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IT'S NOT WHAT YOU MAKE, IT'S THE WAY THAT YOU SAY IT: REFLECTIONS ON THE DESIGN–MARKETING INTERFACE

Paul O'Sullivan

Good design is a cornerstone of marketing. Design is an important variable in every aspect of marketing activities – products, processes, packaging and communications. Yet this topic attracts little attention in the marketing literature and there is, one suspects, very little cross-fertilisation between marketing and design disciplines. This paper puts design on the agenda for both marketing academics and practitioners as well as providing a review of what is embraced within the broad subject of design. Some observations on the history and role of design in an Irish context are offered also.

It may be useful at the outset to recognise that design, usually thought of in terms of the service it provides to manufacturing or marketing, is in fact a significant business activity in its own right. A fully developed design sector is a feature of all the major economies, and design is a huge and successful service industry though it tends to be hampered by the fact that it is 'commonly perceived to be a cottage industry' (Thackera, 1997, p. 33).

There is some truth in this, as most design businesses are classic SMEs with fewer than twenty-five staff and many are two or three person partnerships operating in the traditional professional practice mode. However, there are over ten thousand such companies in the European Union with well over 150,000 employees and the design courses of Europe produce 30,000 graduates each year, most of whom apparently find employment in their discipline.

Thackera (1997) has stated that in a European context 'By the year 2000, expenditure on design by governments, cities, multinationals, small firms, and agencies is forecast to rise to more than 12 billion ECU ($14.4 billion)'. He cites industrial research in Europe to suggest that '85 percent of design projects recover their costs through improved sales, higher profit margins, or lower manufacturing costs. Of these profitable design-related projects, 47 percent paid back their total investment within a year or less, with the average being 15 months from the launch of the design project' (Thackera, 1997, p. 33). Clearly activities of such scale and pervasiveness, delivering benefit at this level and along these dimensions, must be making a very significant contribution to the marketing activity of firms.

However, design remains a weakly conceptualised area with little scholarly debate and there is often a lack of clarity regarding the actual domain and contribution of design, occupying as it does an ill-defined space between science, art and business. It might be regarded as a classic victim of the 'two cultures' dichotomy with the added complication, not to say taint, of a commercial orientation.

Design and Craft

It may be useful to clarify the nature of design itself by reference to its antecedents and its evident interface with both craft and art.

Modern design grows out from, and is nourished by, the craft tradition. Craft is usually accepted as referring to the output of an individual worker, trained on a one-to-one basis by other skilled craftsmen and generally working with hand tools and manual labour as the power source. In craftwork, the designer and maker are often one and the same and the traditional vernacular forms found in the structure and shape of created objects are often the outcome of a long process of creative and practical evolution.

Crafts evolved steadily for two thousand years, but something quite dramatic happened in the mid-eighteenth century. In that first dawn of the industrial revolution, a new relationship between man and object was proposed which created a dynamic that found its ultimate expression as the modernist project. That new relationship has done much to create the contemporary reality of the late twenti-

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eth century, but it is only in recent years that scholars have begun to recognise that there is more to the relationship of man and object in a consumption context than initially meets the eye.

This change in the eighteenth century was no mere new departure but rather a discontinuity in terms of everything that had gone before, and in turn it laid the groundwork for Taylorism and Fordism in the twentieth century. Craftsmen such as Chippendale and Wedgwood recognised the exchange value of design as being independent of the products created. For instance, Chippendale was not just a designer of furniture but used his displays to develop a significant business in interior design and his published catalogues served both to advertise his product and to disseminate his actual designs. Josiah Wedgwood, on the demand side of the equation, was among the earliest to use freelance designers when he reorganised his family's production works for mass output (McDermott, 1993, pp. 3–4).

