



DESIGN MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

ARTICLE REPRINT

**Design
Management
Review**

Brand-Driven Innovation

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Reprint #08193ABB51

This article was first published in *Design Management Review* Vol. 19 No. 3

The Future of Design Leadership

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Brand-Driven Innovation

by Erik Roscam Abbing and Christa van Gessel

As the nature of innovation shifts from the application of new technology to the delivery of meaning and value, brand and design become critical resources, as well as partners, in the development of market-leading products and services. Erik Roscam Abbing and Christa van Gessel provide an overview and case studies of this process as it moves from “brand usability” to “innovation strategy” to “design strategy” to “touch-point orchestration.”

The role of branding for organizations and their stakeholders has changed considerably throughout its history. From its origin as a sign of ownership through the recognition of its status as a mental representation of consumer benefits, the brand has now arrived at a point where it represents the vision and strategic positioning of an organization in relationship to its environment. As such, the concept of brand has moved from being thought of as merely an addition to the offering (the logo on the product) to its acceptance as a representation of the culture, knowledge, and vision that inspires and strategically guides that offering. The brand, in its most developed form, has become a strategic asset for businesses, inspiring both ideation and action and helping them to make decisions and to frame the future in an increasingly complex world. This has significant consequences for the way brands are managed



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within organizations and for the role of design in bringing brands to life. We see four major shifts occurring (Table 1 on next page):

1. The focus in branding is shifting from creating compelling promises to fulfilling those promises in a meaningful and authentic way.
2. The ownership of the brand is shifting from marketing to the entire organization. It is even being shared by stakeholders outside the organization.
3. The place of the brand in business processes is shifting from the end to the beginning, especially in the processes that deal with innovation and creation of offerings.
4. The content of the brand is shifting from stressing organizational strengths to framing a vision of the relationship the organization aspires to have with its stakeholders.

The great opportunity that arises from these shifts is that the fulfillment of the brand promise has become a task for everyone within the organization, and innovation and the development and design of new products and services are great ways to accomplish this fulfillment. Brands, in short, need innovation.

Just like branding, the role and meaning of innovation for organizations is also changing. Innovation is often described as a risky process that is difficult to manage, but that is inevitable for organizations that want to stay alive in marketplaces where everything, from user needs to legislation, from technology to competitor behavior, is in constant flux. In other words, organizations are forced to innovate, but it's a painful business.

Our view on innovation is different: We believe it can be a very rewarding process, from both a business perspective and a human perspective. Just as personal growth stems from natural curiosity, the pleasure of learning, and the satisfaction derived from achieving new levels of knowledge, insight, or skill, innovation is the natural tendency of organizations to become better at what they do or to discover new areas of excellence. This means that beyond satisfying external stakeholders and responding to external opportunities and needs, innovation should be driven from within. This has important consequences for the way innovation is managed

within organizations. Again, we see four major shifts occurring (Table 2 on next page):

1. The drivers for innovation are changing. Where once the major drivers were external (new technologies, competitor behavior, and market metrics), now they lean more toward the internal (unique insights, vision, competence, and ideas). This does not imply that organizations in which innovation is internally driven are isolated from the outside world—to the contrary. The change we see lies in the way these organizations handle the outside world. External changes and influences are internalized and embedded in the organization's unique culture before being used as a springboard for innovation.
2. Innovation is no longer about reacting to change, but rather about proactively creating change. It is about creating opportunities rather than saving one's hide.
3. The role of design in innovation is changing from making the innovation look pretty in the end to being a source of meaningful new directions for growth. Design's function is to merge the various disciplines involved in the innovation process into a synergetic team, and to combine visionary inspirational ideas with tangible and concrete solutions.
4. The focus of innovation is shifting from

Table 1: Shifts in the way brands are managed.

