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Closing the Brand Gap through innovation and design

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Abstract

Existing brands already have certain products and services that generate a particular experience in the mind of custome. However, distortions exist between what the brands what to communicate and what the customer perceive referred to as the Brand Gap.

This paper presents a tool to identify innovation and design opportunities through the Brand Gap.The tool aims to help companies narrowing the gap between brand values and customer experience through innovation and design.

The study explores different levels for opportunity identification (short, medium and long term) and it suggests that to take an experience perspective, brands can start identifying opportunities based on the Brand Gap.

1. Introduction

Pine and Gilmore [1] through the theory of The Experience Economy, present evidence and case studies on the importance of experiences in the development of value proposition. This theory suggests that corporate activities, such as innovation, should introduce an experiential variable and focus on the generation of experiences that reinforce the bonds between brands and consumers.

In The Experience Economy, the brand is no longer a mere label or logo that identifies the manufacturer or owner. It has, in fact, become a strategic asset capable of generating sustainable competitive advantage [2]. So, brands like Ikea, Apple and BMW are focused on building experiences related to the brand that highlights the sensory, cognitive, emotional, social and behavioral character of consumers [3].

Interactions with touchpoints define customer experiences with a brand. Touchpoints are those points through which the customer comes into contact with the brand. For example, some Ikea touchpoints could be promotion and communication material, shopping carts or products themselves. Each touchpoint carries specific brand values to the consumer. Brand values need to be materialized into touchpoints and they should be combined so as to they deliver brand values in an optimum way [4].

However, brand values are not always properly embedded in the touchpoints owing to distortions in the Semantic Transformation Process [5]. Those distortions result in gaps between what the company wants to communicate and what the customer experiences and they are referred to the Brand Gap [6].

From the design perspective, gaps are approached as a means of innovation. Thus, innovation possibilities flourish from the Brand Gap. However, this idea has not been explored beyond its conceptual acknowledgment and the manner in which the Brand Gap is integrated, defined and visualized in the innovation process is as yet unexplored.

This paper pursues a dual purpose. First, we present the Brand Gap visualization tool and second, we test the usability and effectiveness of that tool for innovation through a case study.

2. Brand Gap

Neumeier [6] uses the Brand Gap concept to describe the gap between what the brand wants to achieve and what the

consumer experiences, in other words, the gap between what the brand wants to be, show, and communicate and the actual experience that consumers live.

The Semantic Transformation Model defined by Karjalainen [5] leads to the idea that the Brand Gap encompasses all the inconsistencies occurring between the brand and consumer perception (Fig. 1). The model presents design as a central axis between the brand and the consumer perception. As a brand is abstract and intangible by nature, design is used as a means of transforming abstract ideas into explicit forms [4]. Firstly, brand values are defined as specific tangible elements through design. Then, the interactions with those elements define the customer experience and their perception related to the brand.

The model highlights several distortions. The distortion occurs in two phases (i) between the brand and design and (ii) between design and the customer perception. The first distortion occurs when brand values are embedded in the touchpoints. Brand values, have to be translated into design characteristics, such as color, form, material and technology. Later, these characteristics are converted into touchpoints, which are ultimately the points of contact between the brand and the consumer. The second distortion is due to the difference between the customer interpretation of the touchpoints and the reaction expected by the designer. The consumers while interacting with different touchpoints of the entire experience assign values and meanings, based on what they are seeing, listening to or touching [4]. For example, a black product might have different connotations such as elegance, exclusivity, loneliness or sadness.

From a design point of view, analyzing the Brand Gap and understanding the reason behind its existence is an important part of the process [7]. This research carried out at the beginning of the design process is used as a source of inspiration and it aims to define future opportunities [8].

Therefore, Brand Gap shows innovation potential and provides a new perspective for innovation in The Experience Economy.

