

Addressing the Gap Between Brand Strategy and Service Design: Developing and Communicating the Brand Experience Proposition

1. Introduction

Customer experience has emerged as the leading arena for competition, being suggested as the main path to the development of competitive advantages in the global market (Gentile et al., 2007). As the notion that *the experience is the brand* has grown, Service Design has attracted attention for its ability to design superior customer experiences. Yet, little has been said about the role the brand plays in the Service Design process, and in the management of the customer experience. As Munchbach (2014) notices, there is a gap between the functions that manage the brand, and those responsible for the development of the interactions through which the customers experience the brand.

A consequence of this gap is that multiple service offerings have been designed with little to no regard to the experience the brand wants to deliver, and the meanings it wants to convey. In many aspects, it is as if customer experience has been conceptualized as existing in a spectrum from good to bad, having no relation to the brand. However, brand and customer experience cannot be separated; the brand should inform the Service Design process, enabling the second to deliver the first. Because the brand emerges in the negotiations between the meaning proposition made by the organization (Batey, 2008), and the customers' collective perception (Merz et al., 2009), the brand proposition must be materialized in the offerings and service interactions.

Building on the concept of Semantic Transformation (Karjalainen, 2004), this paper understands that the brand is translated into the enablers of the customer experience during the Service Design process (Clatworthy, 2012). As such, for the Semantic Transformation to occur correctly, it is necessary that the design teams have adequate brand input. Yet, research has shown that contemporary brand manuals are not adequate for the development of service offerings, as they are either focused on the corporate identity, defining the brand through very broad and under-defined values; or too restrictive, describing the design of an specific interactions, making adaptation to new settings difficult (Motta-Filho, 2012).

This paper introduces a process for translating brand strategy into an experiential expression of the brand, and a tool to convey the Brand Experience Proposition to the teams responsible for the development of the new service offerings and interactions – namely, the Brand Experience Manual. In doing so, the gap between Brand Strategy and Service Design is addressed, facilitating the development of brand-relevant customer experiences.

In the next section, the relation between Brand and Customer Experience is explored. After that, a customer experience-oriented approach to branding (i.e. Designing for Brand Experience) is proposed, defending the need for a structured Brand Experience Proposition. Next, the methodology used in the research is presented, followed by the process used to define the Brand Experience Proposition, and the structure for communicating it (i.e. Brand Experience Manual). Lastly, a brief discussion reflects on the research outcomes, and the final section concludes the paper proposing an agenda for future research.

2. Branding and Customer Experience

Customer experience refers to the customers' internal and subjective responses emerging from an interaction with any type of representation from the organizations value proposition (Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Helkkula et al., 2011). These responses are the outcome of the experiences of the Living Self¹ – the customer as they are in the moment of the interaction –, informing the memories of the Remembering-Self – the one responsible for the decision-making (Kahneman, 2011). Regardless of intention, there always is an experience to the customer. Because these experiences inform the customers' perception of the brand, every organization is branding, whether the fact is acknowledged, and even if the process is not intentionally managed (Ostrum et al., 1995).

For the customers, the brand represents the sum of their past experiences with the organization – it can be seen as a mental network of meanings associations linked to the brand name (Keller, 2013). From the company perspective, the brand is a meaning proposition: “a cluster of functional and emotional values that enable a promise to be made about a unique and welcomed experience” (de Chernatony, 2010, p. 17). The brand thus exists in the intersection between the organization's proposition, and the customer's perceptions; it is both a source and a repository of meanings (Sherry, 2005). Yet, as brand value is grounded on the customer's perceptions (Keller, 2013), it is essential that the organization convey the brand meanings through the qualities and characteristic of its offerings.

It is through the experiences of the Living-Self that the customers decode the meanings embedded by the organization in the brand manifestations (i.e. offerings and interactions). As Krippendorff (1989, p.12) notes, “people do not perceive pure forms, unrelated objects, or things as such but as meanings”. In that sense, the experience of the Living Self mediates the meanings proposition made by the brand and the customers' perceptions of the brand. Consequently, customer

¹ To avoid confusion with the word *experience*, this paper uses the term *Living Self* to refer to what Kahneman (2011) calls *Experiencing Self*.

experiences are not merely *good* or *bad*, but the outcome of the customer's interpretation of the meaning proposition communicated through the offerings (Batey, 2008).

