The Role of Designer-Client Communication in Determining Product Appearance.

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Product appearance is a key component in defining product-person relationships and as such it significantly affects commercial success. The potential for product form to satisfy many of the unarticulated requirements of users makes it a critical determinant of perceived value. Designing products so as to present this value visually may provide the opportunity to command a higher product price and enjoy increased unit sales. In mature markets, where the functionality and performance of products are often taken for granted, attention is increasingly focused on the visual characteristics of products. In such markets, focussing on product appearance may offer one of the highest returns on investment.

It follows that consideration of product appearance should be central to the product concept. Thus, it is vital that when the product brief is being discussed with the client, designers gain a clear understanding of what the product's appearance should express. However, eliciting a clear visual direction from clients is not necessarily straightforward. Designers and their clients often operate within different contexts and exhibit different behaviours. Specifically, clients may not be design literate and their visual sensibilities may differ greatly from those of designers. Consequently, communication between designers and clients on subjective product qualities may be challenging.

This paper reports on a series of interviews with practising industrial design consultants. The difficulties they encounter in communicating with clients on the subject of product appearance are discussed. Furthermore, the effects on the design process, manufacture and subsequent marketing of the product are explored. Expanding upon previous work by the authors, a preliminary graphical tool is presented for communicating on the subject of consumer response to product appearance. Designers' responses to this tool, and their views on how this might assist in communicating with their clients are discussed. In closing the paper, suggestions for possible future work are presented and conclusions are drawn.

The role of designer-client communication in determining product appearance and consumer response

This paper reports on a series of interviews with practising industrial design consultants. The difficulties they encounter in communicating with clients on the subject of product appearance are discussed. The effects on the design process, manufacture and subsequent marketing of the product are explored. A preliminary tool is presented for communicating on the subject of consumer response to product appearance. Designers' views on how this might assist in communicating with their clients are discussed. In closing the paper, suggestions for possible future work are presented and conclusions are drawn.

Introduction

Product appearance is a key component in defining product-person relationships and as such, it significantly affects commercial success (Bloch, 1995). The potential for product form to satisfy many of the unarticulated requirements of users makes it a critical determinant of perceived value (Cooper, 2001; Goldenberg and Mazursky, 2002). Designing products so as to present this value visually may provide the opportunity to command a higher product price and enjoy increased unit sales (Ulrich and Eppinger, 2000; Cagan and Vogel, 2002). In mature markets, where the functionality and performance of products are often taken for granted, attention is increasingly focused on the visual characteristics of products. In such markets, "attention to a product's appearance promises the manufacturer one of the highest returns on investment" (Lewalski, 1988).

It follows that consideration of product appearance should be integral to the product concept, and "it is vital that right from the moment when the product brief is being discussed with the client, the designer gets a clear answer to the question [of] what the product's [visual form] should express" (Monö, 1997). However, as discussed in

this paper, eliciting a clear visual direction from clients is not necessarily straightforward. As non-designers, clients may not be design literate and their sensibilities may differ greatly from those of designers (Hsu et al., 2000). Consequently, communication between designers and clients on subjective product qualities may be challenging. Although designer-client relationships may be difficult (Moody, 1980) sensitive communications are a key component for creative teamwork (Walton, 2000). This paper reports on a series of interviews that illuminate these issues and discusses the development of a preliminary tool to assist in designer-client communication on the subject of product appearance.

Research approach

Potential interview subjects were found from an online industrial design directory (EDI Ltd., 2004) and were selected by location. Twenty-six designers were contacted, of which seven were available and were willing to be interviewed at the time of the study. Each of the designers participating in the study had over ten years of professional design experience. They all worked in small consultancies with a varied client base that typically ranged from market leaders in consumer electronics to local laboratory equipment manufacturers.

The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis in the designers' work environment. With the subjects' permission, these conversations were recorded and later transcribed. The average interview length was one hour and twenty minutes, resulting in a combined transcript length of over 53,000 words (excluding irrelevant material). Where appropriate in this paper direct quotations are taken from these transcripts. Thus, the topics discussed are illustrated with the designers' own words and each quotation is attributed to an anonymised designer (D1, D2, D3, etc).

