# Branding meets Value-Centered Design

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## Abstract

We explore the relationship between brand design as intended in communication and marketing, and value-centered design as defined in HCI, arguing that *brand design* is intrinsically *a "value-centered" process.*

## Keywords

Value-centered design, brand design, brand value, digital communication

## ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation

## Introduction

The concept of *brand* is pervasive in the whole domain of interactive products, being one of the keys for their success in the arena of global economy [6] [8]. Brand design is intrinsically a value-centered process, and understanding how values play in brand design may help interaction designers to create artifacts that are more worthwhile for all involved stakeholders. This paper introduces some basic notions of brand design, scopes the domains for the design of *interactive brand experiences,* and highlights the relationship of this process with value-centered design. Finally, we focus on a specific domain (digital communication artifacts) and discuss the different kinds of value involved in the design process[1].

## Brand: general concepts

In marketing and industrial design practice, the brand of an "entity" - being it a product, a service, a company, an institution, a person or, at a broader level, a country or a culture – is "who I am, what I believe, why you should trust me" [9]. It is a *promise of value* that the entity can keep to all its stakeholders - customers, trades, stockholders, employees, fans, or supporters. The persistent communication of this promise brings to the creation of a *brand image* - a set of symbolic constructs within the minds of people that consists of all the information, expectations, values, emotions, or attitudes that "consumers" generally, both locally and globally, associate with an "entity". As a customer gets in touch with or lives by any concrete reification of a brand, a *brand experience* takes place. A brand experience is induced by any perceivable element (communication artifact, physical product, packging, people, service, event,...) that gives to the customer the experiential, comprehensive feeling of the brand. It is everything that creates not only a functional, but also an *emotional* relationship with a product or service *and* the brand underneath it.

## Brand "Product Experience" vs Brand "Communication Experience"

A *digital* brand experience can take place in two distinct macro-scenarios: *branded digital "products"* and *branded digital "communication artifacts"*. When designing an ICT product, brand values are typically *embedded* in the features of the product itself, as these can drive, for example, adoption, satisfaction, and brand retention in the users. Apple's iPhone is an exemplar result of effective "branded product design". The fact that it is perceived as "[...] *a typical piece of Apple's design: an austere, abstract, Platonic-looking*

*form that somehow also manages to feel warm, organic and ergonomic*" [5] highlights that the product embeds all Apple's brand values, and is able to convey them. Branded product design makes a similar assumption as Values Sensitive Design (VSD) [4] in HCI, and focuses on the user experience that is confined within the boundaries of the interaction with the product itself. In other words, branded product design considers *the user's exposure to brand values (of the entity behind the digital artifact) that occurs within the physical and psychological space of the interaction* with the product (see Figure 1). This kind of brand experience corresponds to the Laffley's [7] *second moment* of truth, which may occurs over and over again as the interaction with the product persists.



Figure 1. Branded digital products make values an experience.

In the design of a brand "communication experience", the role of values and the way users are exposed to them is quite different, an more similar to the philosophy of Value Centered Design [3]. A brand "communication experience takes place when a user gets in touch with a branded digital *communication* artifact, i.e., an interactive object which is intended to be primarily a communication means by which a subject, being it a company, an educational or cultural institution, a charity, a governmental body, an artist, or any other entity, can establish or reinforce its brand image. Websites are a typical example of branded *communication* artifacts. Through the web, an "entity"

not only can offer services and inform its stakeholders, but also interact with them; it can also build and maintain a stronger relationship, influence their attitudes and behavior, and finally deliver a *promise* of *values.* The actual fulfillment of this promise is something that the user can actually experience (and verify) *outside the boundaries of the interaction with the artifact* (see Figure 2).
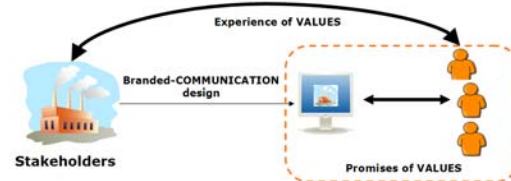


