

CREATING BRAND-INNOVATION SYNERGY: TOWARDS A PRACTICAL METHOD OF USING BRANDS IN THE NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Brands are more than logos that are “stuck on” products after they have been developed. Before new product concepts are envisioned, brands exist – both in the minds of consumers, and in the minds of new product development (NPD) practitioners. In this paper, the values embodied by brands are believed to support strategic decision-making in the innovation journey, which promotes brands to one of the drivers of product innovation. However, extant theory leaves this subject of brand-driven product innovation largely unaddressed, without guidelines of how to make brand values applicable for innovation participants. This paper reports on an empirical research project that aims to fill this gap by developing a model that supports the explicit use of brands in innovation decision-making. Interviews, observations and case studies led to a first concept that was tested and improved in two field tests. The results show that the process of explicating tacit brand values stimulates a strategic discourse that relates to a company’s innovation culture, indicating that brands should not simply be imposed on NPD teams, but that NPD teams have a contribution to make in shaping the brand promise.

Keywords: Brand management, innovation strategy, corporate culture, new product development

1 INTRODUCTION

Why is Google’s brand more than a marketing slogan, but is tangibly experienced every time someone uses Google’s search engine, maps, email, calendar or its host of other products? What is it about Google’s innovation approach that creates such a consistently positive customer experience of the brand through such a diverse range of products?

Most branding theorists agree that the goal of branding is far broader than simply communicating marketing messages to consumers, but is also concerned with aligning the development and delivery of products and services to ensure they meet (or exceed) consumer expectations of the brand. The concept of using brands internally in companies to create alignment and provide direction to employees is known as “internal branding” [1]. However, while branding theorists have advocated using brands as the basis of product development, there is little indication of how this can be accomplished in New Product Development (NPD) practice. Much of the discussion of brands in the NPD context is framed in terms of aesthetic product styling (for example [2], [3]), neglecting the more fundamental role brands can play in influencing innovation decisions, and framing innovation opportunities.

To address this gap, this paper develops a conceptual model to explicitly consider brands in innovation decision-making. This focus is on defining key decision points in the NPD trajectory from an organizational perspective, and understanding what role the brand can play in decision-making. The aim is to seek a practical theory which will contribute to creating brand-innovation alignment in companies.

This paper is structured as follows:

Following the introduction in section 1, the second section describes what literature tells us about brands and about their role in new product development. The third methodological part concentrates on the research set-up. In the fourth section, the organizational context of NPD is described to enable effective application of brands in the organization. Based on the research findings a conceptual framework is presented in Section 5. The settings of the two field tests are presented in Section 6. The paper ends by describing the implications for NPD-practitioners and some theoretical contributions.

2 LITERATURE SUMMARY

2.1 Internal branding and NPD

Brands are traditionally understood to represent the company and its products in the market context, and can be defined as the “intangible sum of a product's attributes” [4] or as a “mental box” of consumer associations [5]. However, several theorists have emphasized the importance of “internal branding” – using brands inside companies to create alignment and provide direction to employees [1].

In the NPD context, Davis and Dunn [6] propose that making a company's brand the central focus of the organization can (and should) “influence product developers, who might otherwise focus more on making new widgets rather than thinking about what the brand (and therefore its products) promises.” Similarly, Kotler [7] states that “branding requires that everyone in the supply chain—from product development to manufacturing to marketing to sales to distributor—work to carry out that [brand] promise. The brand becomes the whole platform for planning, designing, and delivering superior value to the company's target customers”.

However, theory on the application of brands in NPD is predominantly limited to approaches to communicating brands through product styling (for example [2], [3]) providing little practical direction for organizations wishing to apply internal branding to guide innovation decisions.

2.2 Brands as mental models

Brands have been described as mental models [8], [9]. These are “containers of emotions, values and promises” that “enable people to know and predict what will happen” and “help speed decisions” [9]. Senge describes mental models as “deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action” [10]. And Kim [11] states: “Mental models represent a person's view of the world including explicit and implicit understandings”.

The mental models embodied by brands do not only play a role outside companies (in the market context), but also have a significant role inside companies. Ellwood [12] states that: “...the behavior and practices of internal customers generates an approach to business and a specific viewpoint on the world. These are the shared values of a brand and they have a strong impact on the performance of a brand in the external world.” This influence of brands on innovation decision-making is often only tacitly understood by those involved in the innovation process. Stompff [13] calls this effect the “embedded brand”: this is the “brand that derives from the deeply rooted, often unconscious paradigms, values, and beliefs of an organization and that will manifest itself in many subtle ways within the products.”