When designing products and services, several authors highlight the importance of aligning company´s brand values and customer experiences [4,8,9,10,11]. To the extent of the
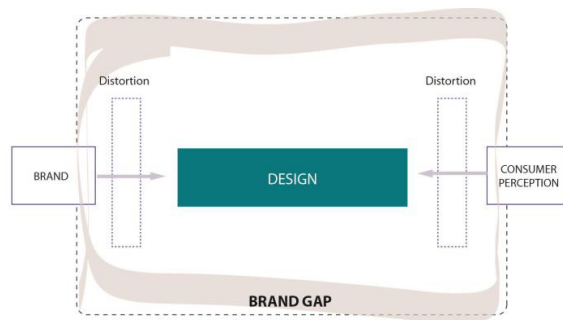

Fig. 1. Brand Gap visualization based on the Semantic Transformation Model of Karjalainen [5]

author knowledge, however, none of them integrates the Brand Gap as a source to find new design and innovation opportunities.

3. Brand Gap visualization

Conceptually, the Brand Gap flourishes when the brand characteristics are compared to the consumer experience. However, in practice, it is not so simple. What the brand communicates is a general concept while what the consumer experiences is based on specific interactions.

Brands make use of brand values to define what they want to communicate. Brand values are characteristics that define how an organization is, how it works and how it relates to their consumers [10]. Brands, especially strong ones, embody a relatively small set of attributes which are specific and distinct to that brand [5].For example, the values of Ikea are: togetherness, cost-consciousness, respect and simplicity [12]. These values are general attributes which guide and encompass the activity of the company.

Brand values are embedded in touchpoints throughout design. Design helps to turn abstract ideas into specific solutions [4].Therefore design explores and defines how brand values need to be transformed to shape each touchpoint and orchestrates them coherently.

The experience evoked by brand related stimuli is a set of sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioral responses evoked by brand related touchpoints [3]. Each time the consumer interacts with a touchpoint a response is generated. Brand does not interact with consumers through a single element, but it does so through multiple interactions over time [4]. During an experience, the consumer can interact with more than one touchpoint. The sum of those interaction over time is the perceived experience.

The visualization of the Brand Gap needs to (1) identify brand values and to understand how they have been defined as touchpoints, (2) to explore and to understand the experience evoked by consumers and (3) to extend it over the time .

3.1. Brand values and touchpoints

Transforming brand values into touchpoints (1) goes beyond providing a specific aesthetic related to the brand logo.

Each touchpoint needs to be designed so us to it delivers brand values in an optimum way. Thus, design helps to transform brand values into specific touchpoints. To do that, it relies on the following five design layers [4].

- Sensory layer (Aesthetic) refers to the aesthetic aspects.
- Behavioral layer (Interaction) explores the type of interaction that customers have with the touchpoints.
- Functional layer (Performance) meets the functional attributes and benefits provided by each touchpoint to customers.
- Physical layer (Construction) describes technologies, materials and processes used.
- Mental layer (Meaning) defines the meaning and emotions evoked by each touchpoint

3.2. Customer experience

Brakus et al. [4] defined brand experience as sensations, feelings, and cognitions evoked by a stimulus associated with a brand behavior. To visualize what the consumer actually experiences (2) in relation to the brand, they propose exploring four dimensions of the experience: Sensory, Affective, Behavioral and Intellectual.

- Sensory dimension is related to the aesthetic and sensory perception of the customer, based on the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell).
- Affective dimension is associated with customer feelings and emotions about a brand. So, this dimension attempts to provide the type of emotion related to a brand such as joy, fun, pride, nostalgia or frustration.
- Behavioural dimension is about consumer behaviour patterns in the long term and imitation of models and lifestyles.
- Intellectual dimension referred to experiences which encourage consumers to think, arousing their curiosity and creativity.

