

The Customer Interaction Game

This paper describes a cooperation between a SME and a design researcher where research and marketing was integrated to explore new forms of customer interaction. The aim was to find a strategy for both marketing and customer feedback of new products. The feedback was analyzed on a general level and used in the further development of the products and marketing, but the analysis also aimed to find cultural differences between the customer groups and how this could affect the design. The marketing was directed to international customer groups with many language obstacles and the context of the sessions required a special kind of testing material. The sessions and the material were therefore designed as a game which both made it interesting for the customers and forced them to make decisions and remember the products as well as crossing language barriers and making it simple and intuitive to use for all.

Keywords: customer interaction, marketing, research tools, product development

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INTRODUCTION

This research is part of a sub-project, WePlay, working on design research and product design in the SmartUs project. SmartUs is an EU funded research and development program in cooperation between the University of Lapland and the Finnish playground manufacturer Lappset. Lappset Group Ltd. is a SME (Small- and Medium sized Enterprise) but a leader in the European market with daughter companies in five different countries and is exporting to more than 40 nations. The SmartUs project was started in the autumn of 2003 and involves different research programs on issues such as children and elderly, physical activity, motoric skills, learning, technology and also business studies. The WePlay designers are implementing this research into new concepts for the playground by designing playground equipment where learning, technology and physical activity is connected and where children and elderly can play and exercise together. A pilot playground will be set up during the summer of 2005 for testing and promotion and the first ready products will be launched in 2006.

Marketing as an opportunity for research

From December 2004 to April 2005, Lappset received visits from international customer groups on a weekly basis. These visits are part of the company's yearly marketing strategy which involves presenting the company and its new projects to their international customers. The groups consisted of 15 to 20 customers such as city council representatives, architects, urban planners and other decision-makers. Altogether there were about 250 visitors. The visits were prepared with a standard program with a company tour and various presentations of the company and its new products. The visits were also a unique opportunity for research.

One design researcher in the WePlay group (the author of this text) had the main responsibility for the research, planning, development and execution of the project, but the plans were developed in cooperation with the Lappset designers and the marketing department. The project started in September 2004 with the idea of marketing the new product line as well as getting the customer's feedback before the launch. The customers are decision makers and their opinions about what a playground should consist of is important for the company as the international market is such an important part of their target. Doing marketing and research at the same time might not be a very conventional approach, but in this context it fitted very well. The research aimed to find if there are data that is general to the groups and also if there are cultural variations between the countries. The information will be used in the research and development of the products and possibly in the marketing material aimed at the different countries. Because this project aimed at both doing research about the client's response to the new products as well as marketing them, the method had to be quite unique. It had to both capture the client's interest as well as giving valuable information to the research. The research method was therefore a question of design itself.

Cultural differences

For the designers in Lappset it is important to get an understanding of cultural aspects and what functional, social and aesthetical preferences might affect the design. Kitchen appliances are for instance viewed differently in Southern Europe than in Northern Europe. Whereas people in Northern Europe want to get the household chores done in a quick and preferably fun way, people in Southern Europe, women in particular, see cooking and household as something serious that holds strong traditions and their view of the products and how they should look, changes accordingly [10]. In the case of playground equipment it is important to understand what kind of notions or thoughts are important concerning children and play. Is for instance, physical activity valued more than learning new skills? Is creativity more important than exploration? These kinds of questions will always be of a personal and individual nature but how much is it guided by cultural background? One of the aims with this project is to see if these preferences are different in other cultures than in Finland and Scandinavia and how they in that case can be implemented in the design. The products differ in their content and style and at the prototype stage some are more popular than others within the company. This does not mean that the customers have the same preferences and view the products in a similar way. Finding out which of the products have the strongest appeal will give indications for future development of products and will also give an understanding of which products should have the strongest focus in the marketing strategy towards the various countries.

Research as an opportunity for marketing

It is considered to be highly important to have a strategy for incorporating customer experience into the marketing plans as customers are very much affected by their experience and impressions of the company [12]. This project is about creating an experience for the customers and designing a new form of market communication that is not a one-way communication but which allows the customers to participate and give their feedback and opinions. Letting the customers sit back and be passive observers to a presentation is not very interesting for either party, there is no real contact between the presenter and the customer and it usually leaves them with few strong impressions of what has been presented.