Mass production in the nineteenth century involving standardisation of product and mechanisation of process, together with a set of parallel changes in the operation of the marketplace (for instance the development of department stores, mail order distribution and the arrival of advertising hoarding), gave a stimulus to debate about the social function of design and the role of the designer. A Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures (1835) saw the beginning of formal design education in Britain, with eighty schools being established by the 1860s (McDermott, 1993, p. 5).

However, the more important development in the nineteenth century arose from a direct reaction against this industrialisation and a growing criticism of the standard of manufactured objects, even those exhibited at the Great Exhibition of 1851. This reaction took the form of a Gothic Revival led by Pugin, with Ruskin as the high priest of a new medievalism.

The anti-industrial faction found its most complete expression in the work of the Arts and Crafts Movement with its belief in 'truth to materials', traditional forms and – through the work of William Morris – the achievement of social reform through design. The achievements of the movement and the extensive documentation of its ideas and approach on the part of its leaders had made Britain the design centre of the world by the end of the nineteenth century. This dominance was short-lived as the tide of Modernism ushered in the new machine age and the torch was passed to new leaders, probably forever. The design agenda for the new century was set by the intensifying debate between modernism and consumerism as reflected in the contributions of the Bauhaus, de Stijl and the 'humanist, restrained' modernism of Scandinavia on the one hand; and the American and Japanese pursuit of consumer styling together with the radical modernity of the Italians on the other.

Design and Art

It may be also useful to clarify the interface of art and design. The questions which arise when mapping this territory concern the nature of art and the nature of design; the various claims they make on the mind, sensibility and allegiance; and the interface or, perhaps more accurately, the dialogue which delineates and animates the space we seek to define between their respective domains.

Definitions proliferate, but in the final analysis visual and plastic art in most cultures is concerned with creative expression. More traditional views have provided little clarity or certainty in the twentieth century. For instance, the notion that art is largely concerned with the representation of beauty or with beautiful representation has become increasingly problematic as artists consciously abandon representation, question its ontology and status and raise doubts about the possibility of an aesthetics of representation. Since the artistic revolution of the *fin de siècle* we recognise that the subjectivity of the artist is the issue – and frequently the very subject – of art and the making of art is ultimately bound up with the expression of self or of self's response to the external world.

Design at face value seems an uncomplicated and straightforward activity. Its reference points are located in the external world – problems in space, visual communication or product development – which will require pragmatic, usable, fully applicable (and usually economically justifiable) solution. That solution will of course involve innovation, invention, perhaps a great creative leap; but the

essence of the designer's response is that it is disciplined, focused, and engaged. It is use-oriented and shaped by the specification of others. In short, it is a response rather than an expression.

This view finds its articulation in the rationalist approach which characterised the Bauhaus and later the *hochschule fur gestaltung* based at Ulm which had a major influence on the Braun product range. Although its curriculum included fine art when it formally opened, with the arrival of director, Tomas Maldonado, fine art was replaced by quite different subjects: mathematics, sociology, ergonomics and economics.

Design then lives in the mundane world of everyday value and use, apparently far from the imperative to express which troubles the subconscious of the great artistic talents. It is a world defined by need, economic order, specification, formal inquiry, testing of concept and articulation of response, the world of transaction and usually, the world of exchange value – in fact, the world of marketing. For some marketers it is not merely a world in which marketing has its place but rather a world where significant primary relationships are expressed by, and find their shape and form through, marketing activity. Ivor Owen, Director of the Design Council (an interesting figure in that his personal experience spanned engineering design and industrial design), has no doubt whatsoever that 'Design also starts with an obsession with the customer and understanding what the customer wants' (Owen, 1990, p. 41).

While a full description of the actual design creation process lies outside the scope of the current discussion, it is noteworthy that almost all analysis in the design and the design management literature features the 'brief' as a central element in the process. This no doubt offers comfort to the marketer familiar with such working methods and perhaps gratified to see the discipline and focus of briefing as the main plane of interaction between designer and client.

