Design as a way of bringing a service brand to life: the design dimension in brand development

In the area of marketing and branding, design and the design competencies are frequently seen as 'supplier(s)' of product attributes as something to be added to 'the core' i.e. the brand itself. As a metaphor design has been constructed as sugar coating. Even though the coat is important it does not make full use of the potential that the design methodologies represent. This paper discuss how the area of branding, specifically service branding, can make better use of the potential that design holds and the challenges it brings.

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INTRODUCTION

The concepts of 'the brand' and 'branding' has evolved from being a name given to make possible the identification of a product offering for customers (i.e. Keller, 1998, Aaker, 1996) to be constructed as 'the creation of meaning' (Strannegård, 2004) for a wide range of actors, internal as well as external ones. Brand associations and emotional values have been put forward as critical elements and the branding area as such has come to move away from the earlier product focused concepts. According to Kapferer (2000) the classical brand concept, where the brand is equal to the actual product, is no longer valid. Instead the brand is endowed with features, images and perceptions (Kapferer, 2000). This 'evolutionary process' continues today where more and more emphasis is being put on offering emotional deliverance rather than functional benefits.

A brand's perceived value(s), functional ones as well as emotional ones, are the results of an ever on-going process, which is affected by the individual organisations history, culture and structures. (Keller, 1998; Kapferer, 2004; Kotler & Armstrong, 1993) These elements are often understood as the foundations upon which the brand and its existence rest. From a brand-owners perspective this process of brand building aims at gaining highest possible brand-awareness, in order to establish clear and attractive associations and by doing so obtains increased market-shares. In turn this conquest is thought to lead to profitability and organisational prosperity. This might seem reasonable and rational, but indeed problematic. Brands are existences distinguished by being everything but rational and logical, rather the opposite. They are highly irrational abstractions whose meanings are constantly constructed and re-produced in an on-going polyloge. As such brands flee and thus they elude the will to define and bring order. This presents us with a situation where an area, which has been identified and put forward as increasingly important for every organisation, rests upon an insufficient and even failing logic.

As with beauty the brand as such does only exist in the eye of the beholder, i.e. in the mind of those interacting with it. 'All' there is prior to the physical and emotional encounter between the actors are respectively the brand owner's intentions, purposes and wishes and the consumers' hopes and dreams. Every odyssey within the branding area can be understood as quest to make the illusive and absent relevant and present. Therefore, each and every activity associated with branding starts with a wish to make oneself to be perceived as being unique in relation to competitors in one way or another. But this uniqueness as such carries little or no value; instead the values(s) are created in the interface between brand owner and consumer. Through the application of functional and emotional (added)values *relevance* is being constructed for both parties. Given today's marketing environment with an ever-increasing amount of persuasive attempts made and the amount of options

within each and every product category presents the brand owner with substantial (communicative) challenges to handle. This mediating process has in many instances come to be associated with, and therefore limited to, traditional marketing communicative activities such as advertising, PR, Sales Promotion and personal selling. (Doyle, 2002; Barrington & Pettitt, 2003). But the communication and mediation of the specific brand-offer is just one aspect. Even though consumer relevance is being constructed through communication the offer in question, and it's embedded promises, must rest upon the foundations of intra-organisational self-awareness. The value propositions and promises made need to be attached to competencies and other resources to the brand owner's disposal. Therefore we have to view the concept of brand relevance from two perspectives, internal relevance as well as external relevance. These perspectives should be seen as co-dependent and as being present in every service(brand) relationship.