The presentation and the way that the research was carried out had to be different and something that would stimulate the customers to think and talk about the products. Research shows that experiential communication draws much more attention and instils a much stronger memory than more ordinary forms of communication [12]. Active participation is a central idea to communicating with users. Buchenau and Suri [2] have promoted this as a way to convey experiences about a product to the user. Their method of letting designers and users experience prototypes allows the designer and user to understand the needs, problems and opportunities together. This project tries to transfer these ideas to a later stage in the design process and to the marketing of the products. Experience is the key to a good customer interaction and this project was about creating a different experience through active participation. In Scandinavia there has already from the 1970's been a tradition for design research games or design-by-playing where active user participation is central [5]. These kinds of design research activities makes the participants involved, it is fun but it also takes the participants concerns seriously [5]. These activities have been used mainly for design development where

the participants have been involved over a longer period of time. Our project involves short time participation, but the idea of active participation and pleasurable involvement are equally relevant to our context.

In marketing it is important to consider the various "noise" factors that can affect the communication, such as lack of language skills and culturally based misinterpretations [3]. In this case several of the customers do not speak any, or very poor English. The presentation of the products and the research could therefore not rely on too much written information. Using questionnaires for the research was eliminated both because of language difficulties and because it is not a very good marketing strategy. Filling in a questionnaire is boring and does not stimulate any real interest in the products. Instead it was decided to use images representing different concepts as it does not depend on language. The customers will most likely interpret the concepts based on their background so in this way there might be a certain kind of noise, but a noise that is wanted in this research.

Based on the idea of active participation, the research material was designed as a game with picture cards and boards. This meant that the customers had to get up on their feet and actually do something. In the tradition of design-by-playing the idea of a game is not to encourage competition, nor is it to teach theory, but to support shared action and reflection [5]. By activating the customers this way they were forced to make decisions and form opinions about the products, and by doing so, fixing them in their memory. As well as getting their feedback on the products and selling the ideas to them the idea was also to give them a feeling that their opinion and feedback was important to the company and that they were involved in the design process.

Most of the literature on marketing and customer relations, deal with the direct experiences of, and connection between the product or service providers, and the user-customer. Ottosson [11] uses the term "pure user" and "pure consumer". Usually the distinctions between the two are only marginal, but when it comes to playground equipment the differences are dramatic as the decision makers are completely different people than the users, namely the children. One can do user research with the children, but it is very difficult to do market research with them as they are, unfortunately, not the decision makers. They are seldom consulted and their actual needs are often completely forgotten when the facilities are being designed [4]. The decision makers and buyers of playground equipment are pure customers and often far removed from the children. Nevertheless these are the people to whom the marketing must be directed and their decisions must be relied on despite possible lack of contact with the users. There are many examples of how focus on the customers instead of the user has lead to the design of products that have been received with indifference by the users [11]. Playgrounds, the numerous, abandoned tarmacs equipped with uninspiring climbing structures must be one of the best examples of this. Therefore it is important to get an understanding of children's real needs and preferences and communicate these to the customers who, after all, are interested in creating a safe, fun and challenging environment for the children. The customers will undoubtedly be more convinced by proper research and argumentation than merely fun looking installations when making their decisions.

Generating knowledge and value in a company

This project is both about marketing and research but on another level it is also about designing new methods for interacting with the customer and thereby creating value. The idea behind this method is to use the customers for knowledge creation, but the knowledge must be sought actively and evaluated systematically in order to be of any real use [6]. The aim is that the interaction with the various partners can generate and form a basis for new knowledge and innovation. It is a new notion in the business world that one of the paths to innovation is work in multidisciplinary teams. Smartus is exactly this kind of team, where designers work with engineers, pedagogical and technology experts and others. It makes it possible for the different disciplines to join forces and create a common view and a shared experience [2]. This project could be said to take this notion one step further as it involves a designer stepping into the discipline of marketing. The designer brings design issues and design thinking into the marketing and makes these visible to the customers. This way she is creating a shared experience with the customers. Forming an interactive and dynamic relationship with the customer is less tangible than other resource investments but it is nevertheless a vital factor in the generation of knowledge and value to the company [6]. This is something that Lappset has already taken seriously through inviting customer representatives to visit the company, but they have been focusing mostly on giving the customer information and not interacting with them and using them in their research. The knowledge that is generated from the interaction with the customers will be used to give recommendations about research and development to the management and marketing department of Lappset.