Aspect of branding	Old branding paradigm	New branding paradigm	Implication
Focus	Creating promises	Fulfilling promises	There is a strong new focus in brand management on touch-point design and offering innovation.
Ownership	Marketing	Entire organization	The "usability" of the brand for all stakeholders becomes increasingly important.
Place in process	At the end	At the beginning	The brand as foundation for business process has to be rooted in strong organizational and stakeholder insights.
Content	About the strengths of the organization	About the relationship the organization aspires to have with its stakeholders	The brand as relationship has to be based on insights within the organization <i>and</i> its stakeholders.

the application of new technology to the delivery of meaning and value.

Again, the opportunities that arise from these shifts are huge. We see innovation growing toward a discipline focused on creating opportunities for delivering value. This value is based on a strongly embedded vision and sense of direction, with design in a lead role as a source for meaningful ideas and a linking force among disciplines.

This implies that the innovation domain within organizations needs a common internalized vision of what the organization is and of how it is connected to its changing environment, in the present and the future. In short, innovation needs the brand.

And so it appears that the domains of branding and innovation need each other to prosper and to benefit from each other in a number of ways. It also becomes clear that design is taking a lead role in this convergence. The bottom line is that for brands to have maximum effect, they need innovation to fulfill their promise, while for innovation to have maximum effect it needs the brand to provide vision, focus, and direction. And in this dance of branding and innovation, design is the music that bonds the two in a shared understanding and a common goal.

A four-step method for brand-driven innovation

While exploring this convergence of branding and innovation and the role of design in this process through project work for our clients at Zilver and through academic research (at the Delft University of Technology's master's degree program for strategic product design and at Eurib's degree program for the master's in design management), we started to work on a framework for managing it. We called the framework Brand Driven Innovation (BDI). BDI defines four domains of opportunity, which can be seen as separate fields, but also as phases in a process:

1. Brand usability
2. Innovation strategy
3. Design strategy
4. Touch-point orchestration

We will explain each step in more detail in the following paragraphs, and discuss what the phases mean in practice in two case descriptions.

Phase 1: Brand usability

We approach brand usability in the same way in which product usability is researched by product interaction specialists when they acquire insights on how users interact with and feel about the

Table 2: Shifts in the way innovation is managed.

Aspect of innovation	Old branding paradigm	New branding paradigm	Implication
Drivers	External	Internalized	Organizations have to develop a strong and authentic vision of who they are and what they can mean to their stakeholders.
Attitude	Reactive	Proactive	In creating opportunities, organizations need a strong and shared sense of direction.
Role of design	At the end	At the beginning	Design thinking, methods, and techniques become vital parts of an organization's innovation toolbox, in both research and development processes.
Focus	Pushing technology	Creating value	Value innovation can only be based on a deep understanding of the organization's culture and potential, as well as the needs and desires of the people using its products and services.

product. If the brand is to be relevant for the organization and the end user, and since it is to be used by marketing and product development (Figure 1), acquiring insights on how these stakeholders interact with the brand is key.

Another insight: If we want the brand to be used by designers, traditional models to capture the brand will not suffice. We want a brand format that is rich, uncut, highly visual, and authentic.

We have also learned that brand usability increases when all the stakeholders who have to work with the brand are involved in capturing it in a usable format.

These three requirements (based on stakeholder insights, captured in a usable format, and high involvement in the process) have led us to the use of techniques from the domain of design research—that is, context mapping, ethnography, and cultural probes.¹ Note that this is research *for* design, as well as research *by* design.² These techniques fulfill the three requirements mentioned above, but are generally used to generate product interaction insights. We are discovering that they work equally well to generate brand interaction insights.