THE SERVICE SECTOR AND ITS INCREASED LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE

The familiar landscape of physical products and services we all are surrounded by and interact with has during the last years come to change (Edvardsson, 2000). What can be described and understood as significant structural changes are taking place where the service sector shows significant growth whereas traditional producing industries are loosing in importance (Nutek, Årsboken 2005). Even within these traditional industries changes can be seen where the service components of their complete offers are increasing in importance. The 'boundary' separating the service from the physical product seems to have become somewhat diffused (Grönroos, 1996). As a consequence many sectors can be seen as hybrids where product and service components together construct the perceived offering and therefore it is neither possible nor useful to try to separate the two (Arnerup-Cooper & Edvardsson, 1998). Instead they can be understood as being co-dependent existences which have never been separate from each other apart from individual and collective constructions frequently reproduced (i.e. Edvardsson, 2000). In many industries competition is fierce and many manufacturers can provide products with what is being perceived as similar, or close to similar, characteristics. Consumers have come to expect the quality and technological level to be comparable between competing offers due to the development of new technologies and the diffusion of this knowledge globally. Put together this has increased competition and followers use the same technology as leaders and launch products with only minor differences.

The implication(s) of this are that functional benefits and values not longer can be seen as being the sole, or even main, determinant when consumers are evaluating and choosing from alternatives. In a market environment such as this enterprises are presented with revised challenges. Instead of a narrow focus on the tangible product and its features a broader understanding of the complete offer is needed. This presents a significant challenge to enterprises this in many ways. The once dominating logics of the production economy have been overturned by those of what can be constructed as a 'symbolic' and 'emotional' economy. In this economy symbols are being consumed (Baudrillard, 1968), not products, and these symbols often takes on the shape of brands. Therefore the service brand as a phenomenon has become increasingly important to understand and make sense of. In order to do so 'new' competencies have to be included in the making of service opportunities, one such competence is represented by the 'designer'.

The character(s) of a service

'There are only industries whose service components are greater or less than those of other industries.' (Levitt, 1972)

The service is said to be immaterial to its nature and is produced and consumed simultaneously. Prior to the consumption there is no service but only an opportunity, after the consumption only the traces, such as memories and physical evidence(s), are left. A number of characteristics are said to distinguish the service from a physical product. (e.g. Grönroos, 1983; Lovelock, 1991) One such is the immateriality of the service, the service is non-existent prior to consumption which makes it hard to for example judge its quality, services are also harder to try out compared to physical products due to their immateriality.

The service is produced, delivered and consumed at the same time and it can as a consequence not be mass-produced and stored for later. Furthermore, the consumer takes active part and therefore influences the process as well as the perceived result(s) through his/hers demands and behaviours. As a consequence it seems somewhat difficult to standardise and manage both the service process as such and the result(s). This means that the service can be described as heterogenic. It seems like it would be appropriate to look at this as being an act of co-production involving the supplier of the service-opportunity and the consumer of the same. Still though this excludes other actors such as fellow consumers and employees who participate in and influence the realisation of the service opportunity and as a consequence there of how this process will be interpreted and understood. This means that the service as such, the environment in which it is consumed and the foundation on which it rests is complex and full of nuances.

The relevance of the service offer is constructed in relation to its (intended) users. Still, several studies reveal that these users and consumers rarely are involved in the service development process (Arnerup-Cooper & Edvardsson, 1998). Furthermore external resources such as consultants from different fields of competence are used to only limit extent in said process. What we can see is a dominance of an internal perspective where internal actors such as specialists are the leading characters when developing service opportunities. Moreover, most companies still focuses on traditional market research techniques such as customer surveys and focus groups to capture relevant user data. (Dahlsten, 2003; Slater, 2001) But these 'traditional' techniques have attracted extensive criticism due to their perceived limitations regarding capturing latent needs of the customer. (Leonard, 1995) Instead they focus on collecting and assembling expressed needs that brings us none or little 'new' knowledge. This confirmative level of information gathering should not be underestimated, it serves its purpose, but is not adequate and sufficient regarding fostering innovativeness. Instead, the importance of observing the user in it's own environment and/or involving said user in the actual development process has more and more frequently been put forward (e.g. Prahalad, 2000). Alam and Perry (2002) argue that customer involvement should play a more important role in service development than in the development of physical products. Still, studies on consumer involvement and related techniques are mostly to be found in product development literature.(Edvardsson *et al*, 2004)

In those instances where attempts have been made to involve intended users in the development process(es) this has included forms as *co-development* (i.e. Anderson & Croca, 1993), *user involvement* (Alam, 2002) and *customer involvement* (Pitta & Franzak, 1996). But still, these strongly allied concepts (Edvardsson *et al*, 2004) focuses on what can be understood as how to manage to stretch the development process horizontally, meaning how to make users/consumers take

active part in the production process by extending the value chain. Even though this of course represents an important part in the development of relevant service opportunities other perspectives are needed to get to the very 'core' of the dilemma, i.e., the construction of understanding(s) regarding the intended user. This could be seen as an attempt to further integrate vertical levels of understanding(s) into the service development process(es).