Figure 2. Branded communication artifacts promise values that will be experienced *outside the interaction space.*

The interaction with a digital communication artifact corresponds to Laffley's *first moment* of truth, when the user experiences a "product on the shelf". It offers a preliminary brand experience aimed at conveying the promise of another, more substantial brand experience that will occur in a different space. For example, a university website should somehow embody the university "brand values" in the design of its content, layout, services, information architecture. Some of them could be functional to communicate and to *persuade* potential students about the "quality of the teaching", "the excellence in research", and the "exciting life on campus". This communication should lead the user to have actual (substantial) experiences with the entity behind the web based brand experience (i.e., the university) in other contexts, e.g. by enrolling to the university, by contacting the university office to know more. It is in these actual experiences (second

moment of truth) that the user can verify those promises and experience these values in his/her life.

## Value-Centered Design of Branded Digital Communication

Our research has focused on the design of branded digital "communication artifacts" [1]. We will refer to this process as *branded communication design.*

The input to this process comes from multiple sources, including the analysis of the *business* and *organizational values* [2], and the analysis of *user profiles, needs, and values*. The outcome of brand communication design informs lower-level design solutions concerning a range of characteristics of the digital communication artifacts, including content, information architecture, layout, socialization, communication channel and interaction style.

Figure 3 shows the ingredients that we have identified in this process, and highlights the different kinds of values involved. It also pinpoints how their definition is informed by other types of values. Branded communication design considers first of all the **communication targets**, i.e., the persons or institutions the communication action is directed to. The definition of target profiles is directly related to the client strategic vision, and is under the direct responsibility of top level institutional **stakeholders**. **Brand values** – typically elaborated by brand experts – represent the "core message" that, more than any other, defines the identity and the personality of an entity. They shape the "brand image" - the set of beliefs, emotions, attitudes, or qualities that people immediately associates to an entity in their mind when they think of that entity. Brand values are typically very general and are not directed to specific niches of the audience. They are those with the highest potential of

hitting a conscious or unconscious level, and of remaining as long lasting imprinting that endures after the real or digital experience with the entity.
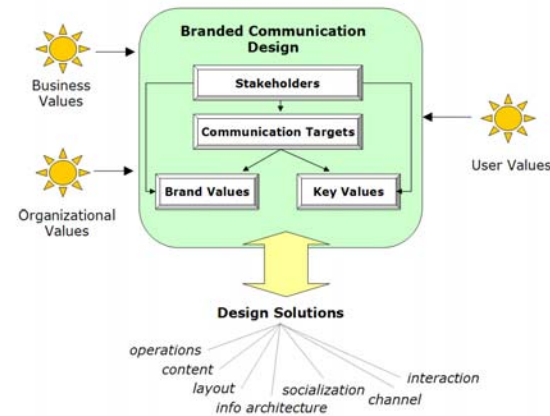


Figure 3. Elements informing branded communication design.

On the basis of the brand values (and consistently with them), **key values** are elaborated as specific pregnant "messages" that need to get across *to specific communication target*. Key values define more concretely the *promise of what that user will experience with the real "entity", being it a product, a person, or an institution or company.* Key values are the elements which persuasion techniques can leverage upon to induce an adoption or change of ideas, attitudes, or behaviors. A key value can be a moral, ethical, social, or cultural *belief* (e.g., "environmental sustainability") which an entity is committed to. Or it can be *a quality of the (experience with the) entity* that is worthwhile for people, either at individual or collective level (e.g. "excellence in research", "diversity", "ideal study environment" or "lively" for a university prospect student). As a final comment, we pinpoint that the

design of branded digital "communication artifacts", or *branded communication design*, is a complex, interdisciplinary process, which is informed by multiple sources, and involves a variety of different profiles, competences, and skills. Our experience in a number of large scale project has shown that a value-centered conceptual framework as the one depicted here provides a substantial support to manage the complexity, and to achieve a more effective cooperation within the design team.

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