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DO YOUR PRODUCTS GET GOOD MARKS FOR BEHAVIOUR?

There are lessons to be learned from the digital world when it comes to creating the right sensory experience around any of your products, says **Charles Drury**, design strategist at DCA Design International

If you followed the QR code on the opposite page, you may well have noticed your phone making a noise like a camera shutter. But did it sound electronic or mechanical? Did it remind you of your old SLR or a motorised soundbyte from the age of Advantix?

Whatever your impression, the sound was, of course, artificial. It's an effect, an illusion; a digital product behaving like a mechanical one to raise its perceived value. It is part of the phone's interactive language.

A couple of years ago, we contributed an article to this publication on visual brand language (VBL). It asked the question, "Why does it look like that?", and examined how brands could employ a simple toolset to define and manage their visual design assets. This article asks a related question about interactive properties: "How should it feel and behave?"

Let's not pretend this is a new topic. Sensory design has been recognised by automotive brands for decades. However, the battle lines have shifted over the years from crafting the furniture, to engineering the steering and choreographing the cupholders.

Investments in sensory experience seem to have been made into ever-smaller details, while at the same time, becoming ever bigger news.

Wieden + Kennedy's work for Honda (a choir creating the sound of a vehicle) puts acoustic experience centre stage for its whole marketing strategy. If controlling how something feels and behaves is such big business for car companies, why isn't this also the case in so many other categories?

One problem is that of language. Sensory properties can often be overlooked in development simply because they can be hard to talk about. Many industry terms are so general as to be unusable: the Living Proof hair care bottle is often described as "soft touch". Alternatively, clients hunt for analogies (we've once been asked to give the action of a mechanism a "buttery finish") but the problem with analogies is that it is hard to know you've got the right one.

Another problem is belief. We are led by our eyes. David McCandless, citing Tor Norretranders' work, reminds us that our visual bandwidth (at 1250MBps)

might be an order of magnitude greater than any other sense, but a third of the information we receive is non-visual, and 99.3% isn't even processed consciously.

Finding someone who knows how to talk about the non-visual third might seem a sensible place to start the sensory brand conversation. Advertising agencies, of course, have provided this service for years: turning a proposition into the scene, the mood and the colour grade that enable a brand to tell stories, rather than just stories to be told about brands.

Transferring this intuitive process to product design, however, has not always proved quite so successful. It is the comparative complexity of the development process – the long, winding and hectic road to industrialisation – which makes it hard to control the glug of the bottle and swing of the hinge.

Scale presents another operational problem. Controlling the qualities of how your product feels, sounds and smells is easy enough when you are turning out a couple of pieces of furniture a month. But when, as Coca-Cola's VP of design David Butler

Design for the sense. Car brands, such as Jaguar (right and below right), have used sensory design for a long time; Living Proof tubes (below) are described as 'soft touch'; Pringles (above) tube cap reanimates the brand behaviours.

has explained, you are designing for 3,300 products, across 500 brands in 206 countries, the challenge of managing consistent and resonant sensory characteristics begins to look a little different.

With so many potential difficulties, choosing the right partners is half the problem. On the one hand, the challenge calls for a fluent sensory-brand translator; and on the other, for an expert production engineer: if you want to know how to make a product feel, you first have to know how to make it work.

But that still leaves us with the problem of definition: how should my brand feel? What should it say? Where to invest? One place to start, as with the VBL process, is with the brand personality. Just as how a brand's products look can be considered a way in which it behaves, so too can the way in which they react. Academic Don Norman thinks about this as three levels of product understanding: the visual, the behavioural and the reflective – how it looks, how it behaves and what it comes to mean.

Taken together, these levels offer us a good description of a product's interface, as well as good representation of an ascending scale of value (and complexity) on which to organise investment. They also draw attention to the way digital products have moved expectations beyond sensory optimisation.

The iPhone is a good case in point. Visually, it is more inoffensive than beautiful, while from a tactile point of view it is haptically inert. Behaviourally, however, it is captivating: scroll bars freewheel as if on gently damped rollers, and maps glide across the screen as papers across a desk.

Apple's use of animation shifts the value of the handset from physical form to interactive behaviour. In so doing, it has created the first Natural User Interface (NUI): what users expect to experience in the real world is what they see on screen.

If you're selling breakfast cereal, you will probably be wondering what any of this has to do with you. The answer: everything. While the snap, crackle and pop on your website probably matches your TV ad fairly closely, there is a good chance your packaging does not. It probably feels much like your competitor's.

Many consumer products have the opposite of a NUI – what users see of a brand on screen is not matched by how it physically feels or moves. Ironically, the most powerful intervention might be to follow the digital example, such as creating a new product interface through your packaging which re-animates your brand behaviours. Think about the Pringles cap.

Yet this is easier said than done. Defining an interactive brand language (IBL) is only the first step. Then, developing compelling product interactions will require production specialists and usability engineers who can collaborate with users and suppliers to develop how a product feels and behaves in parallel with how it looks. IBL cannot be an afterthought.

Also needed are brand guardians who are more than just good project managers. They must be able to bring brand promises to life through sensory craftwork and behavioural mastery or, as Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius wrote, "Breathe a soul into the product born dead from the machine". ●