Project outcomes

The outcomes of the projects involved two audio-visual presentations (after each of the two project parts) and an extensive written report. We requested from the students to present their new product-system solutions (bicycles/stations/promotion aids) through the means of high quality sketches and computer models and additionally films or physical models if necessary. In this paper, we are unfortunately only able to show brief summaries of the seven projects. Figure 1 highlights the bike and rack design as well as selected narrative illustrations created by the seven teams. Table 1 in turn consists of examples of the new brand and product creation in terms of the core values (picked up from the extensive analyses of the part one of the project), the condensed version of the brand narrative and visual design philosophy, as well as some illustrative examples of the key design and functional features (bike and rack) created by the teams.
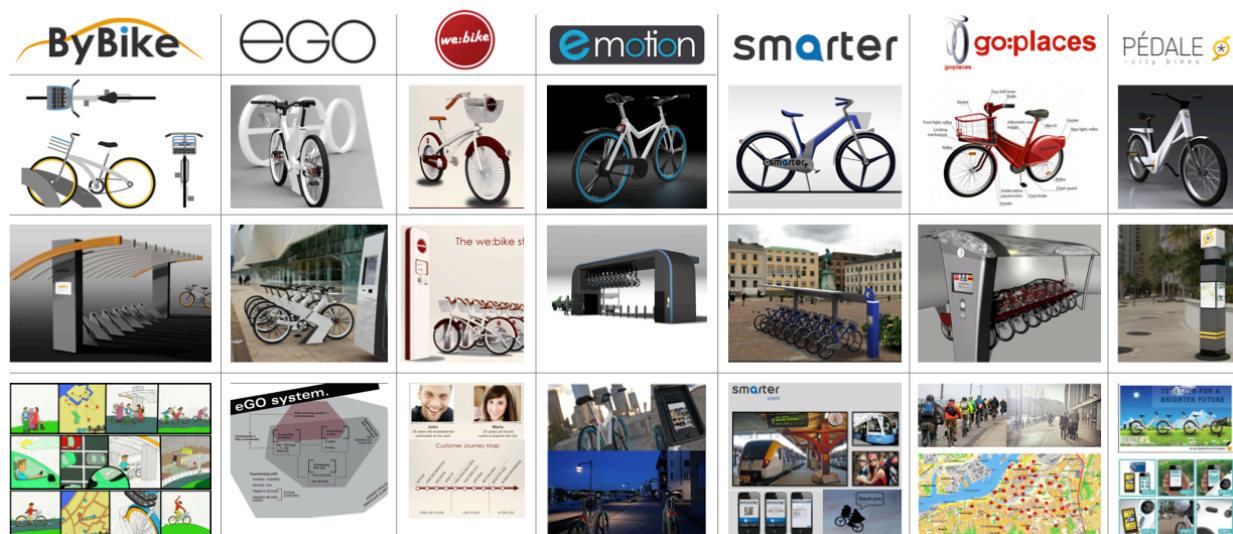

Figure.1 The seven created brands and visual examples of the bike design, rack/system design, and visual narratives created by the student teams.

