Expressions / Impresions

Our framework for analyzing corporate expressions and customer impressions is modeled after a long tradition in psychological research on person perception. The CE/CI Framework is based on the management of two major parts: corporate expressions and customer impressions through aesthetic styles and themes. Each part of chapter 2, entitled “Identity Management through Aesthetics” (Chapters 3–6), will present one of four relevant concepts: corporate and brand expressions; styles; themes; and overall customer impressions.
aesthetic elements

Aesthetic elements are embodied in identity elements. A example is the paper box, which we may isolate as a basic element to be analyzed in terms of its color, size, shape, material, the typeface on the lid, etc.

Corporate and brand aesthetics are created through primary attributes (such as color, shape, materials, and others) and symbols, which taken together constitute styles and themes. Therefore, we advise every manager to pay attention to aesthetic attributes, their qualities (Which color? Which shape? Which typeface?) and whether they should be repeated in other identity elements. In other words, an analysis of an organization's identity should start at the highest level of the four major expression components (Properties, Products, Presentations, Publications), then move through the different layers of the basic identity elements and ultimately identify the key aesthetic elements that are inherent to them.

expressing the private self

Another core task in expressions-management is to express what the organization does, what its values are, its mission—i.e., to express its private self. For a single brand, the task is similar—namely, to express the brand's character.

relating the public face and the private self

The objective of expressions-management is to express the private selves of organizations and brands appropriately through their selected identity elements. But often they do not match perfectly: the private self of the organization or the character of a brand are not adequately projected in the various identity elements that constitute the organization's or brand's public face. These mismatches we call projection gaps.

The process that transforms the private self of the organization into its public face is aesthetics planning of identity elements.
STEP 2 — pre-design step: planning aesthetics

Styles

Corporate expressions, as we have seen, are put forth as the public face of an organization or brand. To produce appropriate impressions in customers, all of the organization's expressions need to be managed strategically. This process occurs through the management of the styles and themes that form the core of the identity.

functions of styles

They create brand awareness. They cause intellectual and emotional associations. They differentiate products and services.

(task) Associate the organization and its brands with a certain style.

elements of style

Buying and consuming are multi-sensory experiences. These experiences are visual and auditory. Sight, sound, smell and taste, and tactile qualities all surround and influence consumers.

These elements come together to create styles across sensory domain.

(example) The aesthetic element of texture contributes to a visual style even though it relates most directly to the domain of touch.

Schmitt and Simonson discuss all the traditional elements of form that make up the design vocabulary. They organize them by perception and discuss their associations.

(visual elements) color, shape, line, pattern

(auditory elements) volume, pitch, meter

and so on for taste, smell, touch

synesthesia

The stimulation of one sense by another sense.

Synesthesia creates an integration of primary elements such as colors, shapes, scents, and materials into "systems of attributes" that express a corporate or brand aesthetic.

By combining the primary elements, a holistic perception is created. The holistic nature of perception is the central tenet of a movement in psychology called the Gestalt movement.

dimensions of style

Here we identify four perceptual dimensions to evaluate corporate or brand identity–related styles:

— Complexity (minimalism vs. ornamentalism)
— Representation (realism vs. abstraction)
— Perceived movement (dynamic vs. static)
— Potency (loud/strong vs. soft/weak)
Summary of styles

Styles are created by designers to reflect the private self of an organization or brand. But styles alone are insufficient to express an identity. Style without content is l’art pour l’art. To be effective, styles must be combined with themes that express an organization’s or brand’s private self more succinctly and more directly.

Misconceptions and visions are often linked to objectives and strategies that are more specific, often measurable, and usually achievable within a shorter time frame. Objectives and strategies are often forgotten and misapplied, resulting in unachievable goals and failure to achieve the desired outcomes.

Foremost... is that of innovation. Apple has been highly creative in product design and execution. In Apple’s model, the innovation and imagination expressed in the hardware and software are critical factors in the success of their products. Foremost is the interaction of technology and style, which Apple has managed to achieve harmoniously. The company has been successful in creating a vision for its products that resonate with consumers and drive sales.

Themes may be critical to a company’s success and can help engage customers. The ability to create and deliver a consistent experience is key to building a strong and enduring brand. A company's approach to innovation and design can set it apart from its competitors. Apple's focus on simplicity and elegance has been a key factor in its success.

Brand personality has been defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand, in particular, a brand can be described by demographics (age, gender, social class, and race), lifestyle (activities, interest, and opinions) or human personality traits (such as extroversion, agreeableness, and dependability)."

