

BRANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE: TOWARDS A UNIFIED THEORY OF EXPERIENTIAL DESIGN

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ABSTRACT:

In today's marketplace, the time from innovation to imitation has become so short that companies must constantly innovate on a technical level just to stand still. Reliance on traditional differentiators such as quality, price and reliability is no longer a sustainable business strategy and indeed neglects the role of emotions in the customer experience. Therefore, in order to acquire and maintain differentiation in the marketplace, there is a need for a branding strategy that combines the physical, as experienced by the senses, and the customers' physical and emotional expectations. The aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of Brandscape Architecture which encompasses the emergent disciplines of Experience, Service and Transformation Design and builds on the service clues described by Berry, Wall and Carbone (2006) to describe the holistic nature of customer centric brand experiences. The implications of Brandscape Architecture for the design profession will be explored in order to establish the foundations of a practical model of Brandscape Architecture for effective application in the design and analysis of customer experiences.

Keywords: brandscape, experience, design

I. INTRODUCTION

The nature of the 21st century marketplace is undergoing a dramatic change. Developments in communication technology and the increasingly sophisticated capabilities of the emerging BRICA (Brazil, Russia, India, China, Asean) markets are fuelling a dramatic increase in commoditisation and enabling significant reductions in timescales from product innovation to imitation. Companies that rely solely on traditional differentials such as price, quality, reliability and features are exposing themselves to increasing competition and shrinking profit margins. Furthermore, the reduction in time from innovation to imitation enabled by these developments can result in a company having to constantly innovate on a technical level just to stand still. This necessitates the commitment of significant amounts of R&D money with no guarantee of an acceptable return on investment (ROI) “Technological invention doesn’t guarantee the creation of value in the marketplace” (Provoost in Schofield 2007). Indeed research by Shaw & Ivens (2005) indicates that 85% of senior business leaders agree that differentiating solely on the traditional differentials is no longer a sustainable business strategy.

This business model is further challenged by an increasingly affluent society with expectations of good quality, competitive price, comprehensive functionality, consistent reliability and so on. The traditional, practical, differentiators are becoming unsustainable and are being supplemented with emotional differentiators in the form of customer experiences which aim to exceed customer expectations “success will be bestowed upon those who are able to embrace and deliver compelling and emotionally engaging customer experiences” (Mohan Kharbanda in Shaw and Ivans 2005).

The differences between products and services are seen and experienced as brands (de Chernatony 2001). Regardless of whether the product is tangible or intangible, the traditional brand differentiators are now supplemented by the addition of customer experience to satisfy the customers’ practical and emotional expectations. Therefore, in order to acquire and maintain differentiation in the marketplace, companies must innovate on a practical and emotional level in order to develop a branding strategy that exceeds the customer’s physical and emotional expectations. An experience centric agenda can add value to a product or service which can then command a premium price. The Commerce Bank in the US, for example, achieved a phenomenal rate of growth in the US although it offered the worst rates nationally for all its services. Rather than offering attractive rates it concentrated on delivering meaningful customer service (Salter 2002).

With the acknowledgement of the power of emotion and experiences to positively differentiate the brand has come the realisation that these experiences can, and should, be carefully designed. PEER (2006) identified “a strong correlation between successful outcomes and the use of robust customer

experience design methods”. A vast and exciting new market is thus opening up in which designers and design researchers can play a leading role in developing and shaping.

2. DEVELOPMENTS IN INNOVATION

Innovation is not exclusive to the realm of tangible products. Intangible products or services also require innovation and benefit equally from positive customer experiences as a means of differentiation. Services now account for more than 80% of both the U.S. and E.U. economy as a result of growing demand, technological progress and globalisation. Growing income has generated increased demand whilst internet auctions, e-trade and internet newspapers are just a few examples of the services which can be delivered more easily to markets due to technological progress. Increased liberalisation and co-operation in international trade has further served to open new markets and generate demand (ECON 2006).

Services constitute the ‘tertiary’ sector after agriculture and industry (Cunningham 2006). Rubalcaba in Cunningham (2006) describes services as “not tangible or material, they are neither storable nor transportable, they are not repeatable or easy to assess and they do not generate physical assets or commerce”. ECON (2006), however, observes that services represent activities compared to products which are physical objects whilst acknowledging that products and services can, and indeed often must, be delivered together.