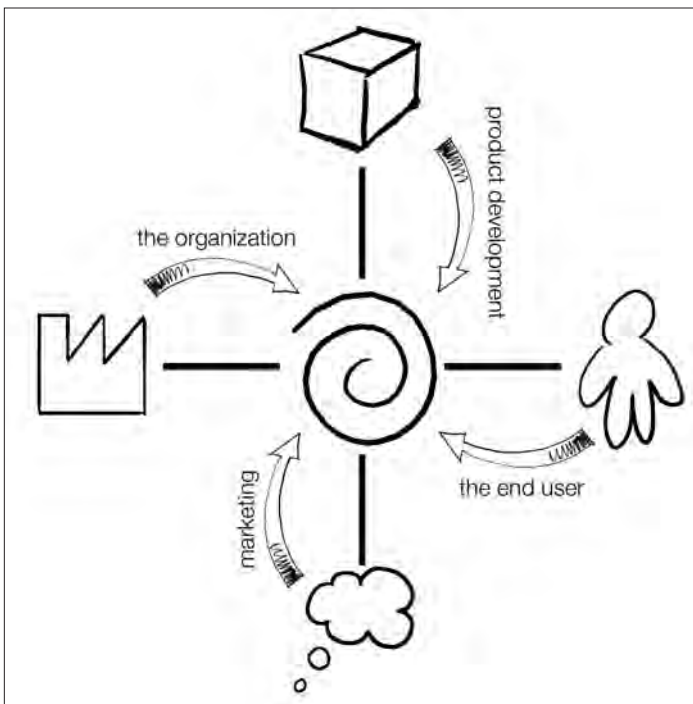


Figure 1. The brand positioned in the center, connecting the organization with the end user, and marketing with product development.

Phase 2: Innovation strategy

Now that we have a brand that is understood and lived by marketing and product development alike, it is time to map out the innovation strategy that helps us fulfill the brand’s promise. In this phase, the team explores desired, probable, and not-so-likely future states of the organization, its stakeholders, and the world in which it operates. It starts by looking at the brand as the relationship between the organization and its customers or end users. It then projects this relationship into the future. By using various creativity techniques, such as scenario building, storyboards, and road-mapping, we explore the relationship the organization aspires to have with its stakeholders, and how this future relationship can be brought to life through future brand interactions. The result is a common understanding of desired and possible future touch-points, which can form the basis for short- and long-term innovation portfolios. Needless to say, this exercise needs to be repeated on a regular basis to allow for changes inside or outside the organization.

Phase 3: Design strategy

Once we know what the directions for innovation are, we can plan how to make this strategy tangible. Using the brand as a source, we can plan a design strategy for turning the fulfillment of the brand promise into a tangible experience for the end user. We see design as “the creation of carriers for meaningful interaction.” In this definition, we consider aesthetics as merely one of the pillars of effective design. To get a grip on the full scope design has to offer, we distinguish five layers in which design can play a role (Figure 2 on next page). The layers correspond to the way the user comes into contact with, and experiences, brand touch-points:

1. First the user encounters the sensorial

1. Cf. W. Gaver, T. Dunne, and E. Pacenti, “Cultural Probes,” in *ACM Interactions*, 1999, vol. 6, pp. 21–29; and F. Sleeswijk Visser, P.J. Stappers, R. van der Lugt, and E.B.N. Sanders, “Contextmapping: Experiences from Practice,” *CoDesign*, 2005, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 119–149.

2. B. Laurel, *Design Research: Methods and Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

- aspects of the touch-point—color, shape, texture. We call this the *sensorial layer*.
2. Then the user interacts with the touch-point by handling or testing the product, entering a store, or browsing through a website. We call this the *behavioral layer*.
 3. By interacting with the touch-point, the user gets a feel for what it does, how it functions, and how it performs. We call this the *functional layer*.
 4. Next, the user is confronted with what the touch-point is made of, how it's constructed, and what physical properties it has. We call this the *physical layer*.
 5. In the end, after having gone through all the layers, the user distills a certain meaning from the touch-point. A mental picture of the entire experience with the touch-point is formed in the user's mind. We call this the *mental layer*.

We think these layers are helpful in the use of design as a strategic resource, because in each layer design plays a specific role. When developing a design strategy for our clients, we define design guidelines for each layer, and we assign specific tasks to each layer as well, relating to the specific aspect of the brand it needs to convey. Next to that, we also connect design disciplines to each layer and define how each discipline can bring the brand to life in that specific layer.