Again, all this put together presents us with a number of challenges; it seems to be of importance to offer service opportunities with relevance to the intended user. Furthermore, the impression is given that it can be somewhat difficult to communicate the relevance and advantages of the specific service-offer. It does not let itself to be described, explained or tried which in turn accentuates the importance of concretisations, e.g. through the use of design competencies, concerning communications of the service-opportunity. (Arnerup-Cooper & Edvardsson, 1998) As discussed this level of abstraction is present, paradoxically, both physically and mentally (Bateson, 1989) which in turn logically should mean that the service exists in as many shapes as there are consumers. And, again as a consequence, as many needs to take in consideration and try to fulfil.

'The reality of a service varies according to the mind of the beholder.'(Shostack, 1977)

Every service experience can be understood as a unique construction, which scarcely reproduces itself. This, the construction and production of the service, is realised in the meeting between the service opportunity and the consumer. Its relevance and (added) values will be brought to life in this interface. The service carries what can be understood as a heavy luggage consisting of immateriality and abstraction(s), a burden containing several possibilities waiting to be explored.

THE DESIGN DIMENSIONS

If searching in a dictionary for the etymology of the verb 'design' one finds that it derives from the Latin *designare*, de and sign, i.e. to draw something with a meaning. In this sense it also means to mark or point out something (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). The dictionary also refers to 'the making of a plan or a mental scheme for something to be realised, a preliminary idea, and a project'. This relates design to planning and organising where organisation design, research design, project design and service design are common terms. In this text the characteristic(s) of a service brand represent the starting point when entering the domains of design. Through the meeting of 'disciplines' possibilities are constructed and made possible to reflect upon. Mager (2004) identifies the following possible applications of design in the service sector, i.e. service design; the development of new services, the communication of service strategies, the communication of service benefits, the creation of service desire, to analyze and optimize service interface, the integration of functionality, aesthetics and emotions and, finally, the creation of service evidence.

The relevance of a service brand

The importance of developing service-offers with relevance and value(s) for users is frequently put forward. Still it seems like these users to a large extent are being excluded from the service development process. Those, whose needs, expressed as well as un-expressed ones, are to be satisfied are not included in the making of said service development. This is limiting and problematic, resources are being spent on development and communication of offers without connections to the market, i.e. the consumers. Internal organisational logic(s) are put in the forefront instead of external influences. By acting this way organisations are risking to develop offers without relevance for their intended users (Arnerup-Cooper &

Edvardsson, 1998). By doing so providers of service opportunities are restricting themselves and their operations when excluding the user perspective in the development of said offers. This limitation leads to sub-optimisations of organisational resources and the inevitable risk of developing offers of less relevance for intended users. In those cases where consumers are being invited to participate in the development process this tends to be in the format of surveys focusing on expressed wants.

This is far from adequate. Instead, the real potential lies in trying to close in on the unspoken needs, those expressed in other ways than as verbal or written answers in questioners, such as behaviours and other expressions. One of the core concepts within the arsenal of design methodologies is the concept of user-needs and functional analysis. The understanding of the industrial designer does often comprise his/hers ability to focus on the intended user. It is not the user as such but instead his/hers actions, and non-actions, which interests the industrial design professional. Compared to the traditional marketing survey this approach presents more elaborate insights and possibilities. The concepts of visualisation and the physical manifestation represent other possibilities in bringing a service-brand to life. These areas constitute one important aspect of service design, namely the transformation from invisible to visible. But, again, this is just one of several possible applications of design competencies in the service context and to limit organisational efforts to this dimension would be unfortunate.