Various forms of prototyping and participatory design are now encouraged in the business community as a way to promote innovation and knowledge [2]. Companies realize that the products they sell must be designed with a proper understanding of the user's needs in order to compete in the market. It is not enough to simply design a product that looks good or that does the job. It must simultaneously meet the user's functional, social and aesthetic preferences in order to be relevant. A company that loses relevance is quickly seen as being old-fashioned and will gradually lose customers [12]. Using new methods for innovation and development is therefore important to a company like Lappset. Although Lappset is a medium-sized enterprise and their success rely more on quality products and services than building a unique brand profile, they need to be at the front of the development within their field if they are to hold their position as one of Europe's leading playground manufacturers. The strategy of marketing through research is something that can contribute to giving Lappset an image as relevant and inventive and through this, attract the customers.

DESIGNING THE METHOD

Because the session with the customers was limited to one hour, the method had to be both efficient and easy to explain and carry through. Because of the language barriers the material would be based on picture cards with simple words. The image together with the word would enforce the content and make it easily understandable. The different factors affecting the context of the research made it challenging to design a testing method that would be both informative as well as interesting. One of the inspirations for the method came from the Ideo Method Cards developed by the Ideo Design Centre in San Francisco. This is a "deck of cards" with different research methods which involve

using cards; like theme cards, collage and word-concept association. These methods can give new and surprising angles to the problem, they show the clients perception and understanding of the design issues and help to evaluate and prioritize design features and concepts [9]. Many of the method cards have ideas for card methods that could have been valuable to this research but none of them fits perfectly to the context.

Cultural probes is another experiential method and a strategy for pursuing experimental design in a responsive way with the help of material like picture cards, maps and cameras and other objects that does not rely on writing [7]. This is a method where the material usually is brought into the user's environment and where the material is used creatively to tell about personal experiences. This strategy would not have been possible in this research, both because of the context and number of visitors. However, when designing cultural probes it is typical to use pictures for the material which tell something about the designer's own thinking and experiences, to convey a personal attitude to the user, and this is something that was interesting to our case. The images used in our cards were selected based on our own understanding of the different concepts and how we interpret them and thus became quite personal and unique in their style and content.

We had several ideas for how picture cards could be used, for instance by letting the customers make collages, making guessing games, circle games and so on. Finally we ended up with a design of a card game that borrowed elements from both the Ideo cards and the cultural probes, but that was simple and intuitive to use, even for non-designers. The testing material consisted of three sets of cards; notions, styles and the products. It would have been interesting to do a collage with the cards, for instance by clustering notions, styles and products after what preferences and ideas they convey to the client, but this would be hard to explain and do within an hour of first being introduced to the material. It would also have been difficult interpreting the collages without the client explaining his or her choices, and with the number of visitors the material would also be too large to handle. A clearer and more commonly understood method was therefore needed. In the game the cards are evaluated from one to ten, which is a more intuitive selection method and which does not require a lot of explanation. There are ten cards for each category and three separate boards. Each board has ten columns and there are ten sets of cards, meaning that the visitor groups would be divided into ten teams. The teams would fill in the columns independently of each other and the clue for us would be to compare how different or similar the selections would be. When the boards had been filled in they would be photographed and this way the material would be easy to handle and use in analysis.

The research topics were developed in cooperation with the other product designers as they are the ones that will be using the information directly in the further development of new concepts. They were interviewed about what they wanted to know and what could be useful for them. Style, colours and materials were of particular interest to them. They can make decisions about these things based on their other research and their creative skills, but perceptions about aesthetics might vary in different countries and certain colour combinations might for instance be disliked in some cultures. One way of analyzing the style preferences could be to simply let the clients pick colours and materials and apply these to the models but this would probably be more confusing than informative. Instead it was decided to use pictures of different styles that would represent colours, materials and certain features, such as futuristic, technical, traditional and sporty.

Futuristic would for instance imply metallic surfaces, clear colours like metallic blue or bright orange, “techno-organic” shapes and an interesting use of lights like LEDs or fibre optics. The use of analogies like this in design research is a quite popular way of getting a common understanding of a product’s features [1]. By using notions and images, real or mental, the participants can get an easy understanding of the designer’s intentions.



Figure 1: The notion and style cards. The products can not be shown here.



Figure 2: A notion board filled in by one of the French customer groups.