As a result of the breadth and complexity of the service sector, numerous attempts have been made at classification. Hipp and Grupp (2005), Gallouj and Weinstein (1997), Den Hertog and Bilderbeek (1999) and Howells and Tether (2004), for example, provide classifications based on the innovative characteristics of service companies whereas ECON (2006) describes services in terms of the activities performed by the service companies and indicates the innovation activities most related to these groups:

- *Problem solvers* solve specific problems that clients are not able to produce themselves and include, for example, law firms, engineers, architects. There is little standardisation among these services. Most innovations focus less on process and more on products such as new solutions, diagnostic tools, analytical concepts and differentiating brands. There is also a tendency to organisational innovation related to skill development and incentive schemes
- *Assisting services* take over time consuming tasks for clients such as security and cleaning and are easy to standardise. Innovations in this group are aimed towards process improvements

linked to improved worker efficiency through standardisation, quality control and scale effects

- *Digital and manual distributive services* facilitate interaction between customers. Innovations in this group focus mainly on methods of reducing transaction costs and can be obtained through process innovations and new forms of distributive services – new ways of distributing as well as what is distributed
- *Leisure services* generate values by stimulating the emotions, perceptions and experiences of the customer and represent activities such as sports, arts, restaurants and so on. Contrary to the norm, customers of these services tend not to seek stability or predictability but instead surprise. New experiences (equating to new product) are the most important innovations in this group.

Whilst indicating that there is common service characteristics, ECON (2006) acknowledge that not all services share the same characteristics:

- *Immaterial* due to them being activities
- *Inseparable* in that production and consumption is conducted simultaneously, for example hairdressing or restaurant services.
- *Hard to standardise*, for example, in services such as business consulting where close customer contact is fundamental
- *Non-durable/storable* such as airline seats or hotel beds.

However, although services now dominate the economic output of many countries, research into, and knowledge of, service innovation is still in its infancy (ECON 2006). Clearly then there is a need to generate knowledge about this market and develop tools and methodologies to service the design and implementation needs of companies engaged in service activities. As will be illustrated later, there are developments in this direction with the emergence of the so called new design disciplines of Service, Transformation, and Experience Design however, there is much to be done to build a rigorously tested and evaluated body of knowledge comparable to that which has been accumulated around traditional product development and manufacturing.

3. BRANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

The emergent specialisms of Service, Transformation and Experience design are similar in many ways. Generally speaking, the differences tend to be their target markets and the level of importance attached to service over product.

Service design has developed from the realisation that intangible services, like products, can be designed and that this design process and the subsequent implementation of the design solution must be managed (Hollins 2006). Although tangible products are often delivered with a service they tend to play a supporting role to the services that are being designed. Projects in this field generally originate from the commercial services sector.

Transformation design is closely related to service design in that it also deals with the design and delivery of services and puts the service user at the forefront of the proposition. The term Transformation Design, however, is used more to describe the application of design principles and skills to social and economic issues such as healthcare, prison reform and education (Burns, Cottam, Vanston and Winhall 2006; Heapy and Parker 2006). Burns, Cottam, Vanston and Winhall (2006) go so far as to claim that this approach could be “the key to solving many of society’s most complex problems”. Transformation projects aim to change users’ perceptions and experiences of often poorly conceived and delivered services through organisational, procedural and conceptual transformations of the service providers and the services they offer. Often the initiators of such projects are publicly funded organisations. Thus, transformation design projects may not generate increased income for the service provider but instead contribute to existing budgets stretching further.

Experience Design (Ardill, 2006) focuses on designing the whole experience of the brand with specific attention paid to possibilities for interaction between the brand and the customer. Experience projects do not necessarily attempt to directly affect sales at the point of implementation. Working on a more strategic level, these projects often aim to indirectly influence sales figures by generating brand commitment and increasing customer loyalty. If successful then new customers may be won over to the brand and existing customers may be persuaded to repurchase. Experience projects generally deal with both tangible and intangible products in all market sectors. There are, however, unresolved issues of definition and scope. Grefé (2000) for example describes Experience Design as relating to the digital realm and notes that it “recognises the imperatives of brand experience and the characteristics of the user’s experience” whilst the description of Performance Space in exhibitions (Dernie 2006) has much in common with the case studies described by Ardill (2006).