On the surface at least, marketing and design are two areas of endeavour, two sets of processes which clearly traverse the same terrain and seek to deliver solutions to problems which find remarkably similar frameworks of definition. There is in fact a tendency on the part of marketers to see design as a subsidiary activity, a contribution within the overall process from mind to market and therefore, essentially, a tool at the disposal of the marketer. Marketers will say that of course the creativity and contribution of designers is valued, for instance in the advertising process or the product design process. However, in the former case we find the designers and art directors working to a brief that all too often comes through an account executive with a classic marketing approach. Marketers in the advertising world will say that of course their approach is all down to team work, and of course the art director may have a role in developing the brief. Nevertheless, there is an inescapable sense that the role of creativity is to provide a service to ends defined by other interests. In the case of product development the designers similarly may be present in the briefing along with the engineers, the ergonomist and the marketer but again there is a sense of the real power being mediated and focused through the lens of a market-defined brief. In short, design is too often seen as available and docile and a useful means to ends.

However, there are far more radical ways of viewing the processes of design; perspectives which challenge the orthodoxies of conventional marketing wisdom and accord a status to design activity as one of the main machine tools of culture.

Towards a Definition of Design

There remains the difficulty of what design actually is and what the term may legitimately encompass. One view suggests that:

> Design involves the way concepts are developed, the way products are made, the way they look, the way they behave, and the way they are used. In Italy, they say design can be applied 'from a spoon to a city' – only nowadays you have to add 'in cyberspace, too'. So it's hard to define design. But does it matter? Can you define 'creativity', or 'organisation', or 'communication'?, Probably not. But you need them in your business and the same goes for design.

It surely does matter for design itself and for productive interaction with other disciplines. If design is essentially problem solving, what of the varying nature of the problems? The elasticity of definition which allows one to capture activities as diverse as architecture, product packaging, furniture cre-

ation, hotel or restaurant interiors, a modern shopping mall, a street map, an improvement in a machine tool or a systems specification within the use of a single term may seem dangerously overstretched. Is one in fact arguing that all of these are essentially products of the same capacity, moving through the same processes and susceptible to a common framework of analysis? We may be travelling perilously close to a meaningless catch-all definition.

What is needed is a unified field theory. There is no doubt that design has done much to shape contemporary reality and that reality as a lived experience represents a gestalt. As Victor Margolin has observed:

> Design is all around: it infuses every object in the material world and gives form to immaterial processes such as factory production and services. Design determines the shape and height of a shoe heel, the access to computer functions through software, the mood of an office interior, special effects in films, and the structure and elegance of bridges.
>
> (Margolin, 1989, p. 3).

In professional practice we tend to treat these varying areas of design as separate and discrete, and the educational formation we give to the practitioners might suggest that the disciplines are not cognate and that the truly productive relationships lie in the direction of the technologies and marketing activities with which the individual disciplines interact. Fielden's (1963) confident and concrete definition of engineering design is not at all untypical. He sees it as being 'the use of scientific principles, technical information and imagination in the definition of a mechanical structure, machine or system to perform a pre-specified function with the maximum economy and efficiency'. There is not as much as a nod in the direction of aesthetics.

We tend to find that the more aesthetically oriented design specialists will have had their training in art schools, whereas design disciplines related to engineering or computer science are the domain of technology faculties. Architecture is perhaps the only acknowledged hybrid. Margolin (1989, p. 4) points out that we segregate 'the design of objects from the design of immaterial products like techniques and services, which are the province of fields such as industrial engineering and urban planning'. The reality, however, is that professional practice increasingly demands participation by all these specialists in multi-disciplinary teams which are brought together to solve problems. For instance, Dutch telecom company KPN has a research team working on advanced network applications. Eight of the 50-strong team are industrial designers employed because they think in three dimensions, are committed to making things work, and focus on the user.