This way of explaining concepts with images was also used for the category of the notions or social aspects. For instance, a child on a lawn holding his mother’s and father’s hand in each

outstretched arm, was meant to represent community. Here the images were not meant to carry visual connotations, but rather be symbols or metaphors of a social aspect. The social aspects in the cards were defined after working on the concepts for the play equipment and they are notions that represent the social aspects we have tried to bring forward in the design of the products, such as feelings of community, freedom, physical challenge, mental challenge, control and creativity. The importance of the various notions might vary in different countries and also be understood in another way by the customers in general than by the people working for Lappset. If mental challenge is valued more than physical challenge for instance, this can be an indicator of what concepts should be pursued more intensively.

The designers were also interested in direct feedback on the products they have designed so far. They have done surveys inside the company, but again, this would presumably differ with the customers and in between the different cultures. Knowing what kinds of products are most popular could help them decide what direction the new product range should take and what products to focus on in the marketing material for the different nations. Because the products are still confidential the product cards can not be discussed and analyzed in this paper.

The research method is a way of educating the non-designers into the way of seeing of the designer so that they, in this case the customer, can share the same vision [1]. Playing this game can be described as a learning process. It creates a common language, investigates future visions and clarifies different aspects of the concepts [5]. By sharing a vision and way of thinking about the products the customer can understand the ideas behind the concepts, what kind of problems the designers are facing and what opportunities the products afford.

CARRYING OUT THE RESEARCH

The customer interaction project was started in September 2004 with ideas and development of method and material. The interaction with the customers started in December 2004 and went on until April 2005. The data from each session was recorded and included in the statistics every week. A central part of the research is the actual customer interaction. The presentation of the product concepts is one thing, but an equally important part, yet less obvious, is the time when the customers are playing the game, when they ask questions, talk about the cards and images and start discussing. There were usually about 20 customers in each visitor group and only 10 sets of cards. This meant that the customers had to go together in groups of two and sometimes three to complete the game. This was a conscious decision, both because it made the data more manageable, but most importantly because the groups had to cooperate to make the selections. It forced them to make compromises about the decisions and through this get an understanding of how we, as designers, have to make compromises about the important factors in the designs. Understanding the social and semantic issues that guide the design process is part of the experience that we wanted to achieve with the customer interaction. The experiences we get from the sessions are likewise of vital importance to understanding the customers, observing how the method works and how it can be developed as a marketing strategy.

The first group was the Spanish and the expectations were mixed. Would they understand what to do? Would they like it or would they find it pointless and silly? Would it be possible to do within the allocated time and would there be any practical problems?

The presentation had to be translated and the translator, one of the Spanish managers, only gave an unenthusiastic, rough outline which made us insecure about how the products would be received by the customers. Most of the worries proved to be needless. The testing session, which took place in the adjoining room, was very successful. Next to the three boards there were posters so that they could read in their own language about the products. Both the posters and the cards had translations in English, Spanish, French and German. There were some questions about what they were supposed to do and it had to be explained again to some, but most got started right away. A couple of people were a little confused and annoyed by some of the concepts and wanted a more detailed description. We told them that it was their interpretation and understanding we were after. A notion like “control” for instance, might have a different meaning to Spanish people than it has to Finnish. This possibility for making individual interpretations made the material less objective but more interesting. The customers did not speak any English but there were comments like “bonito” and many enthusiastic smiles afterwards. It was obvious that they had enjoyed the little game that was prepared for them and that they felt they were doing something important in evaluating the confidential concepts.

The second group consisted of international exchange students from Europe and the USA. They were not actual customers, but interesting to the research as they were in their early twenties and therefore of a different generation than the average visitor in the other groups. The results from this group were more “extreme” than the Spanish. It would have been interesting to also get information like age and gender into the data but this would have made both the practical arrangements of the sessions and the statistical analysis very difficult. It is very probable that age and gender is a stronger distinguishing factor than cultural background and maybe this could be the subject of another similar research. In the context of this research however, it is less interesting as the customers are adults of both sexes and all ages, and neither the design of the products nor the marketing material would benefit from any distinguishing features relating to these issues.

