

Strategically Integrated Design – Helping Brands to Keep Their Promises

Michael Krohn

KEYWORDS

*Design Strategy,
Brand Strategy,
Integral Design*

•

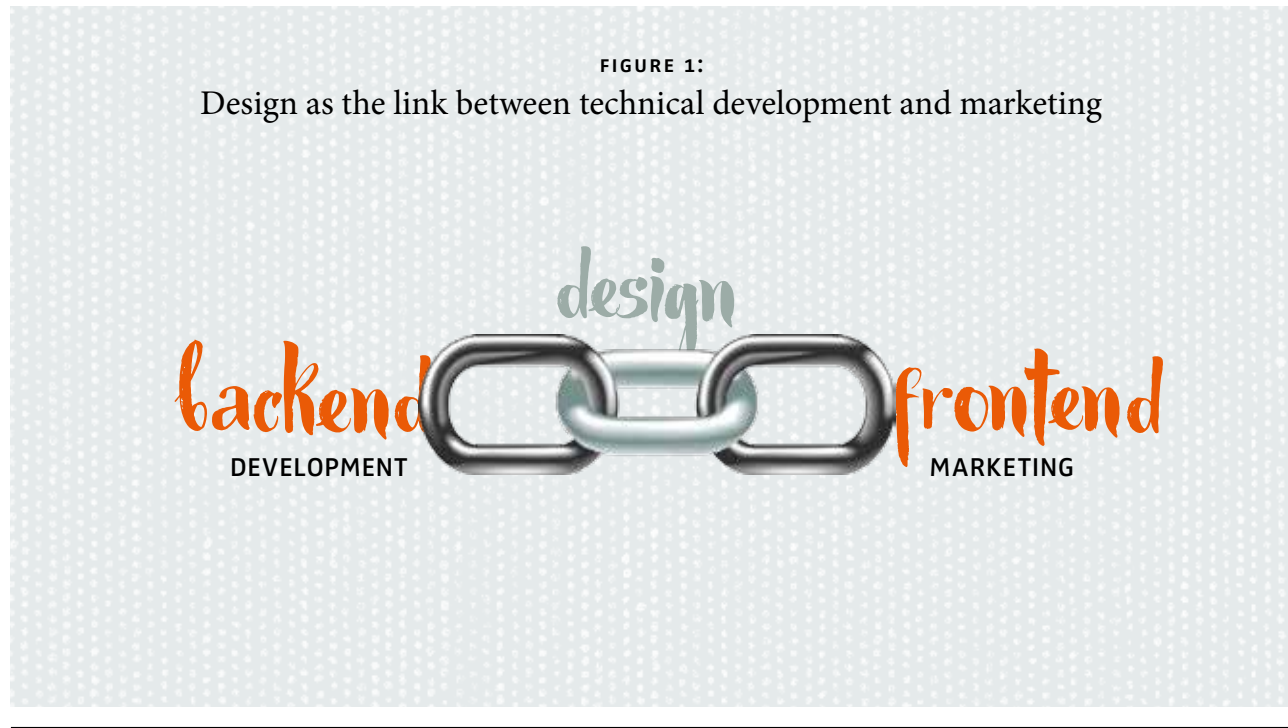
THE AUTHOR

Michael Krohn,
Professor and Chair of
the “Master of Arts in Design” Course
at the Zurich University of the Arts;
Co-owner of the design agency
FORMPOL AG in Zurich, Switzerland.
michael.krohn@zhdk.ch

Things that don't look nice don't sell /// “Between two products that are identical in price, function, and quality, the one with the most attractive appearance will win the race.” With these pragmatic words, design pioneer Raymond Loewy outlined his view of design in the middle of the twentieth century, and was one of the first to describe the importance of design for marketing. It is common knowledge today that poorly designed products don't sell well. In order to establish a clear and unique position in the market, companies consider product design a comprehensive set of artistic, communicative and strategic measures. In a globalized world of goods and brands it is not enough to just bring aesthetically pleasing products to the market. The whole experience chain has to be designed and made tangible. Frequently innovation, closeness to customers or unique services are the basis for successful companies – and rightly so. But these strengths can only be made visible, communicable and brought to life with design. Design, when applied wisely, thus becomes a strategic tool that can only be effective when it looks at problems without bias and solves them creatively in new ways.

Design between the frontend and the backend ///

When we develop innovative design solutions for clients, both in university research and practical applications, we are always dealing with two different stakeholder groups and therefore very different starting points.



On the one hand, we're cooperating with a company's product or service development, i.e. the department in which a new offer is developed from the ground up to market maturity. On the other hand, we're also working with marketing and its focus on launch strategies and communication.

Both positions more or less define the two "ends" of the value chain of a company. The design tasks, and often the available budgets, are very different depending on which group you are cooperating with. Also, the long-term quality of the result varies depending on the initial situation.