Phase 4: Touch-point orchestration

The fourth level is the level of design tactics. The innovation and design strategy are rolled out in the actual product/service design and in all touch-points surrounding the offering. Rather than striving for consistency, BDI strives for touch-point harmony: Each touch-point should convey its own version of the brand story, but it should be in tune with all the other touch-points (Figure 3).

In practice, this means we employ our design management skills to ensure that designers from various disciplines:

- Are briefed in an inspiring way, suitable to their tasks and expertise, and leaving enough room for dialogue and interpretation
- Are briefed with the brand as starting point and are given the explicit task of bringing it to life
- Are stimulated to connect to the design strategy from Phase 3 by involving them in discovering the rationale behind the strategy themselves
- Are briefed simultaneously and are given the chance to exchange experiences across disciplines, both at the kick-off and during the design process

Our task in this step is to orchestrate so that each designer exceeds expectations, and to let the resulting symphony be even more than the combination of the individual instruments.

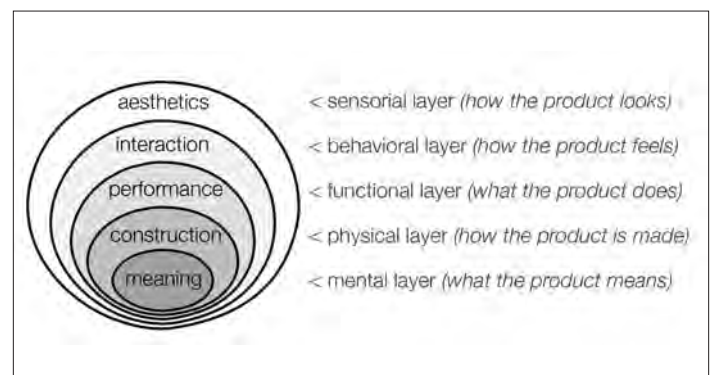


Figure 2. Layers of brand-driven design. The layers correspond with the way the user comes into contact with and experiences designed brand touch-points. These layers are helpful in the use of design as a strategic resource, because design plays a specific role for each one.

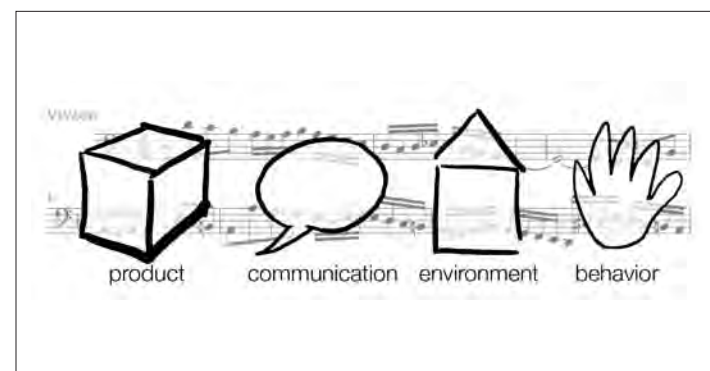


Figure 3. Touch-point orchestration. Product design, communication design, environment design, and the behavior of employees all have to be in tune. Orchestrating brand touch-points is an important task for design managers who use brand-driven innovation.

Case study 1: BDI for a small high-tech B2B start-up

One of Zilver’s clients is a Dutch start-up in the domain of gas chromatography, a chemical analysis technique. The company is highly specialized and operates in an international B2B environment. Our assignment was to create a usable and inspiring brand for them and to develop the resulting innovation and design strategy. We then went on to manage the various people and agencies involved in creating the design touch-points for the introduction of the brand to an international audience.

The brand usability phase

In order to get a deep understanding of the stakeholders of the brand (the founders of the company and a selected group of lead users), we employed *context mapping*. The results of lab visits, the diaries we sent around, and the ses-

sions we held were shared and interpreted with the client and developed further in a number of creative sessions. This resulted in the identity and vision of the organization and the identity and vision of the end user merging into a brand vision and a brand promise. Again, these were shared with and refined by the entire team (Figure 4).