The role of Customer Experience for Branding is thus very clear – it delivers the brand promise to the customer, creating the meaning associations that generate value for the brand. Conversely, the Brand can inform Customer Experience Management practices (Schmitt, 2003) by helping to set the targeted customer experience (Carbone and Haeckel, 1994). As the reflex of the customers' perceptions resulting from their interactions with the manifestations of the meaning proposition made by the organization, the brand carries information about existing relationships, business strategy and internal capabilities (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Grönroos, 2007; Keller, 2013).

3. Designing for Brand Experience

Managing the customer experiences is a central aspect to the development of a successful brand (Meyer and Schwager, 2007). As a conceptual meaning proposition, the brand must be manifested through marketing actions in order to convey its proposition to the customers. For Karjalainen (2004), this process of translating qualitative brand descriptions into value-based design features is termed Semantic Transformation. Clatworthy (2012) has adapted the Semantic Transformation to the context of services; in the Brand Megaphone model (ibid.) the Brand DNA is translated into a Service Personality, which is then communicated through the service Touch-Points, Tone of Voice, and Behaviors.

Service Design has emerged as a designerly approach to the development of new services (Manzini, 2009). As a design discipline, Service Design adopts a “solution-focused cognitive strategies, employing abductive or appositional thinking and using non-verbal modeling media” (Cross, 2010, p.100). Service Design is a user-centered, multi-disciplinary and collaborative approach, which integrates stakeholders from different silos into iterative processes that rapidly prototype and test new concepts through the use of visual and and enactive practices (Kimbell, 2009; Stickdorn, 2010).

Yet, Service Design fails to recognize the indeterminacy of services as design objects (Sangiorgi, 2012). Services only exist in the interaction with the customers, before that there is only potential for value co-creation; in other words, the organization does not provide a service, but the prerequisites that enables the services to take place during the interactions with the customers (Edvardsson and Olsson, 1996). Because value is co-create in the use context, and is phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary, all that can be offered is a value proposition (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). In that sense, the organization must focus on the development of the enablers of the service interactions, integrating the resources that will support the value co-creation (ibid.).

Another limitation of Service Design is that it lacks a stronger link to the business strategy (Mager, 2009); however, as argued in the previous section, the brand can provide this link. Using the brand proposition to inform the Service Design can enable a customer experience oriented approach to branding, supporting the development of value propositions that deliver brand-aligned experiences. Yet, adequate brand usability is an issue; the brand must be translated into an experiential expression that can be used by the design teams (Motta-Filho, 2012). Designing for Brand Experiences require a clearly structured description of the experience the brand wants to deliver to its customers – that is, a Brand Experience Proposition.

4. Research Methods and Process

This paper reports on the development from a project that explored “how to use Service Design to facilitate the translation of brand strategy into customer experience”. Due to the nature of the problem – that is, a *how to* type of question – a research by design approach (Sevaldson, 2010) was taken. After initial studies, the concept of Semantic Transformation (Karjalainen, 2004) was used to frame the problem (Dorst, 2010), and an action research strategy (Susman and Evered, 1978) was adopted to find *how to the translate the brand strategy into an experiential expression that can be used to inform the teams responsible for the development of the offerings and interactions through which the customer experience the brand*, bridging the gap between brand strategy and Service Design.

The design interventions begun on the spring of 2013, and ended by summer of 2014 – throughout this process, four iterations where conducted with four different brands from two organizations. The initial objective was to create a tool to convey the Brand Experience Proposition made by the organization. However, it was noticed early in the process that the organization didn’t know what experience their brands were proposing; as such, the research took a step back also developing a process for defining the Brand Experience Proposition, on the top of finding a way to convey it. In the following sections, the process for defining, and the tool for communicating the Brand Experience Proposition (i.e. Brand Experience Manual) will be detailed and explained.

5. Brandslation Process

Brandslation is the process through which the brand strategy is translated into the Brand Experience Proposition; structured as a Service Design approach, its is a multidisciplinary and collaborative framework that builds on insights from customers, employees and the organization (i.e. brand and business strategy). The Brandslation process is composed of two phases: the first is concerned with gathering insights, informing the second phase, which develops the Brand Experience

Proposition and structure the Brand Experience Manual (Figure 1). In this section, the Brandslation process will be described as a workshop-based framework, making the description more concise – yet, the focus will be on the insights generated, and not on the tools and processes used.