The goal of creating meaningful user experiences links Service, Transformation and Experience design. It is proposed here that this, in addition to the other common characteristics described below, allows them to be viewed as specialist sub-groups of one dominant group or design approach. Brandscape Architecture acknowledges the differences between Service, Transformation, Experience design and variations thereof but focuses on the similarities rather than the differences - the common

goals, activities and outcomes rather than the sector oriented anomalies. This is not to say that the specialisms are not important. Rather, it attempts to take a holistic view of this design space in order to accommodate and assimilate emergent design strands in this field regardless of their title into a generic, understandable whole. Although our research is still in its early stages, the results of studies so far, based on an extensive literature review coupled with market observation through direct involvement in relevant commercial projects, indicate that Brandscape Architecture can be characterised as being:

1. Concerned with generating meaningful customer experiences
2. Concerned with the emotional
3. User centred
4. Holistic
5. Design led
6. Cross disciplinary

It is acknowledged that a rigorous programme of testing and evaluation is required in order to elaborate and validate these observations and it is proposed that this will form the basis of our on-going research agenda.

3.1. CONCERNED WITH GENERATING MEANINGFUL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

de Chernatony (2001) describes brands as the consumers, (or customers') experiences which, although complex entities, can be simplified to the level of considering them as clusters of functional and emotional values. Furthermore, Shaw & Ivens (2005) define a customer experience as "an interaction between an organisation and a customer. It is a blend of an organisation's physical performance, the senses stimulated and emotions evoked, each intuitively measured against customer expectations across all moments of contact."

Meaningful brand experiences are the result of customers' physical and emotional expectations being exceeded and are fundamental to the concept of Brandscape Architecture. Generating meaningful brand experiences is by far the most important characteristic as it is the result that all the other characteristics combine to realise. As a practical tool to aid the development of meaningful experiences, Shaw & Ivens (2005) propose mapping the moments of contact as the customer travels through the experience. In so doing it is possible to plot the stages of the experience and the corresponding expectations which enable the development of a plan to exceed the expectations.

3.2. CONCERNED WITH THE EMOTIONAL

The common denominator in experiences is a high emotional impact (Boswijk, Thijssen and Peelen 2005). The power of emotions to differentiate, therefore, should not be underestimated. Data about the environment, for example what a restaurant looks like or how the food tastes, is gathered and transmitted to the customer via the senses. Stimulation of the senses which influence the emotions can be orchestrated to enable greater predictability in the customer experience. Berry, Wall and Carbone (2006) describe this as clue management and categorise the clues as:

- Functional clues, relating to the functionality or reliability of the product or service (how well it works), which primarily influence customers' cognitive perceptions.
- Mechanic clues relating to tangible things (objects and environments) that are perceived by the customer and which provide tangible evidence of competence, values and standards. Mechanic clues influence the emotional perceptions.
- Humanic clues which emerge from the behaviour of the experience provider, for example tone of voice or level of enthusiasm. Humanic clues, like mechanic clues, influence customers' emotional perceptions.

Although customer experiences are a blend of each of the clues, research has indicated (Berry, Wall and Carbone 2006) that while mechanic clues are an important source of information for the customer; humanic clues nevertheless dominate customers' emotional perceptions. Many companies, therefore, now employ people based on their emotional intelligence which Goleman (1996) defines as "the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships".

3.3. USER CENTRED

In order to design meaningful customer experiences it is necessary to understand the customer, the existing brand experience and the expected brand experience. In addition to a knowledge and appreciation of human behaviour, specific knowledge of the customer must be acquired. There are a number of sources for gathering information on customers which help to determine their expectations such as market research and employee feedback. However, direct involvement with the customer, particularly at the beginning or fuzzy front end, can be invaluable for generating and evaluating new ideas. User participation at every stage of development creates customer insights

which can help avoid costly miscalculations. In order to reveal information about customers' emotional responses to specific clues, Shaw & Ivens (2005) suggest performing a customer service audit where customer expectations (both physical and emotional) are plotted against the various stages of the customer experience.