In a celebrated paper entitled 'The science of design: creating the artificial', Herbert Simon spread the net as widely as anyone has dared when he called for a science of design which would provide a rigorous training in the common ground:

> Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones. The intellectual activity that produces material artefacts is no different fundamentally from the one that prescribes remedies for a sick patient or the one that devises a new sales plan for a company or a social welfare policy for a state. Design, so construed, is the core of all professional training: is the principal mark that distinguishes the professions from the sciences.
>
> (Simon, 1989)

Clearly the adoption of such a position would totally invert the normal employed relationship between marketing and design. In fact it would be possible to conceptualise marketing as one subset of design and its main concern as the management of a group of processes within the overall project of inventing an artificial world.

The Design-Marketing Interface

We have, then, two radically different perspectives on the interface of marketing and design with each of the disciplines, arguably, claiming the status of enduring shapers and creators of human experience. The absence of detailed empirical study of the interface forces us to rely on the available records of pragmatic interaction by way of an examination of local and international case experiences. Some interesting themes emerge.

Ivor Owen's view suggests a warmth of co-operation and common purpose in the practical, routine interaction of design and marketing, a view that will bring deep comfort to the marketer:

> If design is anything, then it is of course multidisciplinary starting with marketing. In many cases it is a toss-up whether marketing comes first or good product design comes first. Either way, there must be no schism between the two any more than there should be between industrial design and engineering design. It includes manufacturing technology, innovation, material technology.
>
> (Owen, 1990, p. 42)

Owen argues for design's necessary obsession with the customer and his wants, and goes so far as to suggest that so important a task cannot be left to the marketers.

> All too often this is not researched adequately and sometimes not at all. All too often there is almost no real understanding of what the customer thinks. There is not contact between the designer and the end user and there is precious little, very often, from a marketing or sales force who may deal with the distributor or the retailer but do not really understand how the customer thinks.
>
> (Owen, 1990, p. 41)

A practising industrial designer and academic commentator sees his discipline as having two particular areas of responsibility in the product development process, viz. 'to represent the market and user requirement in determining the ergonomics and appearance of the product' and 'to integrate market, user and engineering requirements into a whole design solution' (Tovey, 1997, p. 5).

These are British views and perhaps tinged with the idealism of the academy. Design evolution in the United States came through the institutional development of consultancy practices called upon to create new products in order to stimulate, and later maintain, economic growth. The European Modernist tradition did come to the United States following the suppression of the Bauhaus in Germany in the early 1930s. The arrival of Gropius, Mies Van Der Rohe and Moholy-Nagy led to the establishing of the Chicago Institute. The 'White Gods' (in Tom Wolfe's (1982) cynical phase) had an enormous and unarguable influence on American architecture and art but, paradoxically, had almost no impact on mass consumer products. The legendary figures of American design lived, spiritually at least, on Madison Avenue and included Raymond Loewy (Gestetner, Lucky Strike Cigarette pack, Greyhound Bus), Norman Bel Geddes (Toledo Scale) and Walter Dorwin Teague (Eastman Kodak). These pioneers of American design tended to be theatre designers and art illustrators who offered design services as an adjunct to advertising. They created an indigenous style known as 'streamlining' and subsequently provided an important tool for building obsolescence into consumer products. 'The lesson that Loewy and his peers learned and then taught to the rest of the modern world was that manufacturers could be convinced that good style sells more products. This belief in the consultant designer's ability to style the sales curve upwards was the first and most formidable weapon in the new design profession's armoury' (Dormer, 1993, p. 14).

Their earliest imitators included the Japanese: a more extreme version of the styling phenomenon characterised the development of Japanese product design. Sony hired its first industrial designer in the mid fifties following Matshshita who had led the field in 1951. Major Japanese companies set up in-house design departments and adopted an American market-led approach. However, this early emphasis on styling has been followed by new pressures arising from batch production. The rapid and continuous introduction of new models by Japanese companies in their local market has been used both to satisfy and to stimulate demand. It is not uncommon for products such as a PC to stay on the market for as little as four months. The result is that while the American understanding of ergonomics was growing and the British were improving product functioning, the Japanese remained obsessed with styling and, in the view of some local commentators, their 'strengths are turning into fetters' by preventing them from making 'products with enduring value' (Ohtani et al., 1997).