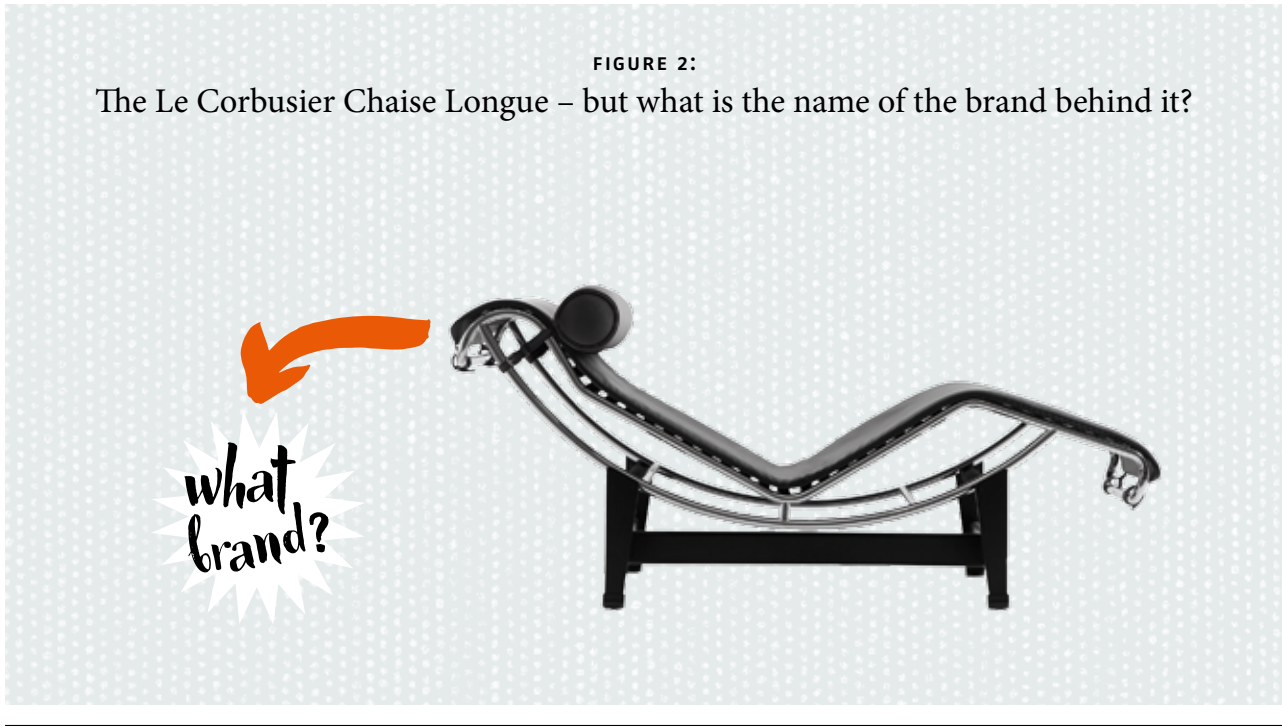
Is design just marketing cosmetics? /// What happens when design decisions are made at the end of the value chain during the marketing process? Many companies actually incorporate design into their processes much too late, and work sequentially instead of in an integrated manner. If, however, the important conceptual, technical or market-relevant decisions have already been made and the product or service is almost ready for launch, then design "cosmetics" won't help much. Design creates images that stick in your mind, and if these images are thought out at the last minute, there's a risk that they will not optimally promote the overall brand image.

This danger also exists for design authorship, which is usually driven by marketing. Some companies try to increase the attractiveness of their own offers with a more or less well-known designer. In specific markets such as fashion, accessories or furniture design such an approach can be successful. At any rate, authorial design refers less to the products or the services of the company but more to the designer as a personality. This is part of the marketing strategy and can definitely lead to sales success. Studies have shown, however, that only big names are effective. Further, products might become associated with the famous designer instead of with the company or the brand. For example, who can spontaneously name the brand behind the world famous "Le Corbusier Chaise Longue"? This way you are putting your chances for building your brand long-term at risk.

Particularly companies who discover design during the marketing process like to declare that "design is at our core." Emphasizing this everywhere all the time is counterproductive, especially when the implied promises are not kept. You shouldn't overemphasize design in the function of marketing. Well thought-out design is often "invisible", as the Swiss social researcher Lucius Burckhardt pointed out in the early 80s. In saying so, he indicated that good design incorporates

FIGURE 2:

The Le Corbusier Chaise Longue – but what is the name of the brand behind it?



whole meaning systems of objects and interpersonal and emotional relationships. This, however, requires an integrated approach to design, starting already at the beginning of the value chain.

Only integral design communicates value /// How do designs evolve that are incorporated into product conceptions right from the start? Integrated design not only gives form to innovations but makes them more user oriented and suitable for marketing efforts. In this case, design – among other aspects – is the actual driving force that adds magical attraction to a brand and its many touchpoints. A few iconographic images are often more effective than a thousand clever arguments. The examples which are cited over and over, be it Apple, Nike, Audi or others, perfectly demonstrate this integral understanding of design and brands without being overbearing. If design is going to have an effect, it has to be strategically integrated. Design conveys arguments and facts, but it is more important to also convey emotions and imagination.