The interviews were divided into two parts:

- Firstly, a general discussion was held on the factors that determine product appearance. The purpose was to gain an insight into designers' perspectives on what external factors and internal processes influence the appearance of

products. This gave the designers the opportunity to discuss issues related to designer-client communication.

- Secondly, a brief presentation was given to the designers describing a preliminary tool to assist with communication on the subject of consumer response to product appearance. The presentation was based on a conceptual framework previously discussed in detail by the authors elsewhere (Crilly et al., 2004). This gave designers the opportunity to suggest ways in which this tool could assist in designer-client communication.

The clients' role in defining product appearance

One of the issues addressed early in each interview was the extent to which clients would set a look for the product or define what the product's appearance should evoke. Whilst most designers could cite examples of where the client had freely expressed opinions on product appearance, they all stated that such examples were uncommon. The client was more often associated with the specification of details such as space envelopes, manufacturing routes and tooling costs.

> "It's very rare for somebody to come to us with a very detailed understanding of exactly how the product is going to look" D1

> "Technical constraints are mostly what the client provides" D2

The designers felt that defining and refining the product's appearance was rightly part of what the client expected from them. The designers also believed that their training, experience and visual sensibilities made them more suited than the client to approach these issues.

> "They come to you as an external consultant for that visual clarity" D3

"I probably have a better idea of what colours are coming in and going out…it's up to us to determine what's correct" D4

It is certainly not surprising that designers are expected to take control of the visual domain of the product's specification. However, the client is the designers' immediate customer and they often have an intimate understanding of the brand. Therefore, appreciating the clients' visual expectations and gaining from them information on what they believe the look should convey is very important. Consequently, the clients' reluctance (or inability) to express their qualitative expectations causes problems with communication.

"The client (laymen) want to describe…the subjective specification of the product…but find it difficult…You have to understand what it is about that product [the client] wants to pick out. What it's made of? It's colour? Or something deeper than that? So you have to turn into an amateur psychologist to figure it out" D1

Challenges to communication

Having explained that the client would seldom specify, or even discuss, product appearance, some of the designers explained the differences between themselves and their clients. The visually literate and culturally aware designers felt themselves to be substantially different to their more verbal and quantitative clients. This fundamental difference between the two groups was often described as puzzling to the designers who were incredulous at how non-visual the client could be.

"I spent some time speaking with a client…who I thought was visually educated, or design educated. They aren't really… they can be just ignorant… That's weird for me, someone just didn't notice that it wasn't nice. He isn't visually aware, he just doesn't know when something's good and when something isn't good" D5

The combination of social differences between the two groups and the lack of design awareness in clients was claimed to present significant barriers to effective communication.

> "To communicate with the client…that's a problem. I haven't got a problem communicating with other designers…because they have this feeling for trends and stuff, they know what's going on. ... Whereas the big problem occurs when you are talking to the client. ... We've had a few problems where that's gone wrong... it goes on at all levels... they are often management people who don't understand anything about design (that's not a derogatory comment...) but it's getting the design across to them and that's a big problem" D2

Effects of poor communication

Designers adopt a variety of approaches (verbal associations, image boards, etc.) to elicit visual information from clients and to inform them of the rationale behind a given design's appearance. However, many of the designers expressed exasperation and confusion at the decisions that clients made relating to manufacture of the product. Designers felt that the client (and sometimes the engineers, toolmakers and manufacturers) misunderstood the importance of product appearance and the implications of changing the design. Despite designers' attempts to ensure that products were manufactured as intended, they believed that changes were introduced beyond their control.

> "We would actually do a controlled drawing and a controlled model but…it would come back and there'd be things where you would think 'why have they done that?'" D3

These changes to the design were often felt to significantly alter the product's appearance and thus compromise the design.

"The way it's been tooled and engineered has created [an] aesthetic mismatch which people will now judge the product on" D4

"The idea is good, the look is good but they use [the] wrong plastic or the wrong metal. [Sometimes] the proportions will change and the meaning will change" D6

Beyond the manufacture of the product, the subsequent marketing program was also sometimes felt to misrepresent the design. A breakdown in the communication between the designer and client would cause a misunderstood design to be portrayed in a way other than that intended by the designer.