Recent research into brand personality suggests that there are five key perceived personality factors:

- assertiveness or lack of shyness
- attentiveness or lack of distraction
- competence or lack of competence
- sophistication or lack of sophistication
- ruggedness or lack of refinement
Chapter 5
Themes

using themes as prototypical images

Themes contain prototypical content. Psychologists define a prototype as “a hypothetical, most typical instance of a category.” prototypes have at their core particular features and characteristics. At the same time, they are idealizations of reality and not reality itself.

repeating and adapting themes

Themes require repetition in order to be imprinted in consumers’ minds. Prototypical expressions often repeated can quickly become embedded in the customer’s memory. The “spreading activation” theory is the leading theory of memory in psychological and consumer-behavior research. This theory views concepts as nodes of a network of associations in people’s minds, with differing strengths of association represented by pathways. the model suggests that when a person thinks about one concept, the thought activates a node in a network which in turn evokes other nodes. With repetition, the pathways become well traversed, and one node (e.g., the brand name) activates other parts of the network and other thoughts easily, especially if it reflects a theme that invokes multiple associations.

creating themes through aesthetics

Executives ought to address three strategic questions concerning the creation of themes:

1. Which characteristics of an organization or brand should be portrayed?
2. Where can a set of rich themes be found?
3. How should the themes be represented in order to express corporate or brand traits?

Three steps are required to answer these questions.

1. One needs to analyze the core elements in the internal and external marketing environments: the firm, its customers and competition. This analysis can identify the company’s constraints and opportunities in theme creation.

2. One should scan for rich thematic content from a variety of different domains within a culture. By analyzing specific domains (such as religion, politics, history, fashion), managers can more easily see appropriate thematic content emerge.

3. One should consider where the corporate themes should be embodied: in names, symbols, slogans/songs, narratives, concepts, or combinations thereof.
mission, vision, objectives, strategies

A mission statement can be described as a statement of a company’s core purpose; how the company provides value to its customers and how its existence is justified. A vision, on the other hand, is future oriented. Where does a company want to go? What does it want to achieve? What are its plans? Both missions and vision are intended to impart clarity, relevance, and direction. They are very general and difficult to convey in a theme—except, notably, through corporate advertising, where companies can specifically express their missions or visions through vivid aesthetics (both visuals and sounds).

Missions and visions are often linked to objectives and strategies that are more specific, often measurable, and usually achievable within a shorter time frame. Objectives and strategies add focus to the mission and vision and can more easily be expressed in corporate themes.

core capabilities

Core capabilities or competencies are strategic assets that may be difficult to imitate or copy. They include strengths in organization, culture, reputation, capital assets, employee productivity and morale, information systems, management, R&D, manufacturing, intellectual property, marketing, or sales. They have been referred to as “sticky assets” that reflect an organization’s history while potentially limiting its future opportunities. About Apple computer’s core capabilities, for example, it has been stated:

Foremost... is that of innovation. Apple has been highly creative in product design...

In Apple’s case, the theme of “user-friendliness” appears in the rainbow-colored logo, in the friendly sound and smiling face displayed when the macintosh is turned on, and in the non-technical icon-based programs. Then there is the subtle allusion to a biblical theme in the Apple logo, with its bite out, recalling Eve’s biting of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge... by 1995, Apple’s core capabilities had been successfully imitated and the company seemed to have limited future opportunities. Ironically, this resulted in another theme, portrayed on the cover of Business Week, the theme of “The Fall of an American Icon”.

legacy

Themes may be selected to express an organization’s legacy—a positive part of the past that a company tries to preserve. Mercedes-Benz of North America used a thematic legacy approach in its recent introduction of the “next generation E-class.”

brand personality

Brand personality has been defined as “the set of human characteristics associated with a give brand. In particular, a brand can be described by demographics (age, gender, social class, and race). Lifestyle (activities, interest, and opinions) or human personality traits (such as extroversion, agreeableness, and dependability).”

Recent research into brand personality suggests that there are five key perceived personality factors:

- sincerity or lack of sincerity
- excitement or lack of excitement
- competence or lack of competence
- sophistication or lack of sophistication
- ruggedness or lack of ruggedness
values

Values are relatively stable (though not necessarily static) beliefs about what an organization should do, concerning both end goals (terminal values) and modes of conduct (instrumental values). Organizational values often arise from a certain corporate culture.