3.3. Experience over time

Each experience is a sequence of interactions and actions over time (3) and, therefore, time is a key factor in designing experiences. When analyzing an experience three key timing sequences are highlighted: Pre, During and Post [13]. In the case of Ikea, for example, the Pre sequence would be to get inform through catalogues and web pages. The During sequence might be the moment where the customer parks the car, enters the store, walks around the showroom, selects and buys the product. The Post sequence might be the moment where the customer goes home, unpacks the product and assembles the product.

What the customer experiences through touchpoint interaction will define what customers think and feel about the organization and how they understand and envision the brand [14]. Therefore, defining and visualizing the Brand Gap requires understanding how brand values are integrated in the five design layers, and comprehending the experience based on the four dimensions and to extend it over time.

3.4. Visualization tool

Fig. 2. presents an outline of the Brand Gap visualization tool. The aim of the tool is to clearly show the Brand Gap and thus to identify innovation opportunities.

The Brand Gap visualization tool has the following structure. The brand touchpoints based on the design layers proposed by Roscam [4] are located on the Brand Line. The Customer Line represents the customer insights by using the brand experience dimensions defined by Brakus et al. [3]. The timeline shows the different sequences over time. A final comparison leads to Brand Gap definition.
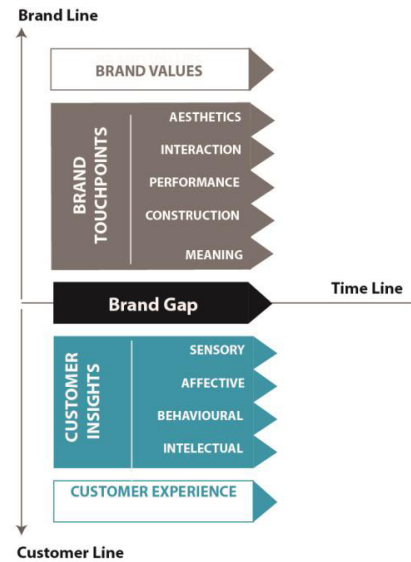

Fig. 2. Brand Gap visualization tool.

4. Case study context and methodology

The case study analyzed the usability and effectiveness of Brand Gap visualization tool. To do this, we developed it in cooperation with an industrial company designing and manufacturing mobility solutions. This company has been focused on technology as a means of competitiveness and differentiation. In light of the current economic situation, the company is taking into consideration the customer experience to find new product solutions.

The tool was applied in a research project context. The goal of the project was to identify new product solutions. The tool application lasted 4 months and was implemented by a designer, with the support of a researcher (co-author of this paper), design consultant and a member of the company.

5. Case study development

The necessary information was gathered through semi-structured interviews from both consumers/users and internal staff from company. Face to face interviews were conducted and they were of duration of 45- 60 minutes. To simplify and facilitate the use of the tools, one touchpoints per sequence was analyzed.
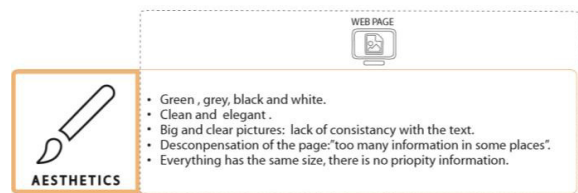

Fig. 3. Example of the Brand Line

The examples that are shown in this paper are focused on the search sequence of the experience and on a specific touchpoint which is the web page. The Brand Gap visualization tool was developed in the following order.

(1) We defined sequences over the time. In this particular case, three specific sequences were defined: Search, Service and Use.

(2) We analyzed the relevant touchpoints in each sequence based on the layers: Aesthetic Interaction, Performance, Construction and Meaning. Fig. 3. shows an application example.

(3) We filled Customer Line based on feedback obtained from the customer and user interviews (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Example of the Customer Line.

(4) To identify the Brand Gap, we compared the information visualized in the Brand Line with the Customer Line over the time. The disparities obtained were formulated as problems. As results of Brand Gap definition, we obtained a list of problems listed in Table 1.