The innovation strategy phase

In this step, we focused on merging the client’s existing innovation strategy, which was impressively well developed, with fresh brand insights. In informal sessions with the client, we explored the future of the client’s market from the viewpoint of the brand: How can we continue to build a meaningful and authentic relationship with our end users, given the choices we have made regarding our brand, and given the changes we forecast in the market in which we operate? And we explored the way innovation should be organized in terms of partnerships, the use of existing infrastructure, and the ways in which different market segments should be targeted.

The design strategy phase

In this step, we translated the group’s insights regarding brand and innovation into a design language comprising a design vision per discipline and a set of guidelines per layer (Figure 5). We developed these guidelines based on our



Figure 4. Diaries and creative sessions lead to brand insights. The company founders, as well as lead users, were involved in this project. They were asked to keep visual diaries (probes) and to take part in brand insight sessions. This created a lot of commitment to the new brand, both inside and outside the company.



Figure 5. Visual design guides for the different design layers related to product design. The collages use examples to inspire designers and to guide them in the right direction, without too explicitly specifying the end result. Left: examples for the products’ sensorial layer. Middle: examples for the products’ behavioral layer. Right: examples of the products’ physical layer (see also Figure 2).

own experience with multidisciplinary design projects, but we also tested them with designers from different disciplines to ensure that they balanced direction with inspiration and that they were easy to understand and applicable.

The touch-point orchestration phase

This step entailed the briefing and orchestration of a team of designers working on the company's first flagship product, the corporate identity (including logo, stationery, presentation template, posters, brochures, spec sheets, and tone of voice for texts), the website, a set of promotional videos, a trade-fair booth, and even clothing (Figure 6). The introduction was a success: The company won two highly coveted awards for innovation, and was complimented by many on the well-balanced and inviting look and feel of the entire offering. But what's most important, the company's founders are extremely proud of their venture, and orders come in faster and in higher numbers than anyone dared to hope.

Case study 2: BDI for a large B2C multinational in the fashion/lifestyle industry

Another client of Zilver is Mexx, a large internationally operating fashion brand. Our assignment was to explore innovation and design opportunities for the brand in the context of

social networks and Web 2.0.

The brand usability phase

For this project, we built an online design research tool (Figure 7) that allowed selected end users to keep a visual online diary about their lives in the context of fashion and lifestyle. Designers working for our client get assignments that stimulate them to study and discuss the online diaries and their authors. They can post comments and react to the comments of others while browsing through the diaries. A result of this dialogue will be a rich and inspiring understanding of the brand and its end users, captured in consumer personas.

The innovation strategy phase

This phase focused on the client's strategy regarding innovation in the realm of social media and Web 2.0, seen both as research for design and as marketing opportunity. With the help of Ralf Beuker (www.design-management.de), we gave structure to the opportunities for social media and Web 2.0 within the client's overall branding and innovation strategy.



Figure 6. Various touch-points that evolved from the NLISIS brand. *Top left:* the NLISIS logo, with the fan representing chromatography colors and the process of simplifying complexity through analysis. *Top right:* the first NLISIS product, a self-contained device for simplifying the process of coupling capillary glass tubes. *Bottom left:* the NLISIS website, with flash animation and introduction movies developed according to the design guidelines. *Bottom right:* the NLISIS trade fair booth travels the world to introduce the new brand and its products.