Since organizational values are ultimately designed to deliver benefits to customers, it is useful to consider the characteristics that customers have been shown to value: efficiency, play, excellence, beauty, status, ethics, esteem, and spirituality. All eight of these traits may be converted into themes through common symbolism. A look at advertisements from the automobile industry makes this categorization and its attendant typology clear. [At the time of this writing,] Many small sedans, for example, use an efficiency theme, focusing on cost, gas mileage, and convenience; Volkswagen in its Beetle and later “Fahrvergnugen” campaigns used a theme that emphasized playfulness and fun; Lexus uses excellence as a theme in its “relentless pursuit of perfection” campaign; Jaguar uses beauty as a primary theme; Rolls-Royce, Lincoln, Cadillac, and Mercedes use status as a theme by marketing their cars as symbols of success; Volvo uses references to ethics and responsibility in their ads, which emphasize safety; Toyota and Ford use esteem as the basis of the theme of their good reputations; and Infiniti uses spirituality as a theme.

representing themes through aesthetics

The final task involved in creating a theme is to decide how best to represent themes to convey corporate or brand identity. Themes can be expressed in a variety of ways:

--- as corporate or brand names
--- as symbols
--- as narratives
--- as slogans or jingles
--- as concepts
--- as combinations of elements

Each type of theme expression elicits particular responses from the public and can be used to accomplish a range of objectives. Names may create identifying labels; symbols can transform into icons; slogans and songs may be remembered as mottoes; narratives may be told as stories; and combinations of these have the potential to represent complex concepts.

summary of themes

Themes are among the most powerful tools that managers have in creating and maintaining corporate or brand identities. With their ability to invoke associations and meanings, themes become etched in customers' memories in unique ways. But finding an appropriate theme and deciding on the best way to embody that theme is a delicate task for managers, and a further effort is involved in deciding when it is time to modify or retire a theme. Managing the creation and implementation of a successful theme, however, is a key part of creating an irresistible customer impression, the topic of the next chapter.
Impressions

process and content

Overall impressions are formed from mental representations of an organization's or a brand's aesthetic through a mental process of interpretation. In this chapter we first discuss the process that occurs in customers' minds when they are exposed to the forms, the styles, and the themes embodied in identity elements. We then discuss the content of their mental representations by detailing several key dimensions that are used to judge any corporate or brand aesthetic.

process: how customers arrive at overall impressions

Customers are not passive recipients of an organization's aesthetic output. They are active information processors of the numerous identity elements they experience each day. They edit and interpret the primary elements, styles, and themes to form overall impressions of the organization or its brands.

Overall customer impressions are based on three types of processes that consumers regularly engage in when they process information: (1) integrations, (2) inferences, and (3) attitudes.

1. integrations
   Information integration is an area of extensive research in person perception. How do individuals integrate the many pieces of information about a person into a coherent impression? Two effects are key in suggesting an answer.
   - the centrality effect; "warm" and "cold" are central traits the pervade our judgement
   - the primacy effect; first impressions give a stronger impression than later impressions

2. inferences
   Inferences are conclusions that customers draw based on the identity elements that they perceive. Inference is a process whereby customers make sense of something by filling in missing information based on their experiences and common sense knowledge.

3. attitudes
   Attitudes are affective evaluations of customer impressions. They can be positive, neutral, or negative. They also vary in strength, from neutral to mildly positive to enthusiastic. A lukewarm reaction is ineffective for producing an image, motivating employees or customers, catching attention, or selling a product.
Chapter 6
Overall customer impressions

content: dimensions of overall impressions

There are key perceptual dimensions of overall representations of identity elements for any aesthetic object that we might encounter, such as cars, appliances, retail spaces, even public spaces and entire cities. These include: impressions related to time and time movements, space, technology, authenticity and scale.

time representations
With the present as the anchor point, a time dimension may refer to the past, the present, or the future, resulting in “traditional,” “contemporary,” or “futuristic” representations.

— traditional
— contemporary
— futuristic

time movement representations
— retro
— avant-garde
— legacy
— classic

space representations
— city / country
— east / west

technology representations
Identity elements may appear to be produced by technology or to be handmade. They may have a high-tech look or a natural look, an artificial or natural feel or taste; they may sound synthesized or produced by traditional musical instruments.

— machined / hand-crafted
— synthetic / organic

authenticity representations
Impressions of an identity are also based on whether the identity seems authentic and original or derivative and imitative.

sophistication representations
— sophisticated / unsophisticated,
— refined / unrefined,
— cheap / luxurious

scale representations
A prevalent representation consists of the perceived scale of the organization

— grand / small-scale