The contextualisation of design

All design professionals, who work in different contexts, get to use their skills in different ways due to the characteristics of the situation. The priorities and trade offs that are being made include aesthetics, functionality, ergonomics, costs and direction and are driving forces behind the design development(s) as such. This adaptability is a key component in every development process, not least in the service context. Professional skills can be seen as being limited by contextualisation as the individual good and the collective good often are constructed as antithesis. Goals are conflicting with each other and the development process including the outcome suffers. The immateriality of the service offer makes it even more crucial to establish common goal(s) attached to brand objectives to guide the development process and it's outcome(s).

Designers, and their design, should not be seen as isolated existences; instead input from 'the market' is needed. How designers obtain these insights differ from discipline to discipline, from individual to individual. The typical methods used by industrial designers are based on observations of users in action, this in order to get to know behaviours and preferences of said users. These research methods could be described as ethnographically and anthropologically inspired. This rests upon the belief that users/consumers do not know what they want in the future when asked, as in traditional surveys, they are not able to relate to the unknown in any useful way. The presented solution is a combination between user insights, knowledge in forms and trends and the constraints given by the situation. (Johansson & Svengren, 2005)

The traditional perception of design focuses and limits itself frequently to the production of physical objects; artefacts. Our purpose with this paper is to expose other possibilities for design and design competencies, in this case the development of service-opportunities. Here design methodologies represent a quite obvious resource waiting to be understood.

'.... and at this client interface the original design competency gets somewhere - namely when it comes to the question how to

make invisible service products visible in the whole process of consumption for the client as well as the employee.' (Mager, 2004)

The physicality of a service brand

Design professionals, industrial, fashion, graphic, retail etc., have got sketching as a central work method and the sketches are used as internal and external communicative tools. Through the use of the sketch as a visualisation mean abstractions in the form of ideas and opinions can take on physical form(s). When being materialised ideas become possible to relate to in new ways. Questions can be asked, discussions can take place and make new ways and the development process can get well-needed input from different actors. The sketching represents a powerful tool and, as every powerful tool, it does also impose possible restrictions by its mere presence and use. As a reflection of the sketch's enabling capacity rests its bordering consequence.

By the close relationship between designer and sketch, ideas from others who don't represent this profession can be oppressed. Not by intention but by it's somewhat intimidating nature. Furthermore, the sketch materialises itself through the designers who needs to be receptive of influences from others. If not, (s)he can become a repressive force rather than an enabling one.

The service opportunity has now started to be materialised and contextualised, which is represented by the space where it is being constructed as well other physicalities that are enabling said construction(s). In this space and interface actors are taking part in the interactive process of 'sense making'. This 'contextualisation' has developed from part an understanding of what can be understood as the possibilities and limitations of traditional marketing communications and part from the dwelling possibilities of the artefact and the collection of artefacts as makers of sense and carriers of identity. One of the possibilities that have been attributed with potential is to use the physical manifestation as a mean of communications. This, the embodiment of the service brand's identity, seems to present a powerful communication opportunity through its ability to embrace and interact. Every service is being constructed and consumed in a context, including a physical such, which affects how said service opportunity will be made sense of and understood. In the same way as the package encloses the physical product does the service-scape enclose the service opportunity (Bitner & Zeithaml, 2000). Through this enclosure the characteristics and the comparative advantages are being mediated. Bitner & Zeithaml (2000) argue that the physicality of a service provides a possibility for organisations to communicate with chosen segments of the market.

'The physical world has become a critical element in a complete branding strategy. Retail and interior environments surround all the senses with a rich, immersive expression of brand identity that can't be achieved anywhere else. (Futurebrand) creates spaces that bring our clients brands to life, with a multisensory experience that makes people want to come back for more'. (www.futurebrand.com)

This physicality is produced by use of the professional competence(s) of designers and therefore every brand-owner and provider of a service opportunity must be introduced to the nature and possibilities of design. If not, it's full potential can never be explored.