Within companies, the vast majority of an organization's knowledge resides within the mental models of each individual employee [11], forming a mixture of explicit learning and implicit absorptions. The latter is what makes the articulation and sharing of knowledge about any subject so difficult.

2.3 The refined research question

If brands are understood as mental models capable of carrying deeply ingrained assumptions that affect how organizations understand the world and take action, it is apparent that they can have a significant influence on how innovation is understood, managed and executed in companies.

We argue that brands should be explicitly managed in the innovation process, rather than unknowingly, passively or intuitively, as is often the case in practice. To be more precise, we consider one explicit task of NPD to be the fulfillment of the brand's promise. By actively considering the shared values of their brands in new product development, we believe organizations can create greater alignment within their innovation processes, as well as being in a position to better fulfill (or exceed) customer desires and expectations of their brands through innovation.

This research therefore focuses on developing a practical method to guide the explicit application of brands in NPD decision-making. This is approached as follows:

1. Understanding how brands relate to existing innovation decision making processes, as well as the organizational context and role-players involved in innovation.
2. Based on this understanding, to develop a model to practically guide the explicit application of brands in the NPD context.

3 RESEARCH SET-UP: LEARNING FROM PRACTICE

The research project was conducted through multi-method enquiry: interviews, observations and case studies led to a first concept that was subsequently tested and improved in two field tests.

Nine in-depth interviews were conducted with experts in the disciplines of innovation and branding, from the academic, consulting, and company environments. The topic guide was based on existing theory, and focused on the role of brands in innovation and new product development decision-making.

Observational and action research was carried out within the context of a brand and innovation consultancy (Zilver Innovation in Rotterdam, the Netherlands) over a period of several months. In this period, the researcher interacted with consultants in the company to discuss the approaches, results, progress and concepts used in the consulting work.

Case studies were conducted of selected companies to understand the practical constraints of using brands in the innovation process, as well as to identify current approaches and best practices. While we examined companies in a range of industries, we found branded technology companies a fruitful area for learning, due to their emphasis on both product performance and the cultural context of the market.

Based on the literature research, interviews, observational research and case studies, we developed an initial conceptual model which defined the relationship between a company's innovation process and their brand. This initial model and its application was tested and refined in two field tests with branded product companies to create a more refined version of the model.

4 THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

4.1 NPD planning in the organization

Before brands can be explicitly considered in new product development decision-making, it is necessary to understand the organizational context within which NPD decisions take place. Typically, the process of translating a company's strategic intent into physical products is accomplished on a number of organizational levels, using different planning processes, and undergoing several iterations.

To enable the practical application of brands in NPD, we defined a general model of innovation planning processes in the organizational context. Based on the innovation planning tasks and timeframes, the model divides innovation planning into three categories: Company, Domain and Product. These 3 levels correspond to possible hierarchical levels in a company that each might have their own strategy, tactics and operations. The intention of the model is to identify the strategic choices on each of the innovation planning levels, rather than limiting the conception of strategy to a particular level.

The *Company Innovation Strategy* is concerned with defining the future growth opportunities and innovation directions for the company as a whole. The *Domain Innovation Strategy* is focused on generating product concepts, and selecting appropriate projects for funding through portfolio planning. The *Product Innovation Strategy* is concerned with development of the product or service itself, ensuring it meets company objectives and capabilities, and market needs.




| INNOVATION LEVEL | KEY STAKEHOLDERS | TYPICAL PROBLEMS | GOALS | PLANNING TIMEFRAME |
|---|---|--|---|--------------------|
| Company Innovation Strategy  | CEO, Directors (especially R+D and Marketing Directors), Department heads. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of direction for growth - too few or too many options. • Communicating innovation directions to the whole company. • Ensuring innovation is aligned to brand and company goals. | Defining the future innovation directions for the company | Long term |
| Domain Innovation Strategy  | Product Managers, R&D / Innovation Directors and Managers, Marketing Directors and Managers, Project leaders. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generating and selecting product ideas. • Communicating direction to product development teams. • Creating brand - portfolio alignment. | Generating product concepts, portfolio planning | Medium term |
| Product Innovation Strategy  | Project leaders, R&D teams, NPD Teams, Engineers, Developers Product Designers, Marketing project teams. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clear company strategy. • Interpreting brand and company strategy on product level. • Understanding core product positioning. • Generating new product ideas. | Developing the product or service | Short term |

Fig 1. Model of organizational innovation planning processes

Companies may organize their innovation planning using more or less than 3 levels, depending on the size and/or hierarchical structure. However, the model’s focus is on differentiating between the practical processes and tasks involved in innovation planning in the organization.