"We always get frustrated to what happens to products once they leave our door. As soon as it leaves the intent of the product that you built in can get lost and it can get marketed in a completely different way as to how it was developed to be" D1

From these conversations with designers it is clear that clients may give little guidance on either the look of the product or what the product's appearance should evoke. The clients' difficulty in discussing subjective product qualities was attributed to their poor visual literacy and the quantitative culture within which they operate. A number of approaches are used both to elicit the clients' expectations and to explain the rationale behind designers' decisions. However, despite these efforts at improving communication, the manufacture and marketing of the product often provides evidence of continued misunderstanding. This suggests a clear need for a tool to assist with designer-client communication.

A preliminary tool

In the second half of each interview a preliminary tool to assist in communication on the subject of product appearance was presented to the designers. This tool was based on a conceptual framework for consumer response to product appearance (Crilly et al., 2004).

Response to product appearance was presented as part of a process of communication where the design team creates a message that is encoded in a product and the product is perceived by the consumer within an environment. This perception leads to cognitive, affective and behavioural responses, where cognitive response is composed of aesthetic, semantic and symbolic aspects. Interpretation of product appearance may be assisted by reference to other products, concepts or entities. In addition to these visual references, moderating influences may operate at each stage of the communication process. These moderating influences may affect the consumer's perception of, and response to, the design message. Response to the design message takes place within the consumer's cultural context and it is within this context that the visual references and many of the moderating influences originate (see figure 1).
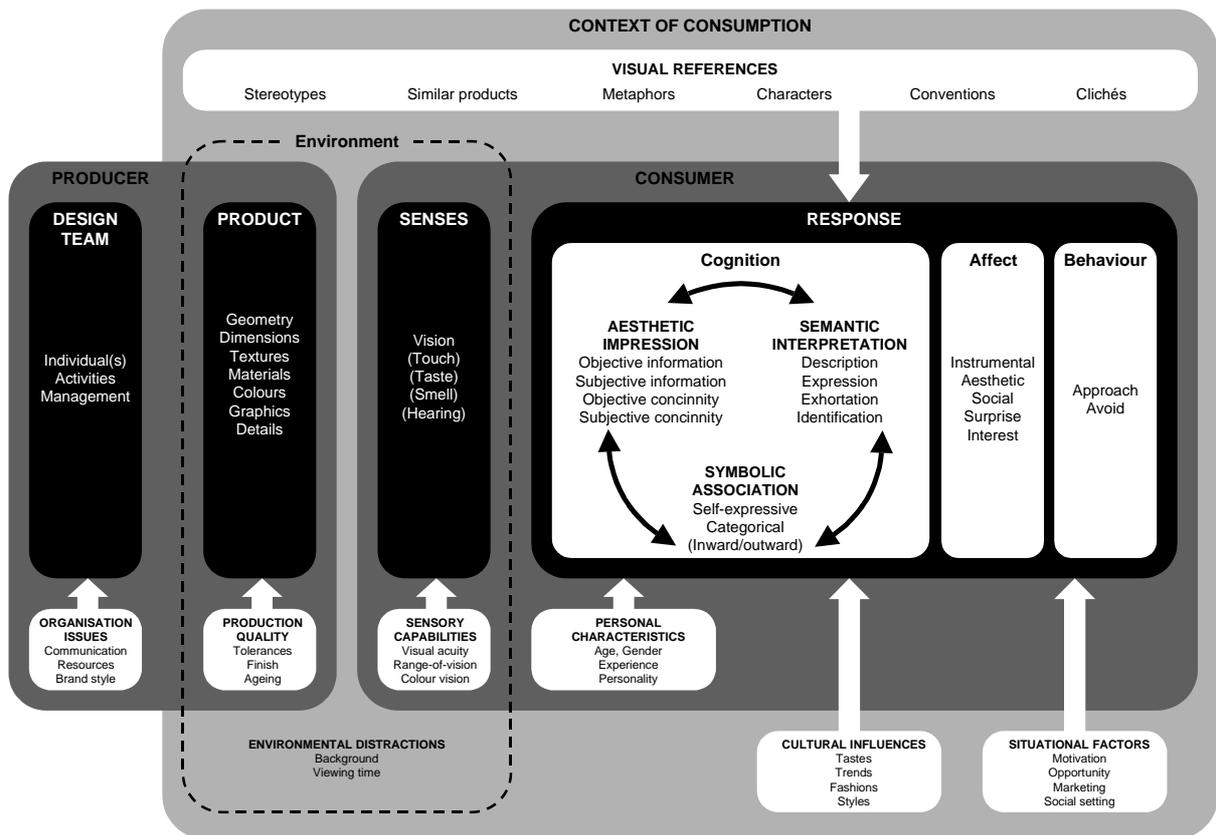
Figure 1 – Conceptual framework for consumer response to the visual domain in product design

This emphasis on consumer response offers designers the opportunity to focus discussions on the visual preferences, expectations and needs of the target market. The consumer, their experiences, and the cultural context within which they operate are the subject of consideration. Without exception the designers suggested that this tool would be of use to them in communicating with the client.