Some groups stood out like the Dutch, where explaining the concepts and getting their interest was very easy. It was clear that they liked “getting their hands on” the material and they started arranging the cards on the floor with great enthusiasm. Several people were sitting around on their hands and knees in the middle of the room playing with the cards and discussing. As the research progressed with other groups it was clear that the method worked exceptionally well in getting the customers interest. It triggered discussions about the concepts and the importance of social factors and design in a way that a normal presentation could not have done. With the French the discussion almost took a philosophical turn with some people getting quite passionate about the subjects. The Portuguese group spent a long time after they had filled in the boards, discussing and bringing their coffee cups with them from the next room so that they could continue into the coffee break. They would gather around the boards in groups and discuss between themselves and compare the different selections and reasons for evaluation. With the German group the discussion was directed more towards us with questions about details in the concepts and recommendations for how things could be improved.



Figure 3: The international exchange students filling in the boards.



Figure 4: The Dutch group spreads cards on the floor to discuss their selections.



Figure 5: The Portuguese gather around the boards and discuss the filled in boards and reasons for evaluations.

the general level the notion of “control” was low and the notion of “physical challenge” was high so it is easy to draw the conclusion that people, regardless of nationality, value physical activity and freedom to get dirty and make mistakes more than control and supervision of children.

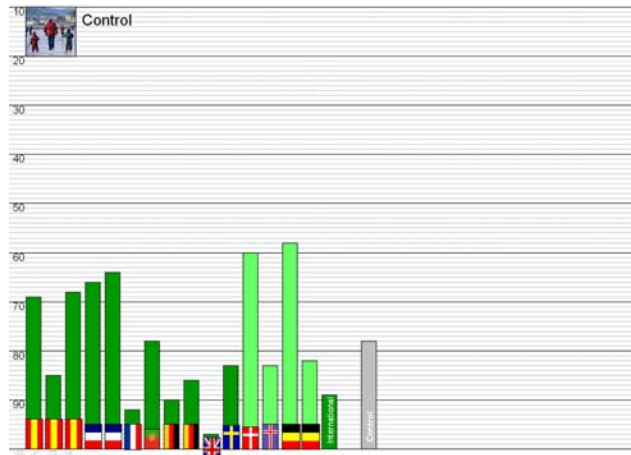


Figure 9: Control was not a very popular notion, but comparatively strong with the French groups.

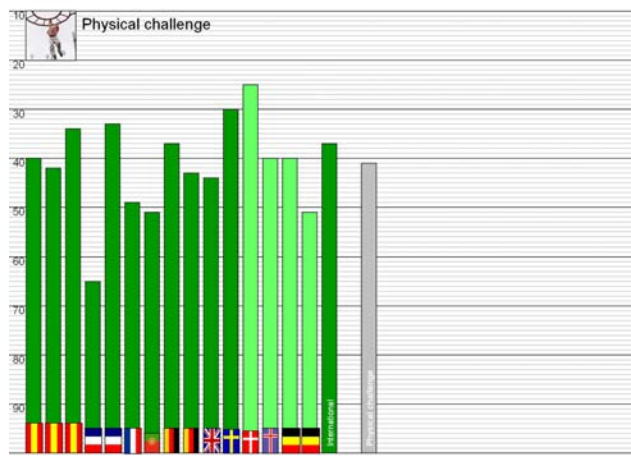


Figure 10: Physical challenge was in general a very popular notion.

The statistics are quite clear about which notions and styles are more popular. From the notions “creativity”, “excitement”, “exploration” and “physical challenge” got the highest scores and “control”, “performance” and “3 generations” got the lowest. “Community”, “liberty” and “mental challenge” got average scores. From the styles category “adventure”, “playful” and “sporty” got the highest score, whereas “action figure”, “space” and “traditional” got the lowest. In the middle one could find “futuristic”, “machinery”, “modernist” and “technical”.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents the development and use of a game in the context of the marketing of a new product line and the research of the customer’s response to it. The two aims with the method, marketing and research, were equally significant for the company and the academic researcher. The situation in which this research took place is very unique with the university researchers and company staff working closely towards the same goals. The success of the new product line relies on the researchers’ work, and the success of the researchers relies to a great extent on the

quality of the products. Therefore the company’s aims and the academic aims are so closely linked that it is difficult to draw any clear distinctions between the two.