Furthermore, it should be noted that strategy development is not simply linear and one-way – while a company’s strategic intent may be translated downwards from the company to the product level, the role of iteration and experimentation in organizational learning should also be taken into account. As Ravasi and Lojacono [14] state: “successful product innovation may inspire an overall organizational development centered on the revision of design principles and strategic intent, which in turn will affect how product innovation is carried out in design centers.”

4.2 Brand-innovation case studies

Case studies were conducted of companies that consistently express their brands through their products, selecting companies as best-practice examples which are adept at aligning tangible product performance dimensions to their brand values. The focus of the case study research was on understanding how these companies practically used and communicated their brands on the different levels of innovation planning.

In the companies we studied that consistently express their brand in their products, we did not find a single uniform definition of the brand that was ingrained on all the different innovation levels. Rather, there existed a broad understanding of the company’s common identity and approach, which was adapted or translated to the specific context of the level.

For example, at Océ, a Dutch manufacturer of professional printers, the brand has been expressed on a company level as *independent*, *professional* and *human*. On a product innovation level however, we found a development team had translated their (mostly tacit) understanding of the Océ brand into a set of six “basic identifying features” – their definition of the key characteristics of Océ products – which they then used as the basis of all their NPD decisions. Their ambition to develop products that exemplify “productivity” (one of their basic identifying features) have led them to design high-speed printers that can accommodate changes of paper without stopping the machine, and paper rolls that their customers can install without specialized training – features which their competitors have not yet managed to replicate.

Our analysis underlined the learning that the somewhat abstract language traditionally employed to codify the brand is insufficient to provide direction to innovation teams [15]. Rather than being defined in abstract marketing terminology, in the best practice companies we studied, their brand values and promises were defined in practical ways that could be measured and compared against their competitors. For example, Google focuses on developing products that are “useful, fast, simple” for customers, differentiating their products through “user experience”, “comprehensiveness”, “relevance” and “speed”. To achieve these goals, they leverage their unique approach to innovation throughout the new product innovation process – for example, they “focus on the user and all else will follow”, and “persistently pursue innovation and refuse to accept the limitations of existing models.”

Furthermore, in the companies we studied, brands are not only understood from a marketing communication perspective (aimed at establishing meaning in the mind of the consumer), but also from an internal cultural perspective (aimed at also establishing meaning in the minds of the employees i.e. within their mental models as was mentioned earlier). These companies obviously understand how their unique innovation culture and approach contribute to the tangible consumer experience of their products. We see this connection between a company’s innovation culture and approach on the one hand, and the tangible consumer experience of the branded products on the other, as an important basis for managing the delivery of the brand in the New Product Development context.

5 THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL

5.1 Defining the role of brands in NPD

Based on the literature research and case study findings, we developed an operational definition of brands that enables their role in new product development to be better understood.

We view brands as “mental models that operate at the intersection of company and market culture. They explicate the relationship between an organization and its customers”. The role of brands is to bridge between a company’s approach on the one hand and customer needs on the other. As such, brands perform an essential task of interfacing between the complex characteristics, processes and relationships that make up companies, and the complex characteristics, processes and relationships of the market.

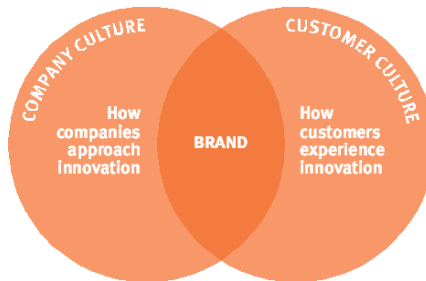


Fig 2. Operational definition of brands in NPD

To *consumers*, brands as mental models represent company, its products, identity and culture. Essential to the NPD context is the function of brands as "promises of delivery" – the expectation of a tangible product experience. This attribute of brands can be summarized as "how customers experience innovation."

To *company employees*, brands as mental models represent the company's identity, culture, strategy, approach to innovation, values and customers to employees. Essential to the NPD context is the brand's function as a representation of the company's worldview and approach: "who we are", "how we do things here" and "how we satisfy the needs of our customers". This attribute of brands can be summarized as "how companies approach innovation". Brands seen from this perspective make them part of the companies culture. Schein [16] for instance defines culture as "the set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds" which seems to touch on the implicit aspects of mental models that was discussed here and that encapsulate the brand values.