3.4. HOLISTIC

Customer experiences are the embodiment of the brand measured over all touchpoints and stretch from the stage at which expectations about the brand are set through pre-purchase and purchase interactions to consumption and post experience review. They are often composed of services and products delivered over time and evaluated together to form the customer's perception of their personal customer experience.

Using the language and methodologies of semiotics allows us to extend the vocabulary at our disposal with which to discuss customer experiences and provides tools with which analyse and thus better understand customer experiences and their complex relationships across the whole brandscape. Chandler (2002) tells us that "we live in a world of signs and we have no way of understanding anything except through signs and the codes into which they are organised". Signs can be words, pictures, sounds, symbols, objects, gestures, or "anything which 'stands for' something else" (Chandler 2002). Codes organise signs into meaningful systems of signifiers and signifieds, the rules and conventions of which must be understood in order for meaningful communication to occur.

The service clues described by Berry, Wall and Carbone (2006) can thus be described as codes of customer experience composed of signs - signifiers and their related denotative and connotative associations – which, when read syntagmatically (sequentially or in the form of spatial relationships) and/or paradigmatically by the customer, communicates the brandscape proposition.

3.5. DESIGN LEAD

Business has been slow to realise the benefit of good customer experiences to their product or service offerings and even slower to appreciate that designers are ideally suited to design and co-ordinate these experiences. Business professionals are now beginning to recognise the value of design in shaping ideas and forming desirable solutions. Management consultancies are now, however, employing techniques core to design such as visualising, prototyping and experiencing things from a user's viewpoint (Burns, Cottam, Vanstone and Winhall 2006).

The design subject area with its highly skilled practitioners, therefore, is ideally positioned to take up the challenge of servicing and indeed developing this new market through practice and research. By extending the boundaries of knowledge, developing new methodologies, approaches and techniques in this marketplace, designers can be instrumental in developing its future direction “as designers we either seize the opportunity to be part of some of the most exciting and important work around, or we get left behind” (Burns, Cottam, Vanstone and Winhall 2006).

3.6. CROSS DISCIPLINARY

Due to the holistic nature of Brandscape Architecture the discovery, generation, synthesis, planning, implementation and monitoring of a brand experience is a complex process. This involves many stakeholders from numerous disciplines which cover all aspects of the brand/business/design relationship (Ardill 2006; Burns, Cottam, Vanston and Winhall 2006; Grefé 2000; Hollins 2006). The role of the brandscape designer, therefore, is similar in many respects to that of an architect. On a conceptual level the designer is charged with creating spiritual worlds which stimulate the senses and create a sense of emotional wellbeing. On a practical level the designer is concerned with the detailed planning, management and implementation of complex systems of human interaction within the brandscape. As de Chernatony (2001) notes “one of the major challenges is co-ordinating all the value-adding activities to deliver an integrated brand”. A range of skills and competencies are therefore required which allow the brandscape designer to move within these levels whilst drawing in and communicating with specialists as and when required.

4. CONCLUSION

A new and exciting opportunity for design is emerging with the changing face of the 21st century marketplace. Reliance solely on the traditional differentiators such as price, quality and reliability no longer guarantees market success. Increasingly, companies are accepting the power of emotion to differentiate their products and services leading to brand strategies that aim to deliver meaningful customer experiences. Acknowledging the significant contribution that design can make, businesses are now seeking to create holistically designed, planned and implemented product/service brandscapes. As a result of this several design ‘strains’ have emerged to service this market, which, although focussing on differing market sectors and product types, nevertheless display common characteristics. We propose Brandscape Architecture as a generic term to describe these new design approaches and list and elaborate on the characteristics which we have identified as being common to them.

This classification is by no means definitive or exhaustive but rather constitutes our initial steps towards developing the foundations of a practical model of Brandscape Architecture for the effective application in the design and analysis of brand experiences. Further research will concentrate on testing and evaluating the validity and applicability of these characterisations across the whole brandscape. Additionally, we recognise the need for adequate tools to aid in the visualisation, modelling and assessment of brandscape experiences. This is particularly challenging as much of the brandscape is composed of intangibles such as human interaction, customer experience, service products and so on. Early steps towards identifying and developing such tools have led us to an exploration of networked 3D virtual communities, the initial results of which appear very promising.

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