The tensions between extreme market-led design and the requirements for aesthetic and structural values continue to find expression in a variety of solutions and styles. It may be useful to observe how varying approaches to product and indeed to graphic design originating in a variety of cultures serve to map out in practice the interface of marketing and design in contemporary commercial environments.

Design Classics

In theory at least, design should be informed by a formally stated market-led brief. Reality suggests that even classic designs are achieved through a more diverse set of processes and conditions. If we regard a classic as a work that has demonstrated enduring quality and enduring appeal beyond the local or the temporal, then it is correct to regard certain designs – packaging, furniture, products, graphics and spaces – as classics of the century.

The *Coca-Cola bottle* is widely regarded as the most universally recognisable item of packaging in the history of trade and commerce. The bottle itself is heavy, anachronistic, and expensive but such is its appeal and its recognition value that Coke can never abandon it. The bottle is idiosyncratic in shape but it (together with the red livery and the distinctive typefaces) has come to be a significant aspect of the brand identity of Coke. It is one of the few truly global phenomena in the world of marketing, and one of the few brand symbols that appear to transcend all linguistic and cultural barriers. Such is its potency as a symbol that one tends to forget that it began its life as a practical piece of packaging.

Advances in technology, the need to vend and dispense more efficiently and the cost-effectiveness of cans all meant that Coke had to face up to the dilemma of presenting its product in something other than the effective brand vehicle. Project Arden (as in Elizabeth Arden of the cosmetic world) was designed to refresh the visual face of the corporation and involved a number of modifications. For instance, the circular motif which was part of the Coke identity for half a century has now become a square. The status of the bottle as an icon raised its own problems which were ultimately resolved by taking the 'dynamic curve' of the bottle onto the can by way of the distinctive vertical white line.

In effect the Coke package designers are 'briefed', or perhaps more accurately 'constrained', by a weight of tradition which embodies a substantial part of the brand value in a now impractical packaging expectation.

The *London Underground map* is regarded as one of the true design classics of the century. In defiance of conventional design management wisdom, this map was not the outcome of a commission and no brief, effective or otherwise, was written. The initial design suggested by Harry Beck, an engineering draughtsman, was turned down by the board of the company as being too strange and revolutionary. There had in fact been a number of previous attempts at imposing order on the complex weave of lines created by the amalgamation of diverse companies in the twenties and early thirties.

However, earlier maps had foundered on the issue of literal representation of distance and true geography. The new solution was based on the realisation that geography doesn't matter under ground and it freed the map from the tyranny of representation by realising that connection was the issue. The result is more a stylised diagram than a map that abandons both scale and geography and owes its inspiration more to an electrical wiring diagram than to any cartographic principles.

In a sense a brief did exist in that the need for such a map or diagram was widely recognised, and the chief executive of the underground system had sought to give a rational, scientific and efficient image to the whole operation. This was manifest in the overall approach to the architecture and interior design of new stations opened in the twenties and thirties, which owed everything to the European modernism then current. The map, like the stations, is uncluttered and functional; it conveys information efficiently and form follows function perfectly.

The design has in fact achieved the status of an icon and people form their mental maps of London through the perceptual lens of the underground as represented diagrammatically. The design has had a profound influence on the eighty or so other underground systems around the world as well as on road, rail and air network representation. It has achieved the status of popular graphic art object as poster, postcard and souvenir motif and is a key example of the complex interface of marketing and design. Furthermore, the design becomes the basis of a range of spin-off merchandise and finally the design itself becomes a standalone art object possessed of a severe, electric beauty. In short it serves as functional graphic, brand, product communication device and artistic icon.