5.2 The Brand Experience Strategy - a guide to codify brands in NPD

The definition of brands above led to the development of a conceptual model to explicate the brand for application in NPD. This model, which we termed the "Brand Experience Strategy", is intended to create alignment between the brand terminology and language used on the three different levels of innovation (company, domain and product). Furthermore, the model guides codifying the company's innovation culture and approach in relation to the customer's tangible experience of the branded product.



Fig 3. Development of the Brand Experience Strategy conceptual model

The brand forms the connection of the inner awareness of the brand and the outer customer brand experiences. The goal of the conceptual model is to codify brands in a way that allows them to become an active part of the innovation discussion throughout a company's NPD decision-making processes. In this way, the model promotes the brand to act as a shared language in new product development, assisting the alignment of innovation goals and activities across the three innovation planning levels.



Fig 4. The Brand Experience Strategy conceptual model

The Brand Experience Strategy is comprised of three inter-connected components – the “product development philosophy”, the “desired brand experience”, and the “brand experience promise”. In the remainder of this section, we discuss each of these components in more depth, using some of Google’s values as an example for illustration purposes. These values have been sourced and compiled from Google’s corporate literature [17].

5.3 Product Development Philosophy

Every company has a unique approach, which informs how innovation projects are originated, directed, selected and executed. The left hand side of the framework explicates the company’s internal worldview and the approach they bring to New Product Development.

To define the Product Development Philosophy, the company’s innovation approach is codified into a set of value statements. These value statements represent the most important focus areas in innovation projects, and are described in terms of actions. For example, Google’s Product Development Philosophy includes “We focus on the user and all else will follow”, and “It’s best to do one thing really, really well”.

5.4 Desired Brand Experience

Consumers have certain desires and expectations of the experience they will get when purchasing and using a branded product. On the right hand side, the Desired Brand Experience describes the tangible experience the customer desires from the brand. The experience is divided into three parts: symbolic, differential, and functional, based on the “brand meaning hierarchy” [18], [19]. Codifying the brand on all three levels of experience assists participants to draw connections between abstract brand values and tangible product experiences.

5.4.1 Symbolic experience

The Symbolic experience answers the question: ‘What is the intention behind our product experience?’ This includes the brand emotions (feelings the product experience invokes), the brand personality (what does the product say about me?), the personal values the brand represents, and the ideals (social values) the brand strives for. For example, Google’s symbolic experience includes “Engaging”, “Innovative”, “Profitable” and “Trustworthy”.

5.4.2 Differential Experience

The differential experience answers the question: 'What makes our products different?'

This includes the perceptible advantages and disadvantages of the branded products, the relevance of the products to the consumer, and the uniqueness of the products in relation to competitive offerings. For example, Google's Differential Experience includes "Comprehensiveness", "Relevance" and "Speed".

5.4.3 The Functional Experience

The functional experience answers the question: 'What do users experience in our products?'

This includes the Brand Signs and Symbols (the visual style), the Product Range, and the Functional use experience (what does it do, look like, how does it smell, feel, taste). The functional experience is summarized into an overall functional meaning. For example, Google's Functional Experience includes "Clean design", "Simple layout" and "Easy Input / output". Google's overall functional experience is summarized in the attributes "Useful, Fast, Simple".

5.5 Brand Experience Promise

The central component of the Brand Experience Strategy is the Brand Experience Promise. This summarizes the connection between the Product Development Philosophy and the Desired Customer Experience, summed up in the question "in our opinion, what is the ideal product?"

The Brand Experience promise concisely describes the most important (relevant and differentiated) benefits to the user, not only in terms of function, but in terms of the company's unique innovation approach. For example, Google's Brand Experience Promise is summed up in the founder Larry Page's vision for the perfect search engine: "It understands exactly what you mean and gives you back exactly what you want."

6 FIELD TESTS: TESTING THE MODEL

Initial field tests were conducted in two companies to test the practical use of the conceptual model to assist NPD practitioners to explicitly consider brands in product innovation decision-making. The aim was to firstly use the model as the basis to codify each company's approach to innovation and the consumer's desired experience from the brand. Based on this, the goal was then to consider the implications of the codified (explicit) value-set for the future innovation directions of each company. This would enable us to test whether the framework's format was applicable for use in innovation decision-making.

Both companies in the field tests were small-sized durable consumer product companies with established brands in their home market of the Netherlands. Both these companies conduct new product innovation in-house. Additionally, both of these companies focus on product development and marketing, outsourcing their production to manufacturing partners.