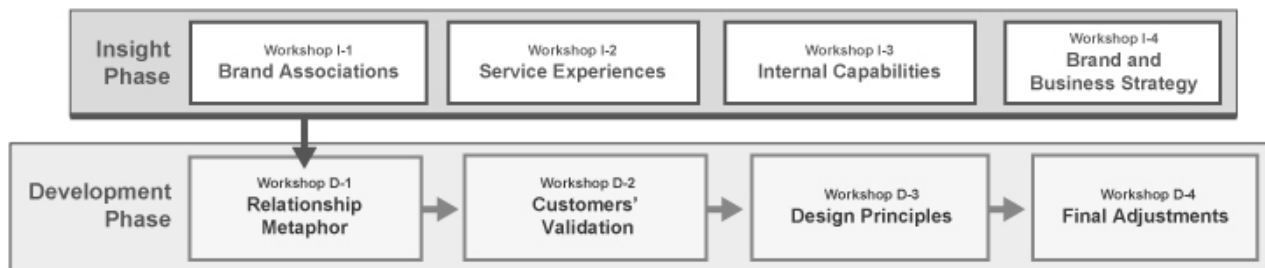


Figure 1: The Brandslation process

- *Workshop I-1 – Brand Associations*: The goal of the first workshop is to understand how the customers see the brand, and what meanings they associate with the brand name. As the brand value is grounded on the customers’ perceptions (Keller, 2013), understanding the way in which the brand proposition is interpreted by the customers is essential in order to create an experience proposition that is grounded on a balance between organization’s intentions and reality.

- *Workshop I-2 – Service Experiences*: This session aims at understanding the service experience through the eyes of the customers. As different customers attribute value to different aspects of the service, it is important to understand where value is created. Also, because the service offering is the means through which the customers experience the brand, knowing how they decode the meanings embedded in the interactions can yield some relevant insights.

- *Workshop I-3 – Internal Capabilities*: The employees – both of the front and the back offices – are key stakeholders in the value co-creation process; yet, they do not work alone. An organization will only deliver the experience it can – the internal capabilities, and the incentives that coordinate it greatly influence the customer experience. This workshop focuses on understanding the corporate culture, and the systems and processes that support the personnel.

- *Workshop I-4 – Brand and Business Strategy*: The goal of the Brandslation process is to convey the existing brand proposition as an experiential expression, and not to change it. In order to support the development a Brand Experience Proposition that is not only desirable, but also feasible and viable, this workshop gathers insights into the business strategy and the brand identity.

- *Workshop D-1 – Relationship Metaphor*: This is the most important session of the entire process. In this session the Insights gathered in the previous phase will be translated into the Brand Experience Proposition through the development a metaphor for relationship the organization wants to foster with the customer. As the relationship is the outcome of the customer’s experience with the

brand, by expressing the desired relationship the organization is actually expressing the experiences they want to deliver over time.

The workshop should begin by building a persona for the brand by framing the insights from the previous phase in light of the Brand Identity, and then associating adjectives back to the persona. For example, the brand may seem to be funny and a bit socially awkward in the way it communicates to the customers; or it can appear as an enabler of the customers' choices – the core of the brand's offerings is to make packages that easy for the customer to chose. As the this brand persona becomes more clear, it should be put in a relationship with a persona for the customer, and a story for the two of them drawn.

- *Workshop D-2 – Customer's Validation:* Because the Brand Experience Proposition is structured as a Relationship Metaphor, it is important to see if (1) the desired relationship is relevant for the customers, and (2) if the expression of the metaphor is working. This workshop is an opportunity to use customers' insights to refine the Relationship Metaphor. At this point, the greatest challenge is to ensure that the customers' ideas do not overrule the process – there has been a structured approach this far, and it is important to keep a good balance between existing research and new insights.

- *Workshop D-3 – Design Principles:* The Brandslation process aims at translating the brand into an experience proposition, but it is also meant to inform the Brand Experience Manual, ensuring that the knowledge developed over the process is not lost. After the Relationship Metaphor, the Design Principles are the most relevant expression of the Brand Experience Proposition, informing the user of the manual what must be consistently done over the design in order to enable the desired experiences to emerge. The concept aims to close the gap between the current and the desired customer experience over the service journey – by clustering the actions necessary to bridge this gap, this workshops creates the Design Principles.

- *Workshop D-4 – Final Adjustments:* It is often the case that the Design Principles need a review, and the Relationship Metaphor need some final adjustments as the process reaches conclusion. This workshop provided the opportunity to assess what has been done, and to discuss the ideas for the third element of the Brand Experience Manual, the Service Moments. Service Moments are narratives that describe how the customers' experience with the service journey would ideally be. Developing these narratives is an opportunity to (1) see what has been done so far through another angle, and (2) to discuss the final adjustments with the company's stakeholders.