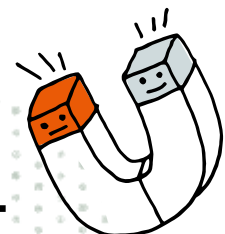
“Poorly designed products don’t sell well.” These days you can add to that: “If a product has a bad narrative or no story to tell, it won’t be noticed.” Brand image and design have

a close relationship here. The oft-quoted concept of “form follows function” no longer applies in its oversimplified form. Design, rather, pursues an expected emotional value that consumers expect and that helps connect with the brand and offers orientation. Designers must therefore understand the target group and their sensory needs, and translate these into shape, color, material, surface and other aspects. Cleanly integrated functions, fitting ergonomics and intelligent detail design are expected in any case.

»

Design – is the actual driving force
that adds magical attraction
to a brand and its many touchpoints.

«



DYSON: HOW MARKETING AND DESIGN CAN AMPLIFY EACH OTHER

A distinctive example for product design as a starting point for successful marketing is the Dyson brand. It became famous for its vacuum cleaners and in the meantime has become known for other household devices. Essentially, the company varies three similar elements:

- > An innovative, often revolutionary basic technology that has not been established in the market environment.
- > A design that conveys this innovative function expressively in its narrative without coming off as insincere.
- > A consistent language of color and shapes at all touchpoints, which creates a unique style and makes the brand and its products unique.

The design of the objects plays into the hand of marketing, is a part of the corporate strategy and is understood by the consumers. It adds value to the brand and helps to build its long-term potential.

FIGURE 3:

The Dyson Canister Vacuum: Unity of design and brand



Design needs dialogue /// Design can be a strategic link between development and marketing, as illustrated in Fig. 1. In order to become effective, design needs a dialogue between a sponsoring company on the one hand and a good designer with creative freedom on the other. In a well-prepared briefing, the core products must be described as well as the desired emotional and cultural value for the result. A comprehensive design briefing does not just define the desired functions and price but also the marketing requirements: How will the product tell its story? In a world in which technical performance and prices are interchangeable, design often remains as the essential, unique and decisive factor. "Fostering desire" is the magic phrase here.

This is how design creates a connection to the users and buyers. An important point is also interculturality. Products and services

are not just developed globally, they are often also consumed globally. India is not the same as Brazil or Finland. Globally active brands can afford to speak a clear language. However, companies that are regionally grounded or are just starting out often need to take into account cultural differences between consumers. This can be accomplished through design.

Design is strategic innovation /// The most important capabilities of many companies are ideas and innovations. These are developed into products and services, and they fill market niches or gain new market shares with clever marketing. When Steve Jobs was asked how Apple tests market needs, he replied that Apple does not test its products at all – a leading company simply has to know what the customers need and then produce it. With this statement, Jobs practically tied the two ends of the value chain together.



»
It is not only the object
that is used in visual marketing
but rather its symbols
and meaning.



Development and marketing should be thought of as one and the same. Companies should know, feel and – during the implementation – also design what the customers want. Their design strategies should serve this common but ambitious goal.

Design measures, cleverly implemented from the beginning on, are already a part of marketing. Visual marketing understands the object as the headliner and the center in order to be convincing with its iconographical and semantic effect. Objects and their images are the most important conveyors of the message. The more distinct and emotionally loaded, yet understandable and customized this language is utilized, the more powerful the design of things will be. Put simply, it is not only the object that is used in visual marketing but rather its symbols and meaning.

How unused design potential can be better exploited

/// Our experiences in the development of innovative design solutions can be summarized with the following recommendations.

- > Incorporate design considerations as soon as you begin drafting new products. If the design process does not begin until the frontend, it risks having a cosmetic effect only and no substance.
- > Use design as a link between all functions of the company. Emotional added value and meaningful symbolism can only be created through dialogue.
- > A smart design briefing and creative design agencies who understand how to think integrally about design and marketing are the basis of successful cooperation. Freedom for designers is a requirement for developing their creativity.

- > Good design can definitely be “anonymous.” The quality of the services can be combined with marketing more easily if no famous designer name is in the foreground. Good design doesn’t exist in a vacuum; the images and desires of the future are already anticipated in the minds of the consumers. If you take into account the preconditions of good design, it becomes real and authentic. Then, the promises of design and marketing can be fulfilled at the same time. /.

FURTHER READING

Wedel, M., & Pieters, R. (Eds.) (2007):
Visual Marketing: From Attention to Action.
New York: Taylor & Francis.

Burckhardt, L. (1980):
Design ist unsichtbar [Design is invisible].
In Texte von Lucius Burckhardt.
Retrieved from http://www.lucius-burckhardt.org/Deutsch/Texte/Lucius_Burckhardt.html#Design.