The part(s) and the whole and back again

Understanding(s) of the service opportunity are made possible by the clues which when put together constructs the opportunity in question. From here consumers form understandings concerning aspects such as service-quality,

level of competence within represented by employees and the will to pay. (Zeithaml et al, 2000) Every clue contributes to the understanding(s) of the whole and therefore becomes crucial to attend to for every provider of a service opportunity. (e.g. Berry & Parasuraman, 1991) But again, every single clue must be attached to the foundation of the brand and/or the organisation. The pattern of complexity reproduces itself and is a challenging task to make sense of.

A DUALITY PRESENTING ITSELF

Within the area of business studies a commonly presented perspective is that every organisation should place the consumer and his/her needs, in focus of its existence. Keller (1998) argues that the ability to understand the consumers needs and wants and the ability to produce commodities in accordance with these are the foundations of 'successful marketing'. This perspective is even more cherished within the design literature where the user perspective is surrounded with an aura of almost mythical character. I would argue that the understanding of users, consumer and their needs are one of the foundations of all marketing and communication, including the one labelled successful. The other part of this foundation, often placed in the shadows, is the understanding of the (service) brand's core value(s). Without this part we can never talk about effective marketing despite how well we know our consumers and their needs. Especially if effective and successful marketing and brand development is seen over time, where consumer needs alter and a somewhat stable foundation is needed. Thus a divided foundation is a necessity for every brand with aspirations on survival and prosperity in the long run. This duality exists and must be managed by every brand-owner and cannot be neglected.

A significant part of the challenge can be attributed to the dynamics to meet and if possible exceed the consumer's expectations and the will to manifest the unique brands identity in relation to the service opportunity. How can balance be found, if balance is what is to be found, between satisfying ever changing consumer needs and hold on to the core values of the brand, the soul of the brand? Consistency and consequence in relation to change and flexibility, this is a challenge for every brand-owner and designer relation to handle.
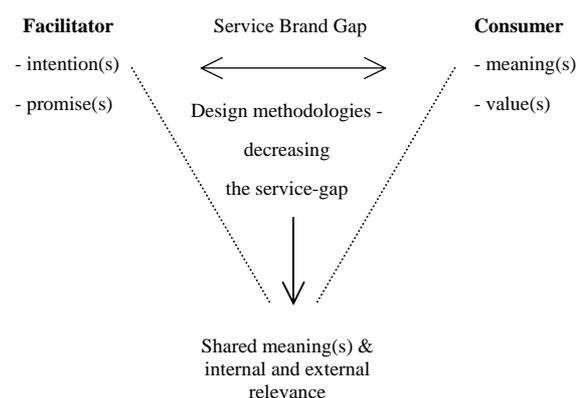

Figure 1: The Service Brand Gap (Andersson, J. 2004)

This text is an attempt to discuss the nature of the service brand and the challenges and opportunities waiting to be explored. The focus has been put on the design dimension(s) in service brand development. By narrowing the omni present gap between the providers of the service opportunity, the facilitator, and those realising and experiencing the service, the consumers, it is suggested that higher relevance and ultimately shared meaning(s) can be obtained. A perceived higher

external relevance would ultimately result in an increased will to pay to obtain and be associated with the service offer in question. The internal relevance relates to how the service opportunity connects to the foundations upon which the service brand rests; i.e. identity and core values. The two complementing perspectives on service brand relevance should be understood as being inter-dependent and constructed simultaneously. Based on preceding discussions this text claims that design methodologies enclose qualities, as discussed earlier, which can facilitate the narrowing of the service gap. But to realize this potential the individual and organisational perceptions and knowledge regarding design must be altered and increased at all levels. It is time to transform understandings of design, from being a rhetorical argument used by management, into organisational action(s) embraced by the organisation as a whole. That's when design and design competencies can develop from being perceived as (a) 'supplier(s)' of product attributes, as something to be added to 'the core' i.e. the brand itself. Instead design holds the potential to bring a service brand literally to life.

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