

The Value of Design in Retail and Branding

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Preface

The Value of Design in Retail and Branding

We are delighted with the publication of this book, which sheds important new light on the value of design in retail and branding. Design has been used since the inception of commercial enterprises, and businesses recognise its importance to value creation, especially in forming associations with customers. However, in terms of research or scholarly think pieces, there is a dearth of literature discussing the importance and connectivity of these elements of practice, their meaning and related aspects of commercial performance.

Given this situation, a colloquium entitled 'Experience and Value Creation in Design, Branding and Marketing' was organised at Hasselt University in Belgium in December 2018. Forty delegates from 15 countries attended, and the call for papers sparked keen interest from marketing, design, branding and business scholars, as well as industry practitioners globally. It was a fantastic two days of intellectual and practical discourse, where like-minded people from around the world were able to present, debate and discuss issues that help explain the various phenomena.

A myriad of relevant topics were discussed, from contemporary aspects of digitalisation and the importance of innovation to the use of sensorial strategies and brand identity. A fascinating range of insights emerged, along with a sense of the rigour being used to investigate these issues, and, most importantly, the use of diverse theoretical disciplines in making sense of what is happening in the real world.

This valuable book is the result. We believe that integrating research into design, retail and branding will benefit practice, and this contention is strongly borne out in the papers presented at the colloquium and the chapters of this book. We are delighted to be able to advance understanding of the value of design in retail and branding and how it permeates all aspects of our lives. We are also delighted that a vital yet under-researched interdisciplinary topic is finally receiving the attention it deserves.

Katelijjn Quartier
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Foreword

Creativity, knowledge and zest for life.

‘Design shapes the thought’, that’s our adage, so the question of whether it’s a good idea to write a book about design in relation to brands and retail is answered; that’s a very good idea. Partly because design is in relation to good thinking and very good thinking, you can easily leave it to the authors of this book; all good thinkers.

Retail is the mirror of society, when society changes, retail changes and sometimes retail changes society. Usually, the changes from society are caused by social, technical or economic developments, but sometimes retail is in the lead. For example, IKEA made us think differently about our house and made it possible for almost everyone to develop their own taste. Or like Apple who, apart from their products, has provided retail in electronics, the service concept and the shopping experience with a new dimension. Concepts that have excited consumers are very, very successful and have enriched life for many. There you can see the close relationship between brand and market, between things and real life, between new ideas and latent needs, between ambition and appreciation.

Over the last 20 years, the Internet has brought the greatest change, and Covid-19 has added to this by speeding up the use of online shopping by 5–10 years. This, in turn, has consequences for the shopping street and the physical shops. It had been going on for some time, first the ‘development’ of villages and small shopping areas, then the less vital shopping areas in smaller towns and now it has also reached the main shopping street for some time. Covid-19, however, has made it even more visible and speeded it up by making it compulsory to sit at home.

Physical shopping is the core of this book and also the great strength of the University of Hasselt in which it is founded. However, due to the possibilities of online developments and the growth of virtual shopping, the physical shop is faced with completely new issues, both in terms of the role of actual physical shopping and the encounter with the brand that personifies the shop.

And, of course, the role of the shop in the shopping street or the shopping centre, in which, due to the decreasing number of shops, shops in some cases have to become, or have already become, the destination in themselves. Then, it really comes down to the strength of the brand, the experience that takes shape physically and connects the consumer with the brand and also the customers with each other. Where the combination of the product range, the services offered, the staff

and the shopping process is experienced and consumed. A brand is then a meeting place between like-minded people, brand personality, staff and customers.

Although we are talking about the physical shop, we cannot, of course, ignore the virtual version of brand and shop. This is a ‘body and mind commitment’ where the strategists, the various design competencies, compilers of the assortment, etcetera, must create a single holistic concept that consumers can intuitively understand and find attractive.

The whole thing can be unravelled, but it cannot be developed step by step. There is no sequencing in, for example, ‘let’s make a nice shop first’ and then select the assortment, or instruct the staff. After all, the customer literally enters the shop and sees all the aspects at a glance or certainly in one shopping experience. The shop is beautiful, the items are nice, but, for example, too expensive, or the shop is beautiful, the items are nice, but unfortunately the staff doesn’t understand a thing; then you don’t have a good shop. It is a holistic experience, which also needs to be developed as a whole; all aspects of the shop are positioned in a circle around the core of the brand, which consists of the identity, the position in the market and the driving ambition that indicates the direction and the goal. All this will have to result in a total concept that unites all formula aspects. That fits together so nicely that it can be further developed in a natural way that it can grow.

That’s what I like when I look at the table of contents of this book, a reference work in prospect, in which so many facets of (retail) design come together and from which it will be possible to draw for a long time to come.

Here, one can also see and understand that retail design, the conception of a new retail formula or giving the next life to an existing chain is not a solo art expression of a creative spirit, but an orchestration of elements that need to be brought together. The retail designer is pre-eminently both the composer and the one who can fulfil the role of conductor in such a process. And, in retail design, it soon becomes clear whether the concept is a success and, thus, determines the market and turnover.

