

How Design Can Change Brand Perception

a report by

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Charlotte Sjudell is Chief Designer of Colour and Materials at Ford Europe, a position she has held since October 2001. Prior to this she had held the positions of Manager of Colour and Materials, Lead Designer/Acting Manager and Colour and Materials Designer since her initial appointment at Ford Motor Company in September 1999. Between 1995 and 1999, she undertook internships at Pelikan Design (Copenhagen), Blanking Design (Malmö, Sweden) and Bio Design (Pasadena, California). She attended the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, from 1996 to 1999, where she received her BSc in Product Design. Prior to this, Mrs Sjudell attended the Art Center College of Design in La Tour de Peilz, Switzerland (1996), Folkuniversitetets konstskola and Lunds konstskola/Art School of Lund (1993 to 1994) and the University of Lund, Sweden (1992 to 1993).

When people speak about design within the automotive industry, they tend to refer to the aesthetic styling of the car, rather than the engineering. As Sir Terence Conran puts it:

“Design is 98% common sense and 2% that magic ingredient called aesthetics and sometimes style. That two per cent makes the difference between something which is perfectly acceptable and something which is so special that everyone wants to possess it”.

The role of the automotive designer is to create a product so visually appealing that it draws the customer into the showroom.

As with other industries, a strong brand makes it easier for a company to introduce a new product to the market. A branded product is no longer a product on its own but forms part of a range of products. If the brand's products and marketing communicate safety, quality and style, it will be likely that the perception of other products in the range will be associated with the same qualities.

Some of the design cues that constitute the impression of the brand are obvious, while others are more subtle. It might be difficult for the customer to identify exactly what it is that makes the car look, for example, like a Ford or a Volkswagen, but subconsciously they will recognise the design and associate it with a brand if the styling department has performed their job well.

As competition within the automotive industry is growing, customer demands are becoming more difficult to meet. The available choices of vehicle styles are increasing every year and the original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) have created a concept to meet each niche in order to beat the competition. Despite a broad range of brands, vehicle platforms and body styles, it is surprising how many vehicles end up looking very similar in their styling. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the layman to distinguish the differences between the brands and, often, it is necessary to look at the badge to gain an idea of what company lies behind the car.

Within the automotive industry, products tend to have less visible brand cues than in other industries. It seems that the larger the purchase and the greater the investment a product is associated with, the less distinct the design. Within the fashion and accessories industry it is still possible and affordable to offer the customer an endless amount of styles. With the restrictions of the automotive industry, it is being found that it is much more difficult to make a truly unique product and ensuring that sales will cover the production investments.

On the one hand, going to production with an unusual design can be fatal if sales do not take off as expected and, subsequently, few companies are willing to take such risks. On the other hand, true success can be achieved if a product is created that stands out from the crowd. As safety features, gadgets and good driving dynamics are becoming expected as part of the package, design stands out to be one of the final drivers in the purchasing decision.

The mainstream car has to cater for a large audience with diverse needs and tastes. If all customer needs were taken into consideration while designing a vehicle, it would most likely be found that the initial concept is strongly compromised and that the end-product is an unexciting, mediocre design that no one gets particularly emotional about. Going with a strong concept will often result in a polarised reaction, based on individual taste. If enough potential buyers have a strong reaction, it does not really matter if some people simply dislike the car. If the design is strong and the concept has the ability to create the 'must-have' emotion, it becomes less likely that extra rational value will be needed to be added to sell the product. A product with strong personality will make the customer overlook even technical drawbacks.

Market research has long been used as a tool for the automotive companies to ensure that they are releasing the winning design concept to the market. Market research results have often turned out to be misleading. The concept is shown to the customers in a pre-production phase, often in comparison with the current leading competition within the segment. As the new concept is being presented before its

actual inception, it becomes impossible to rate it against the competition, which it will finally meet. A positive result might turn out to be false as the car is launched and it eventuates that the trend has changed and the competition has produced a bolder design addressing the new emotional needs of the customer. A negative research result has often proven to be a high selling product, showing that the customers simply were not ready for the new design at the time that it was researched. The styling of the car many times over ends up being the only emotional element of the car, which, in many ways, is a very rational product.

In the case of both the Ford Ka and Focus models, the initial market research returned a fairly negative response. These two products later turned out to be two of Ford's best-selling car models in Europe.

Contrary to common belief, good design does not come free of charge. It is easier to understand that new technologies and advanced materials come at a higher price than it is to appreciate that a three-dimensional surface can vary dramatically in price. Complex tooling will allow for a greater variation of surface and, even though the raw materials stay the same, the process drives up the price. New technology can often have a huge impact on the three-dimensional design of a part. An example of this is the steering-wheel design of an early model car compared with today's designs, which are constraint-driven to take into account the size of the air bag, which has altered the entire design language.

If cost is not a limiting factor, it makes it easier to enhance the brand consistently in terms of design.

Designing for a large-volume car in the lower-price target range is a great challenge. The amount of restrictions in terms of process and cost limit the available options enormously in terms of design. The main focus is to find the highest perceived value for money and simultaneously try to drive the design and the brand. Inspiration for new innovative ideas is often found by looking at other industries such as fashion, gadgets, accessories and furniture. In the past, each brand was distinguished by its heritage and cultural differences. Today, strategy groups are set up within the design studio to ensure the future direction of the brand. Being different is increasingly difficult when the whole industry is working with the same influences. Industry members subscribe to the same magazines, attend the same trade shows, consult the same trend agencies and information from throughout the world is available via the Internet.

Most trained automotive designers have been educated at one of the few institutions providing this qualification and the industry has realised the

value of recruiting within other areas of the design industry. Despite outside influences, there is still only a small skilled group of automotive designers available on the market. As in many other fields, designers tend to change job frequently and, in doing so, bring with them their own designer 'signature'. It is a challenge for the design management to ensure that the design direction stays true to the brand and does not become confused by individuals' concepts, which belong in the competitor's brand rather than in their own.

Unfortunately, the competitive cost target leaves only a few suppliers in charge of the whole market and the available choice in terms of innovation is now shared by the whole industry, making it even more difficult to be unique within the different brands. Small companies offering niche products are simply outpriced by the competition and their products are only affordable by the premium brands.

One way of obtaining good value for money and to offer the customer best-in-class design and quality is to make parts within the brand's common property. This can have great benefits on the one hand as it makes certain design cues part of the brand. On the other hand, it can become any designer's nightmare when the carry-over aspect does not fit the new design concept. Part communality can also have a negative effect when it becomes too noticeable to the customer and the press. The person who pays more for a larger, more prestigious car might feel cheated when they realise that what they are getting are the same parts as in the less expensive small car.

To make an impact in terms of design requires not only the design team to come up with a brave and unique concept but also for the management to buy into it as well. The value of more expensive design features cannot be measured as effectively as the size of the stowage space and the power of the engine, nor can the design be charged for in the same way that a feature or extra can be charged for. Despite great feature offers, a customer might just leave the showroom if the design is not convincing or appealing enough.

As the competition between the OEMs is growing, the designers' great hope is that companies will invest in good design, making bold decisions that will hopefully result in an emotional product that will drive up the value of the brand. A strong brand will only be able to sustain poor design for a limited amount of time. If the design is consistently poor, the brand will disintegrate and it will take a truly outstanding design and marketing strategy for the brand to be reborn. Design, therefore, becomes a strong tool in making a brand survive. ■