6.1 Codifying the brand

The first step in the field tests was to convert tacit brand values into explicit form. In one field test, codifying the brand was conducted in conjunction with a wide range of brand stakeholders: employees, customers, and distributors of the company, while in the other field test this was accomplished in a workshop session with the company only. To elicit the brand information, several techniques were used, including Contextmapping [20], which was employed to understand the tacit brand perceptions of customers, creative facilitation techniques [21] which were predominantly used to elicit brand information from company employees, and personal interviews. The resultant data was then used to populate the conceptual model, clustering the data into themes to enable the participants to practically deal with the information.

6.2 Using the brand in innovation decision-making

Once the brand had been codified in terms of our model, we aimed to use it explicitly in innovation decision-making processes. Our key area of interest was to actively include the brand in the process of defining future possible innovation directions for the companies.

In the field test, the brand was included in a formal process of generating innovation search areas, using the process defined by Buijs and Valkenburg [22] as a basis. Additionally, the effect of the brand on informally generated future innovation possibilities was evaluated. The main effects of codifying and using the brand in innovation decision-making in the field tests are described below:

Firstly, the actual process of codifying the brand in the framework stimulated NPD practitioners in these companies to consider the practical implications of the brand on the innovation process. Specifically, using the framework encouraged NPD participants and managers to evaluate ways in which the company's innovation culture could be leveraged to deliver the consumers' desired brand experience. This was a spontaneous and intuitive process amongst participants. Secondly, using the brand in formal innovation planning encouraged participants to consider a wider perspective than their traditional orientation – one which considered both the consumer's (tacit) desires as well as the company's approach and culture. Thirdly, the codified values in the framework enabled participants to evaluate existing and future potential product concepts in light of the brand. Finally, defining a company's search areas using the language of their brand can potentially assist to provide clarity and consistency of purpose to their innovation directions.

As such, the field tests indicate that there are several potential benefits to using the brand in innovation decision-making, predominantly related to gaining a more holistic focus in the decision-making process.

6.3 Learnings from the field tests

Our key learning in the field test related to the importance of NPD decision-makers being involved in the process of explicating tacit brand knowledge, rather than simply being handed the final results. Active involvement in defining the brand contributed significantly to NPD decision-makers' understanding and sense of ownership of the brand definition.

Secondly, debate and discussion played a major role in eliciting participants' tacit mental models. These strategic discussions, sparked by codifying the company's approach to innovation and consumer desires of the brand, assisted participants to share their mental models with others, enabling reflection as well as organizational learning.

Finally, rather than defining the brand only in terms of individual values, we found it useful to focus on the relationship dimensions between companies and their customers. We discovered that conceptualizing the brand as a relationship assists to bring the definition to life, making it less abstract and easier to communicate.

7 DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The core intention of the conceptual model developed in this paper is to actively consider the company's brand in innovation decision-making, rather than using the brand unknowingly, passively or intuitively in the New Product Development process as is often the case in practice.

This research begins to define a practical approach to actively and explicitly use brands in the new product innovation processes – not only in relation to product styling, but also in terms of the brand's mental models, which have a strong (but often tacit) effect on decision-making in the innovation environment. A definition of brands in the innovation environment is offered which is translated into a conceptual model to assist codifying brands, aiming to assist innovation practitioners to better understand – and manage – the effect of their brands in NPD processes.



Fig 5. Creating a shared understanding of the brand across the possible levels of innovation planning: company, domain and product.

The “Brand Experience Strategy” model attempts to define a shared language to codify brands on different levels of their innovation process. By creating a shared understanding of the brand throughout new product development, we believe companies can create greater alignment and synergy in their innovation processes. Furthermore, by actively considering brands in NPD, companies can be in a better position to meet customer expectations and desires of their brand, and fulfill their brand promise through new product development.

One of the important discussions prompted by the research is the role of NPD practitioners in relation to a company’s overall branding activities. While much of internal branding theory is concerned with aligning employee behavior to a brand vision, our framework stimulates discussion and debate amongst actors at all three relevant levels – from the board, from the business unit (or domain) and from the product level – about the company’s innovation culture, and its relationship to the consumer’s desired experience of the brand. As such, it sees all these vertically ordered actors as having a role and responsibility in creating an organization’s brand knowledge, and thus having a valuable contribution to make in shaping the brand promise to consumers.

The ongoing process of explicating tacit and implicit knowledge in the innovation environment, grounded in discussion and debate, aims at continually adapting the brand based on the evolving relationship between a company and its customers. As such, the process can assist organizational learning by explicating tacit insights, enabling them to be communicated and understood throughout the organization.

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