Jos van der Zwaal, one of the founders of the Dutch graphic design agency Milford, once described in an introduction to a lecture I had to give, what retail design is and should do:

In modern Western society, design has become as ubiquitous as air and water. We hardly notice it anymore, confrontations with highly innovative or mind bending examples excepted. A retail environment is the surrounding ‘par excellence’ where all functionalities of design are confronted with the public appreciation. Here design is challenged, tested and judged on its effectiveness without a jury, without a casebook and without mercy. The retail environment does not worry about academic divisions between graphic, interactive, product or environmental design. Here design just has to do its job. It has to be functional, physically as well as mentally. It has to communicate the targeted position and the quality level of the retailer. And it has to contribute to the reputation of the retail brand and the company behind it.

In the past, retail design was simply the design of the place where everything took place. Now, retail design has become the very place where all the signals of the brand are captured and translated into the medium where it comes into contact with the consumer. This can consist of a shop, a sound, an event, a shop in shop, etc.

In any case, we know that everything is changing rapidly and that design will have to be able to continuously give shape to that changed situation or need. The designer cannot be a hobbyhorse; he or she has to be open to all signals from the market, adapt to the budgets of the client and be flexible. On the other hand, he or she must also be able to be the conscience of the brand, resist opportunism (a human and sometimes understandable motive) and keep an eye on the details. Raymond Loewy, one of the first major designers in the world, wrote the book 'Never leave well enough alone' because clients are not always the best assessors and are sometimes complacent. And Charles Eames said, 'details are not details, they make the product', about the importance of always 'taking that extra step'.

The development of retail is fast and slow, that is to say, the need for change, more convenience, more contact, more added value is great and some companies are entering the market with that attention, but it is also slow. In particular, companies that have been around for a long time, large and small, often find it difficult to go through the transition. Their apparatus is not equipped for it, and it is difficult to set all the wheels in motion and initiate the necessary adjustment and renewal.

For both situations, the retail designer must be able to offer a helping hand, think further, see what is desirable, achievable, affordable and successful. In all cases, the core of the solution will be at the heart of the brand. This is about authenticity, about interest in each other, in what people are looking for and what the brand can give: the relationship, the experience, the community. Maybe this is not true for all product categories, but today's customer is looking for memories and friendship rather than products and services.

Customer experience is at the heart of the value proposition!

Maybe it is easier if you start fresh or exist for a short time, then you are better able to immerse yourself in today's time. Young designers who are part of it or creative entrepreneurs who start from scratch have it relatively easy; it's a matter of being part of the zeitgeist. However, one day they too will run into problems, as older companies are now experiencing; the problems that have to do with keeping or finding connections with the changing and changed society. Also called 'the wheel of retailing'; this is about product and price (what one offers) on the one hand and authenticity, attractiveness and relevance (who offers it) on the other hand. It is about the fact that a formula that is successful will be attacked and copied, and, thus, will have to renew itself.

The secret to this successful innovation is in all cases the search that leads to finding the 'purpose' of the company on the one hand; what is our company about, what do we offer that makes our own heart beat faster and what is the bigger plan behind our business? Just like with people; 'if you don't love yourself first, how can anyone else love you'. And, on the other hand, to be

able to start the conversation with the customer, everything you do has to be customer-oriented, but it has to come from your heart and not just from the need for turnover and profit.

If you understand that, retail design is much more than the design of a physical space that represents the brand, but it is the actual shape that is given to the brand and the relationship with the customer. All the touchpoints that a customer shares with the brand during the customer journey play an important role in this, and the ultimate encounter in a physical environment is seen as the apotheosis of the customer journey because a virtual relationship is ultimately not very attractive. This is where everything comes together in the spatial experience: the products, the services, the staff, in short, the customer experience in all aspects. The story the customer experiences and eventually takes home with him/her; to friends, to colleagues. A story that is told and makes other people curious. After all, we are group animals and want to belong to something; brands play a major role in this.

Designers actually have two clients: the company and the consumer. The later being a higher power, which ultimately has to be 'inspired' and which sets certain requirements that perhaps would not have come directly to the retailer's mind. Although a company is basically a commercial organisation that sells products and/or services for profit, it operates in a society in which consumers have certain outspoken or intrinsic beliefs that they would like to see reflected in the relationship with the companies they buy from. These can be, for example, political, sustainability, culture or combinations of these. Belonging to a brand has become an overall picture in which opinions, beliefs and actions are an important part.

In the future, retail brands can be compared with media companies; Magazines, commercial TV channels and YouTube channels, which have a certain brand image and conviction, which appeal to certain groups in society, which recognise their needs and group feeling in the content, the form, the shared passion, the products, the events, etcetera. These are challenging concepts that combine vision and commercial strength and that have intrinsic resilience as long as they are able to keep in touch with their target group.

Retail designers can put their teeth into these concepts, enjoy them and above all put their knowledge and creativity to good use. Knowledge, training, education, cooperation – these are the keys to the future, for the individual and for society. It's great that the University is there and is committed to this and will continue to send many well-trained retail designers out into the world, as well as this wonderful book that will certainly do its bit.

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