> "I wish I had some of this stuff up my sleeve when talking to clients" D7

> "I think it could be very useful for education within the relationship [between] clients and designers" D6

The formalised and integrated presentation of the information was felt to be an appropriate vehicle for communication. The designers acknowledged that whilst the

issues presented were ones with which they were familiar these issues were often difficult to explain.

> "What I think is interesting is that it just scoops up a lot of things that are floating around…because a lot of this you do in a rag-bag, intuitive, anecdotal way" D3

> "To be able to quantify and qualify the design process is always tricky…the ability to give [the client something like a lecture] on how this product-person interaction works would be useful" D1

The designers suggested that this preliminary tool could be used to communicate the implications of modifying the design. It could thus offer improved opportunities to ensure that the design message remained uncorrupted by the client.

> "I think there are some positive conclusions you can come up with there as to how to maintain the initial design intention all the way [to when] the product is finally out there being sold" D5

Designer recommendations

A number of the designers made suggestions for how the framework (developed for a design research audience) might be adapted so as to be of greatest assistance to designers. Most of their recommendations focused on modifying the language used so as to be more appropriate to an industrial context. One of their concerns was that the terminology used (mostly adapted from design literature) would alienate or confuse clients.

> "Whether we could use that externally, so you could say to a client 'the cultural context of your product is blah'… My suspicion is that they would either be honest and say 'we don't understand what the hell you're talking about', or they would nod their heads pretending to be sagely cognisant of what's

going on. [But] in the next room they'd say 'what the hell are they talking about?'" D5

However, it was not only for the benefit of clients that the designers proposed simplifying the way in which the information is presented. It was also suggested that designers' comprehension of the information and the likelihood of the framework being used would increase if language and presentation were simplified.

"I think it would be very useful if it was in a simple enough form for designers to understand, …a checklist would be ideal" D7

"My warning would be: if it's too complicated, too theoretical too use, people won't use it. If it's simple then that's fun and that's fine" D2

Beyond adapting the language so as to be suitable to the professional context other suggestions included modifying the mode of presentation towards a more visual tool. One such approach would be a structured image board where the designers and their clients populate the different areas of the tool with images that expressed their expectations or ideas.

Possible further work

As suggested by the designers, future work in this area might include developing simplified and graphical versions of the communications tool discussed here. Such a tool would be produced specifically with the intention of assisting in designer-client communication. Consultation with designers whilst revising the tool would maximise the benefit that it provides. Furthermore, a series of interviews with designers' clients might be conducted, so as to better understand their perspectives on the issues discussed in this paper. One might determine what they feel are the difficulties in communicating with designers and what tools they might benefit from.

From the interviews already conducted a preliminary framework has been drafted that represents the factors involved in determining product appearance. A further series of interviews with both designers and clients would allow this new framework to be completed. Attaching this to the left-hand side of the consumer response framework (figure 1) would allow a more comprehensive representation of the issues involved in product appearance. The implications of this new combined framework on client-designer communication could then be investigated.

Conclusions

There may be substantial differences in the training, experiences and sensibilities of designers and their clients. This may cause problems when communicating about subjective product qualities such as appearance. These difficulties may lead to protracted discussions between the two parties and result in confusion during the manufacture and marketing of the product.

Designers interviewed were of the opinion that educating clients on the factors that influence consumer response to product appearance may alleviate some of these problems. In particular, designers expressed a strong interest in adopting a modified version of the tool discussed in this paper as part of their proposals to clients. It was believed that this would assist in designer client communication on the subject of product appearance. Such an improvement has the potential to reduce confusion during designer-client communications and allow the designers' intentions to be maintained during the subsequent manufacture and marketing of the product.

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