Finding ideas to solve those problems helped to identify innovation opportunities. Some ideas might drive small improvement, for instance, to reduce technical information. Some others might drive bigger challenges such as to design apps that allow the user to interact with the mobility solution.

Table 1. Example of the Brand Gap

The brand value is visualized in a single section and it has no impact across the entire web page
There is little information that impacts in the behavioural and intellectual layer related to the brand value
Too much technical information, little brand perception in the first layer
Interaction with the web page is confusing in certain points

6. Case study results and discussion

We used a semi-structured interview to analyze the usability and effectiveness of the Brand Gap visualization tool. The interview lasted 30 minutes and the questions were the followings.

- Question1: How easy / difficult is it to understand the tool? Why

- Question2: How easy / difficult is it to apply the tool? Why?

- Question3: What level of clarity does the Brand Gap output have? Why?

- Question4: Does the tool support the identification of innovation opportunities? Why?

Analysis of the interviews showed that the user found the tool easy to use and that the structure was clear. It should be noted however, that the user was a designer and the input the tool requires are concepts well known in the field of design.

Despite the initial simplicity, the tool showed some difficulties.

Gathering information was time consuming since the tool was designed to consider all the touchpoints involved in the brand experience. Therefore, to visualize the entire brand experience might be complex and laborious. For example, when the experience includes a lot of sequences and touchpoints, the complexity of the tool increases exponentially. That is why, if the brand has different services, offerings and users, it is recommended to work them separately.

The design layer of Meaning was very abstract, unintuitive and difficult to describe. They assumed that meaning was equal to brand values. So Meaning layer can be difficult for those companies that are not familiar with the field of experiences.

The customer interviews questions did not elicit enough information to describe the behavioural and intellectual dimension. For example, with questions such as what do you think....?, How do you behave...? and, How do you react? Consumers are not usually able to articulate specific answers. Therefore, it is appropriate to combine the interviews with observations.

The Brand Gap gathered problems related the touchpoints, touchpoints orquestation and the experience. Finally, innovation proposals emerged from those problems. Some of them showed possibilities to implement in the short –medium term as touchpoints redesign, while others proposed radical innovation possible to implement in the long term, such as the redesign of the overall experience.

7. Conclusion

The Brand Gap visualization tool provides designers with guidelines to activate brand´s innovation potential through the identification of the Brand Gap. The tool organizes the information so as to compared at the same level, information related to what the brand wants to communicate with to what the consumer perceives, and to identify gaps that give rise to innovation opportunities.

The tool explores in detail the touchpoints and the consumer feelings and reactions, that is why the Brand Gap has more than one variant. Thereby, the innovation opportunities identified have different natures and they can be classified in short, medium and long term.

In the short term, the different existing brand touchpoints themselves are a source of innovation possibilities. Companies can consider if they facilitate the communication and reinforcement of the brand values. Companies can also consider designing other brand touchpoints or redesigning the existing ones for more consistency with brand values.

As a medium term goal, companies can focus on orchestration. As different types of orchestration exist, different orchestrations can be designed to promote a proper and significant flow of brand values through customer experience.

In the long term, innovation opportunities can be visualized regarding the type of customer experience. This analysis level can help the company to focus on the main characteristics of the customers experience actually live and in the shape and content that ideal experiences might have.

By understanding brand values and how, using design, they are transformed in touchpoints, companies can identify the reasons behind the emotions and feelings expressed by the customer. Therefore, companies will be able to define and consider Brand Gap over time in order to find innovation opportunities that will let them compete in The Experience Economy context.

8. Limitations and future research

The evaluation of the tool shown in this paper has limitations, both in terms of number cases and downstream /long term effect. The study is based on qualitative exploratory research, thus the external validity (generalizability) of the findings cannot be assessed. Future research could improve our findings through insights from additional case studies.

In addition, the results are context dependent since the model was tested in the research project context. This should therefore be considered an initial evaluation of the tool, requiring further case studies development and verification.

Acknowledgements

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