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PRODUCTS AS MANIFESTATIONS OF BRAND IDENTITY

This paper describes the research topics in my specialization subject in the master of industrial design engineering course at NTNU. The main topic in question is how one can use product design as a tool to communicate strategic brand values through products.

INTRODUCTION

In today's oversupplied markets, where the features and quality of many products are more or less the same, the need for differentiation is evident. A company can differentiate itself from its competitors through branding – the act of evoking strategic associations through various means of communication. According to Karjalainen (2004), products are in many cases the strongest representations of brand identity, and are usually the prior source through which a brand is evaluated. The question on how the design qualities of a product represent brand identity should therefore be of great interest. However, the research conducted in this specific field is not too substantial. Two theses of interest in the field is "Semantic Transformation in Design" by Toni-Matti Karjalainen, and "Design Syntactics: A Functional Approach to Visual Product Form" by Anders Warell. There seems to be a gap between branding and product design. On one hand there exist an extensive body of literature concerning corporate identity design and design management, where brand identity design mainly refers to graphic design. On the other hand product semantics has focused on product qualities on the general level of meaning creation, not from the particular stand point of brand communication.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This specialization project will be divided in two parts. First an article on the subject of how brand specific meanings can be constructed in design will be written. Second a practical project, based on the findings in the article, will be conducted.

Article

The article is an attempt to view the topics of brand and identity from the specific perspective of products, concerning the communicative and visual qualities of product design.

Three central questions will be asked in the article:

How can products carry strategic messages and hence create brand recognition?

What are the design elements through which one distinguishes between products? In other words; what makes a car look like a Saab or a Volvo?

What tools can be used to evaluate a brand and its product portfolio to locate that brand's strategic product language?

Particular emphasis will be put on how one can use these tools in the development of new products which represent the brand identity, as designing for an existing brand usually is part of industrial designers' everyday life.

These questions will be addressed on the basis of a review of existing literature. Main authors of reference are Toni-Matti Karjalainen, Anders Warell, Susann Vihma and Rune Monö.

The first question concerning the product within the context of communication, leads to the viewpoint of products as signs carrying meanings. A look into semantics, the symbolic functions of products, is important because it offers a theoretical basis for chasing brand identity references in product design. In this context a product – its gestalt form, characteristic shapes and single elements – functions as a replica embodying specific signs or representations that convey brand associations to a perceiver's interpretative mind. Several different semiotic approaches exist. However, my study is based on the generic view of Pierce, as this seems to be the most fruitful to product meanings. Interesting authors in this relation is Rune Monö (1992), Susann Whima (1995), Anders Warell (2001), and Toni-Matti Karjalainen (2004). I choose to adopt the viewpoint of Karjalainen (2004) where a replica, such as a design element, usually includes several references that can be conceptualised as a pattern of signs. In addition to this, the reference relations are in most cases stringed (one association, evoked by the reference relationship, leads to another association, which again leads another and so fourth), which actually makes this system rather complex. When looking at a product and all its design representation only a very few of these actually acts as identifiers of the core identity attributes of the brand. This leads to the next question: what are these elements? What makes a car look like a Saab or a Volvo?

This is really an utterly individual case, and must therefore be considered individually in every specific brand situation. Brand identity can be reflected through different aspects of the product. According to Karjalainen and Warell (2005) these three aspects are visual brand cues, implicit design cues and product characteristics.

This being noted it is obviously not a simple, universal method on how to find a brand's strategic product language and apply this in the development of new products for that brand. However, there are presented some helpful tools one can use in this situation. I wish to try to present these (and maybe modify some slightly) as a general framework, which one can tailor in every specific case.

Practical Project

In the project I wish to evaluate Saab Automobiles by using the tools and framework I found in the article. I then want to take these results and bring them on to a new product that communicates the Saab identity. This will only be done on the concept stage. If I get time I would like to make concepts for different products, however this

does not seem too likely considering the time available. The most favourable product at the time being is a sleigh for children.

The reason for choosing Saab is its relatively strong and complete brand identity, and the fact that they are recognised for its distinctive design on both overall shapes and detailed design. This will hopefully exemplify the tools found in a suitable manner. I also find it intriguing that Saab owners supposedly are the most truthful ones considering brand compared to other car owners.