The *Aga Cooker* which has been around since 1922 is the product of a Swedish engineering inventor who was invalided by blindness rather than a conventionally trained product designer working to a brief. Dahlein, the inventor, set about applying a scientific engineering knowledge, together with technical insights in metallurgy and nutrition, to the domestic problems of cooking and heating. The absence of dials, sharp edges and exposed hot surfaces is perhaps the major concession to the inventor's blindness and is in a sense testimony to an implicit brief.

The cooker was introduced into England in 1929 and rapidly established itself through a process of top-down selling where opinion leaders such as the Royal family were recruited as early adopters. It is interesting to observe that the Aga design might work in Britain or Sweden but would not work in France and certainly not in the United States. The Aga is very much able to fit in with the 'conservationist, Volvo owning classes' as Stafford Cliff of the Conrad Design group has observed.

The *Volkswagen* is one of the most famous mass produced shapes in the world and is the outcome of a formal search for solutions to the specific problem of creating a people's vehicle worthy of the Reich – a brief driven by ideology as well as economics. The Volks works best as a basic functional design with nothing of its innovative engineering or styling superfluous to its function. Almost all cars up to the mid-thirties had been box shaped and 'to go from the box to the round is a good Bauhaus principle'. The VW, originally the KDF Wagen, promised 'strength through joy' for a political movement that was gothic in its iconography as in its horrors.

Post-war the relaunch of the VW on the consumer market in 1948, its origins now forgotten, provided an apt symbol of Germany as once more competitive and competent. The attributes of performance and reliability became synonymous with the car. The early advertising made a virtue of its oddity, featuring the tag line 'Ugly is only skin deep'. Wally Olins of Wolf Olins noted that 'the reliable, simple, bizarre appearance endeared it to the customers' and in the 1960s the Volks found a new lease of life as a cool accessory for alternative lifestyles and an implicit critique of American car design and values. The car now acquired yet another personality: an identity as 'Herbie' and 'the Beetle' that transcended cultural and market boundaries and resulted in eighteen million units sold worldwide by 1974.

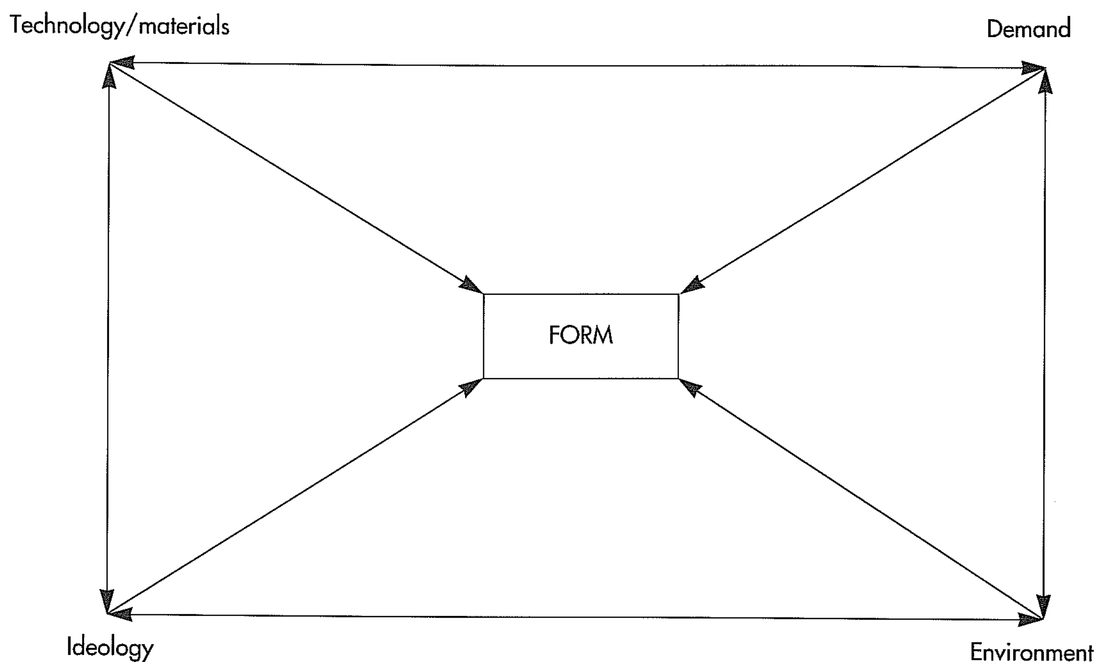
An Irish success story points to the fact that the interplay of marketing and design disciplines in practical decision making can create a product capable of real commercial success. The case of *Ballygowan Spring Water*, an 'invisible' product in a market which could be neither anticipated nor predicted, points to the achievements of design in branding and packaging as well as the efficiencies of distribution, logistics and pricing. It offers a useful insight into the value and processes involved in the strategic management of design in response to a marketing brief.