6. The Brand Experience Manual

The Brand Experience Manual is a tool meant to communicate the Brand Experience Proposition to the teams responsible for the development of the offerings and interactions through which the

customers experience the brand. One of the first challenges faced in the development of the Brand Experience Manual was to find a way to convey experiences, and consequently, it had to be developed through the same process used to structure and communicate its expression. The parallel development of the Brand Experience Proposition and Brand Experience Manual was a necessity, and one couldn't be achieved without the other. Structurally, the Brand Experience Manual is divided into three parts: The Relationship Metaphor, the Design Principles and the Service Moments.

- *The Relationship Metaphor* conveys the Brand Experience Proposition by portraying the relationship between a *brand persona* and a *customer persona*. This includes a rich description of who each of these personas are, how they met, and who they are to each other. For example, in a project developed in cooperation with a mid-sized telecom brand in Northern Europe, the brand persona was described as the older college graduate that supported the Jane (the customer persona) in her first days in college; although this happened 5 years ago (the customer segment was young professional), this relationship kept stable, and they see each other more or less the same way.

The brand persona was described as being: Quirky and Charming; Giving Choices; Supportive; Dependable; and Fair and Reasonable. Yet, it was acknowledged that these traits do say do much by themselves, so a more thorough explanation of what each of these traits meant was given. For example, Fair and Reasonable, in the context of the brand persona meant taking responsibility for ones mistake, letting little things pass, but not being over protective. This is because the brand was positioned as a low-cost competitor, and although small mistakes could be tolerated, the brand was not aiming at a full service, overarching experience.

- *The Design Principles* prescribe actions that can facilitate the design of new offerings and interactions with the Brand Experience Proposition embedded in it. The goal is to provide a sort of checklist that can be easily used in the design process – if all, or at least most of the principles are followed the new service should be able to foster the desired experience. In the same project with the Northern European telecom, two of the Design Principles were “Empower the Customers to Stay Control” and “Provide Multiple Choices”. Although these seem as rather generic concepts, they are specifically suited for the strategy and the context in which the organization was inserted: their offerings needed to be more diverse, and the customers able to make the decisions by themselves. These principles were found not on best practices books, but by observing the problems in the customer journey, and exploring ways to bridge the gap between the current and the desired experience.

- *The Service Moments* aims at creating a representation of the desired experience through a narrative. The goal is to create a proxy where the users of the manual can *experience the experience* they should aim at delivering. The Service Moments are structured as sub-journeys within the greater

process (i.e. service journey) – that is, a moment in the service. For example, in the process of becoming a client, the customer might go through a first encounter, and then making the right choice, before being welcomed on board. Stories narrating this process can help the audience grasp what is the experience the brand want to create, making the Brand Experience Proposition easier to understand.

7. Discussion

The Brand Experience Manual, and the process for defining the Brand Experience Proposition were consistent with the initial goals of the research – that is, *translating the brand strategy into an experiential expression that can be used to inform the design teams*. The methods and tools used in the Brandslation process not only provided a different sort of insight, they also helped the organization reflect upon their brand, who they are, and what experience they ant to deliver. The assessments made through semi-structured interviews and de-briefing sessions were mostly positive, with exception to some criticism over the Design Principles (in the Brand Experience Manual), which were adjusted later, resulting in the format presented in this paper.

The main limitation of the Brand Experience Manual observed during the research project was implementation. A follow-up study showed that the partner organization didn't manage to successfully translate the Brand Experience Proposition into actual offerings and interactions. This issue can be traced back to the lack of organizational capabilities in the area of Service Design. This also points to a limitation of the Brand Experience Manual, which is not adequate for all audiences, but for people trained in the tradition of a design discipline (Cross, 2010).

8. Conclusion

This paper has presented a (Brandslation) process for defining and a tool (Brand Experience Manual) for communicating an experiential expression of the brand proposition (Brand Experience Proposition). The present research followed a practice-based approach, where the objective is to generate knowledge through the development of a design artifact (Saikaly, 2005) – in this case, the Brand Experience Manual. Yet, in light of the implementation issues reported in the previous section, it is suggested that further studies on how to Design for the Brand Experience Proposition are needed – that is, there is a need for a Service Design approach that incorporates the insights provided by the Brand Experience Manual. Additionally, future research should include a wider application of the Brandslation process, and the development of measurement instruments based on the Brand Experience Proposition.

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