Lappset is a traditional, family owned company whose success is based on the production of high quality equipment using local pine. It is risky and ground-breaking for a company like this to set off the vision of incorporating technology in a product line and using academic researchers in the development of it. This new mission meant that new research and design methods had to be introduced and it also meant that the products would have to be marketed in a different way. The customers must be convinced why they should spend more money buying these new technology products instead of the conventional products. One of the best ways to do this is through educating the customers about the benefits and potentials, for example by using the researchers to tell about the academic content and process. The customers must be taken seriously and not be underestimated, but the material must be presented in a way they can relate to. Lecturing about theories and statistics is not a good way to inform outsiders. Instead they should be made to think about the concepts and what are the implications of the social and functional features. For this purpose we decided that an experiential and participatory method would be the way to go.

The method is developed on the background of participative design methods such as experience prototyping, cultural probes and design-by-playing, and is thus drawing lines from current design research. Experience and participation are also present in the field of marketing and this research is an exploration of how methods can be transferred from the one field to the other, how the material must be adapted to the change of context and what the implications are. It is a contribution to the discussion of experiential research and marketing and explores how new methods can be of value to a SME company like Lappset.

As well as this paper, a report will be presented to the Lappset marketing department and management with the results of the research and recommendations for how the feedback can be used in the further development of the product line. Certain notions and styles were clearly more popular than others, such as “creativity”, “excitement” and “exploration”, and “adventure”, “sporty” and “playful”. The report will give recommendations for activities and product features related to these. For example it is obvious that products which encourage creativity, such as drawing, building and narrating are popular. Because “excitement” is seen as important, products with movements and speed should be a focus area as well as products which allow children to explore the environment, for instance through maps, information points and science equipment. “Adventure” was by far the most popular of the styles and one recommendation would be to produce devices for children’s narratives. Special towers, caves, platforms and closed in spaces can function as castles, boats, spaceships and so on. The design should not be too detailed so as to already decide the function and content for the children, but rather through basic shapes allow for different interpretations and use. The styles sporty and playful were also popular and indicate a preference for bright colours, unusual shapes and details like rubber grips and steps. The recommendations will not follow the statistics rigorously. Rather it will be used to support some design features, strengthen others and give recommendations for new ideas. For example, even though some notions like “3 generations” were quite unpopular, this study does not recommend terminating the concepts developed in that direction, but rather to concentrate on

marketing them in new and interesting ways and create systems that facilitates the integration of these concepts with others, for instance through the more popular notions like creativity, excitement and exploration.

The management representative from Lappset was very happy about the way the method involved the customers and made them talk and remember the products. There has already been talk of doing the same program for customer visits in the autumn of 2005. It is clear that they see the value of this type of marketing, but the question is if they will use the method again for another product line. Do they appreciate the value enough to develop new material for the method in the future? They have not given a clear answer to this yet. The method can be used again with a change in content but the material is rather time-consuming and expensive to produce. For this particular case the material would be used many times and the effort was rewarded, but it is worth considering whether a simpler paper system could be used for future marketing sessions.

The method forced the customers to make compromises about the decisions and through this get an understanding of how designers have to make compromises about the designs. This issue was secondary to the ideas of marketing and getting feed-back, but during the process it became clear that this was central to the concept. The discussions took directions like how difficult it is to design challenging equipment when safety is so important, the dilemma of vandalism versus appealing play equipment and around the choice of materials in relation to styles. There were comments about how much they liked the designs and how the style and notion cards made them understand the reasons for the designs better.

Because of the context of the research; the amount of time given for the sessions, the number of customers and the language difficulties, there were many compromises that had to be made to the method. Surprisingly, very few compromises had to be done regarding the relation between the marketing and research. There were no big dilemmas about which issues to exclude or about the design of the material. One drawback concerning the research aim was that it could not go more in-depth. Had the context allowed for more time spent with the individual customers and a wider scope of the research, it might have been possible to find more data relating to the cultural differences. As it was, the data did not reveal any information that made it possible to draw any proper conclusions about this. It was disappointing not to find more on the cultural differences and reach that aim of the research, but on the other hand, the results on the general level gave very interesting results and clear answers to the more overall questions in the WePlay group. The marketing and research aspects were easy to integrate with each other and the design of the material and the organization of the sessions were not difficult in that respect. The possibilities for developing methods for participative design and marketing should be many and also spark discussions about the value of this kind of activity. According to this research the application of methodologies from the tradition of experiential marketing and participative design supports the combination of marketing and design research and opens up new possibilities for customer interaction.

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