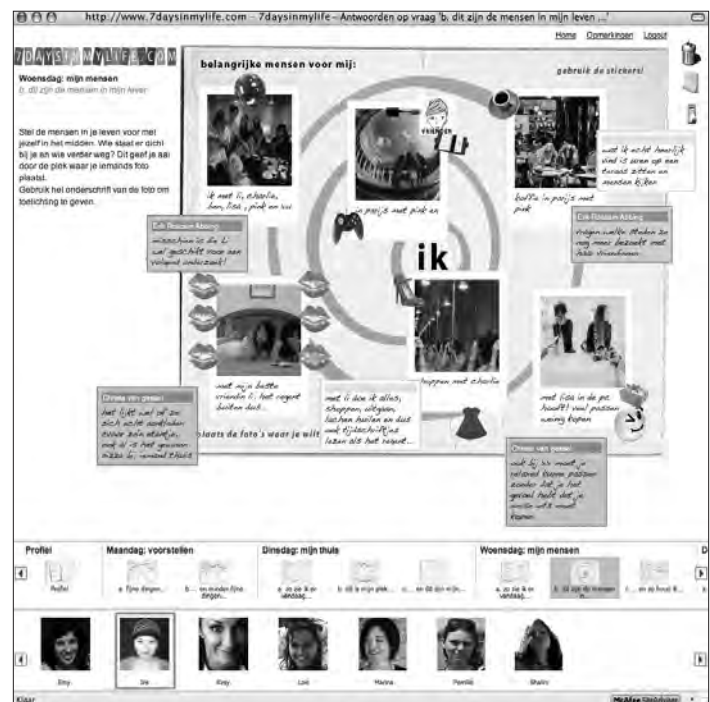


Figure 7. 7daysinmylife.com is an online design research tool for brand development. The figure shows a screen dump of the tool in operation. Participants in the research keep an online diary about their life in the context of the brand that is researched. Participants can upload images ("polaroids") and text ("post-its") to fill their diaries, while—invisible to the participants but with their consent—researchers and designers are allowed to comment on and discuss the content of the diaries with their own "post-its."



Figure 8. Our consumer journey tool. The tool uses personas and their “journeys” through the brand’s touch-points (step 1) to create brand interaction themes for each persona (step 2). These themes are used to brainstorm on the specific relationship the brand has with that persona (step 3). A brainstorm (step 4) then focuses on how new touch-points can contribute to building that relationship.

The design strategy phase

For this phase, we developed a tool based on consumer journeys (Figure 8). With this tool, we look at the way consumers come in contact with different brand touch-points. The tool helps to look at touch-points as points of interaction that contribute to building a relationship. The sort of touch-points to design, and how to design them, follow from the kind of relationship the organization aspires to build with its prospective end users.

The touch-point orchestration phase

Part of the work we do for this client is done within a multidisciplinary design venture called Designest. Designest was created with the orchestration of brand touch-points in mind. It is formed by design management specialists and designers from product, graphical, and new media backgrounds. Most of the sessions for our client are conducted with this group, and the results of all research, strategic sessions, and creative sessions are shared with this group. This way of working ensures that all disciplines work in sync and have a clear understanding of the brand, its strategic positioning, and aspirations with regard to innovation and design.

The result of this project is twofold: On the one hand, our tools and our approach are creating better alignment between outside design teams working for our client on various design disciplines. On the other hand, we have delivered

concrete online interaction concepts that help our client to meet its end users, and that help the end users connect to our client’s brand in a more interactive and engaging manner than before.

Conclusion

In a world where organizational authenticity and end-user relevance are increasingly seen as key success factors in innovation and design, we see the brand as an inspiring and strategically solid driver for innovation. Brand-driven innovation can help you employ this driver to create a durable relationship among your organization and its stakeholders, and to forge a synergy between your marketing and product development teams. For design management professionals, there are huge opportunities in helping organizations fulfill their brand promise by offering unique and meaningful products and services to their end users. In our view, performing this task with both vision and hands-on pragmatism is what design leadership is all about.

Suggested reading

Karjalainen, T. M. *Semantic Transformation in Design: Communicating Strategic Brand Identity Through Product Design References* (Helsinki: Ilmari Design Publications, University of Art and Design, 2004).

Roscam Abbing, E. “Brand-Driven Innovation: Fulfilling Brand Promise Through New Product Development.” Dissertation for the Master of Design Management degree, 2005, Nijenrode/Inholland, available on www.branddriveninnovation.com.

Stompff, G. “Embedded Brand: The Soul of Product Development.” *Design Management Review*, vol. 19 (2008), no. 2.

Online resources:

- <http://www.branddriveninnovation.com>
- <http://www.zilverinnovation.com>
- <http://www.design-management.de>

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