As Mark Mortell observed, 'branding is the life blood that flows through the product life cycle and design is one of the critical elements that pumps this life blood ... design is much more than the shape, size and graphics of your logo, packaging or stationery. Design is the vehicle that projects your corporate and product personality. It is the outward face of what you offer to potential customers' (Mortell, 1992).

He argues that design must therefore be managed throughout the marketing mix, in packaging, corporate identity, advertising and promotion and even the office or factory. The original packaging design and corporate image came from McConnell's Advertising Service and concentrated on communicating the nature of the product, the Irish origin and the heritage associated with the source. A clear glass bottle with a green film over it suggested the Irish origin and provided an innovative approach to a packaging solution familiar in the product category.

The emergence of imitators necessitated a reappraisal of the packaging and image after Ballygowan had grown the market and had, in effect, become the generic name for bottled water in Ireland – with many substitutes being served when the product was requested. 'Re-design becomes a serious brand consideration in Ireland for those reasons' and was regarded as vital if effective penetration of a strongly supplied and more sophisticated UK market was to be achieved. To achieve a premium price position in the UK and a launch in North America, Design Bridge was

Figure 1 **New Product Development Contexts**



commissioned to work with the printer and glass bottle maker.

The process involved:

1 understanding 'the brand's existing equities'
2 involving these towards new concepts without losing essential values – variations on shape and graphics
3 developing the actual bottles and labels
4 differentiating the varieties
5 testing the concepts and adapting as needed
6 print and bottle production
7 manufacturing and technical issues (Mortell, 1992).

Mortell claims the new brand/pack/identity 'confronted' passing-off and differentiated from me-too brands, providing an effective, competitive, international standard pack, extended the brand applications and lengthened the product life cycle.

Mapping the Interface

The general consideration of these case histories would suggest that diverse forces drive a complex range of interactions between marketing and design and the processes involved in design creation are subject to a range of influences which vary in strength, origin and orientation. The forces which influence design might be modelled as a parallelogram representing a complex interplay of technology/materials with demand; in turn this is shaped by a changing environment and all of these factors may ultimately be shaped and directed by the influence of ideology. Figure 1 provides a diagrammatic version of the interplay of these influences on the final form sought by the designer.

As was stated at the outset, the field of design is relatively poorly conceptualised and debate has hardly commenced regarding the interface of marketing and design. An accurate map which will provide due recognition of the varying claims of the respective disciplines seems as yet elusive. The problem is compounded, as Richard Buchanan has observed, 'by the different modes of argumentation employed' by the various actors. 'Industrial design tends to stress what is possible in the conception and planning of products; engineering tends to stress what is necessary in considering materials, mechanisms, structures and systems while marketing tends to stress what is contingent in the changing attitudes and preferences of potential users' (Buchanan, 1995, p. 19).

Marketers argue from contingency, engineers argue from necessity and designers argue from a vision of possibility. The major advance in recent decades has arisen from increasing recognition of 'the interdependence of these modalities of argument in the development of successful products' (Margolin and Buchanan, 1995, p. xiv). In effect, the dialogue has only just commenced.

Author

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