Table 1. Examples from the reasoning of the student projects

Brand	New brand	Core values	Brand narrative	Visual design philosophy	Key design & functional features (bike & rack)
Volkswagen	ByBike	Reliable, family oriented, fun, for all, innovative	"Encourages eco-friendly mobility and progressive ideas for responsible action in everyday life"	Innovation, clean, joyful, urban, professional, safety, social inclusion, integration	Colour scheme (grey/blue/orange), clean and simple design, modern look, clear and easy to use UI
Audi	eGO	Creativity, commitment, activeness, enthusiasm, leisure, progressive, energetic, competitive	"Energizing movement"	User involvement, sustainability, integration, social inclusion, economy, safety	Colour scheme (white, black, contrasts), discrete yet dynamic shapes, simplicity, precision, sportiness
BMW	E-motion	Joy, sporty, emotion, exclusive, attitude	"The identity and fascination of e-motion derives from its aesthetic uniqueness accompanied by innovation and technical brilliance that together support a sustainable future"	Expression of motion and attitude, sophistication, innovation, and technologically advanced, interaction	Colour scheme (grey, white, blue), chamfered and dynamic profile of the bike, asymmetrical wheels, reflective coating (rims)
Smart (Mercedes)	Smarter	Responsibility (sustainability, innovation, care for the customers), agility (mobility, easy access, integration with the city), encouragement (active lifestyle, environmental awareness, exploration)	"Smarter way of moving regarding the environment, personal health, economy and accessibility. The brand slogan "Smarter together" indicates that by using a PBSS we can all help out to create a "smarter" community.	modern and distinct aesthetics, communicating sustainability (durability, modularity, simplicity, logicality, naturalness, local aesthetics and individuality)	Basic, round and friendly shapes, straight lines, light and uncomplicated appearance, accent colours (blue connecting to Gothenburg),

Fiat	We:bike	Italian, inclusive, functional, sustainable, playful	"We:bike' refers to the inclusiveness of the brand; biking together towards a more sustainable future.	Playfulness, inclusiveness, retro-vintage-classic expression, unified visual brand identity.	Coherent design, colour scheme (red and cream-white), soft rounded shapes, easy to use
Renault	Pédale	Freedom, affordable, people-centric, sustainable, simple, humour	"Greener means of transportation by providing an affordable, innovative and an easy-to-use bicycle-sharing system… simplicity, freedom and fun."	Playful, flexible, dynamic, sportiness, durability, quality	colour scheme (bright yellow, white, black, turquoise), rounded elementary forms such as rounded squares and circles
Toyota	Go:places	Moving forward, challenge, quality	"To provide the most flexible and effective solution to public transport system… encouraging a healthier lifestyle and a healthier environment… moving forward, together."	Quality, reliable, safe, for all, sustainable, urban, Japanese	Robust materials and shapes, basic and inexpensive yet quality details, functional solutions, colours cheme (Toyota red)

3. Conclusions

In the two-fold assignment of the project, the logic was first to familiarize students with the ways the automotive brands use in defining their brand values, crafting their brand narratives, and reasoning their visual strategies, by deconstructing the branding and design strategies of the companies. In the brand building and design exercise, the second assignment of the project, the teams then performed a process reverse to the analysis part and were to compose a credible and meaningful brand narrative and consequent design strategy, as well as design and service concepts, to represent the narrative.

The analysis part went far beyond merely concentrating on the material that the automotive companies themselves made available. Consumer interviews and personal interpretation of the narratives were also methods the project teams employed in order to encapsulate the "essence" of the auto-brands, something that eventually helped them with the context of the bike-sharing scheme they had to design.

The same brief was given to every team in the second assignment: The service and design concepts were supposed to include the same basic elements and functionalities: the bikes, the loaning/repository stations, their geographical positions in Gothenburg, the accompanied smart phone service applications, and so forth. In addition to the functional quality of the products and services, we emphasized the importance of differentiating the

concepts from the "competing" offers of other teams through brand and design. This involved careful consideration of the values and narrative elements, based on the target customer profiles, and strong justification of chosen design strategies and elements. As the snapshots of Table 1 and Figure 1 highlight, the "E-motion" concept, based on the BMW narrative" involved a very different approach from "Go:places" based on the Toyota narrative. The same basic functions were provided by all the concepts, but the customer experience was meant to be somehow unique in each case, to appeal to specific customers by creating meaningful experiences for them. Most often, these experiences were created by specific visual and form elements in the bikes, the racks, the smart phone interface, and marketing material. The brands created a context within which the teams were able to create meaningful design strategies and transform them into representative design elements.

This paper consists only of a rather limited description of the project, which provided rich and insightful material for further analyses. In terms of brand narratives, the teams were developing many other details in the system, such as pricing schemes and several other service aspects that are not included in the scope of this paper. In this paper, we aimed to present the process for brand contextualization and strategic design that might be more widely useful for management and design education.

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