



Why is it vital a product's visual design reinforces your brand values?



1 Dyson
2 Audi A5
3 Method hand soap

Stand upright and smile; you're an Audi from the late Nineties. Now lean slowly forward and start to frown: you're more aggressive, sportier; you're an Audi from today.

The automotive industry may be going through a tough time at the moment but for a long time it has understood how to create, control and develop a three-dimensional visual brand language (3D VBL). A 3D VBL is an often overlooked but powerful method of translating a brand's unique values and personality into tangible, physical design cues. This ranges from the safe, reassuring shoulder line present on all Volvos, to the signature radiator grille on the current Audis.

Automotive brands know how to shape our perceptions of their vehicles and brands by creating VBL strategies that blend brand value-based design cues with product agenda-based design cues. Most of all, they know the value of how a well-structured VBL continuously reinforces their brands through purchase and use.

Not all of us, however, are selling emotive consumer products, so how can we communicate our brand's essence through the visual design of our more humble household or office products to build a deep, emotional connection with our customers?

Increasing brand recognition, unifying and strengthening brand impact, as well as boosting the efficiency of product development and in turn the rate of introducing new products to market are just some of the reasons to give it a go.

In the early Nineties, a client asked me: "Why does it look like that?" They were referring to a successful consumer product that we had designed. They wanted to deconstruct why it had been so successful and what they should do next. A definitive answer was difficult and obviously required an analysis of all the communications that had surrounded the product. But my client was specific; he wanted to know how the look of the product had helped. What was it in the visual design of the product that had resonated so well with its audience? Like art historians, with hindsight we could theorise and hypothesise why, but the fact was it had not been designed strategically to communicate particular messages about the brand or the product; it was a happy accident. It is difficult to repeat happy accidents.

Intelligent approach

We are now in a sober period where it is vital to have a more intelligent approach to design. "I think concept number five is the cool one" is not good enough.

We know that products are a primary touchpoint for the brand, so it is important to think of them as brand ambassadors. Their visual appearance broadcasts a myriad of messages about who you are, what you stand for and how well you understand and meet the needs of your customer. The visual design of your product will always be communicating something, so what are your products actually saying? Are they putting across what you want to say?

If you have spent time, money and run out of post-it notes aligning and defining your brand footprint, it is vital that you create a 3D VBL based on this footprint rather than simply instructing product designers to create a beautiful but random object.

A VBL is a strategic tool and therefore needs to be created at the same time as developing your other communication strategies. Like everything, it should be integrated.

It is important to ensure that a 3D VBL guides and does not dictate. The visual design of a range of products, whether it is cars or face cream, needs an element of flexibility; each product needs to be an individual. One of the key values of a VBL is to increase brand recognition through consistency, but it should balance novelty with familiarity. The range should be along the theme of a family photo, not a series of clones.

The VBL should result in a flexible set of guidelines that summarise how agreed brand values and product messages can be expressed through three-dimensional form, material and colour. Colour is obviously vital to brand recognition but, like the car industry, it cannot always be relied on to be consistent, so form is also critical.

Historically, a VBL can be replaced by the intuition of a single person or like-minded group as seen in small challenger brands such as cleaning brand Method and Innocent drinks.

When the scale of the brand or product portfolio is manageable, an individual can tightly control the visual design. Examples of this are Dieter Rams at Braun in the Sixties or

more recently Jonathan Ive at Apple. These are examples of empowering brilliant product designers with a vision. They are also examples of incentivising product designers for the long term. The result is a consistent stream of rich product design that intuitively communicates the brand, with the right dose of novelty each time. The challenge comes when life doesn't turn out like that. When the scale of brand and product portfolios is very large as in some consumer electronic and FMCG companies. It is impractical or unreasonable for a single design leader to keep control.

Creating a VBL starts by asking: how is your brand doing? If your market share is growing and people are asking for your product by name, then a VBL needs to build on current values and leverage recent visual heritage. If your growth is stagnating and there is little differentiation on the shelf or in the minds of your customers, then the VBL is a central part of a larger exercise to redefine your relevance.

From either starting point, once the brand values and personality have been defined, the nub of creating an effective VBL is the translation of the verbal to the visual.

The team creating the VBL needs to combine a deep understanding of the potential consumer and user with the shifting residual, dominant and emerging codes and signs of the category or cultural context.

At DCA, we split the visual design of a product into two main areas – visual brand language and product language. The product language is then split into product agenda

and its semantics of use. This structure allows the team to create a visual brand language toolbox and separate individual product language toolboxes, all guided by an overarching VBL strategy with principles on consistency and novelty.

For example, let's say we are going to create the visual design for a non-automotive BMW product which has the brand essence of "Joy" – sheer driving pleasure. We would start by understanding the residual, dominant and emerging visual codes for the specified category to understand context and opportunity.

We would then deconstruct the brand personality's three key values "dynamic, challenging and cultured", translating them into visual equivalents initially in abstract, then as more tangible design cues.

Design cues

These design cues would be split between the product's overall silhouette, its surface transitions and materials and finally its design details, the "stamps". Simplistically, for a BMW product you could explore, test and develop silhouettes that communicate poise and balance, challenging surface transitions that combine innovation with elegance and a mixture of stamps from precise split-lines and materials that communicate sophistication to the more obvious prestige heritage references of the kidney-shaped radiator grille.

Layered over this visual brand language would be the product's individual visual language specific to its key agenda in a category. The consistency of application of

these growing principles and toolbox should also be a strategy driven by the brand's essence. If you are Dyson, you will control your functionally driven VBL very rigidly; if you are Method your VBL's strength and differentiation comes from a confident visual flexibility.

Designers will only use a VBL if it offers inspiration and room for personal creativity. Nothing will become redundant quicker than a rigid set of design rules. In the automotive world, think of how a concept car offers both inspiration and direction at the same time.

For the brand manager it begins to offer an analysis tool for visual design. It is an enabler for the non-design trained. It provides a new vocabulary and a more tangible connection to the semantic process of translating words to three-dimensional design cues, while introducing a series of basic metrics to audit brand consistency.

Creating and using a 3D VBL does not mean we end up designing by numbers. It does not focus group a design to death. It provides inspiration as well as direction for design teams while creating a powerful tool for brand managers to brief, control and evaluate the success of a visual design in reinforcing their brand's DNA.

Now if anyone asks "why does it look like that?", either the designer or the brand manager should respond with an answer that can be traced back to the brand essence and product agenda. ●

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