Chapter 12
Concept Naming:
Exploratory Methods in the Development of Product Design and Brand DNA

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ABSTRACT

The primary research method described in the case studies for this chapter offers a unique alternative for integrating product personality in brand development. A new method, a specific derivation of product personality assignment referred to as 'Concept Naming,' is offered in combination with other more standard research methods. The Concept Naming method in particular asks respondents to assign personalities to particular areas or features on a product rather than the entire product itself in order to explore consumer/user perceptions, motivations and attitudes towards specific product/brand attributes and the individual meanings and values they place on them. Concept Naming in combination with other qualitative and quantitative data collection methods facilitates the development of a product character vocabulary based on form, color, material, texture, details, and brand. This product character vocabulary when analyzed leads to the development of product and environment design based on Brand DNA (a combination of the tangible and intangible aspects of the product brand).

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes 3 case studies (a master’s thesis research study, a funded research collaboration that involved an industry sponsor, and a funded research collaboration with a city government department in the U.S involving a transdisciplinary team made up of sponsor representatives, university faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students. This chapter explains the Concept Naming research method in combination with other more standard methods and how its use can capture latent user preferences that can be used to generate design and development of products and environments.

This chapter begins with a discussion on the metaphor of DNA and its use in Brand DNA. A conceptual framework that puts into perspective
the interrelationships between the tangible and intangible aspects of a product/environment is discussed and expanded upon in terms of the brand experience, product experience, and brand DNA within the context of the overall consumer experience. This chapter then goes into a discussion of the unique Concept Naming method; its background, development, and its use in combination with other standard qualitative and quantitative methods.

This chapter finally focuses on three case studies that employ the Concept Naming method in the development of brand DNA for a theory-based research study on an existing high profile product and brand, an industry sponsored human-centered research and design program, and a government sponsored brand identity and environmental human-centered action research and design program. The objective of this chapter and each case study within it describes in detail the usage of the unique Concept Naming method and the obstacles and challenges as well as the overall benefits and outcomes of its use as evidence of its efficacy.

BACKGROUND

Defining the Term ‘Brand’

David Aaker (1996, p. 68), noted marketing strategist, defines brand identity as: “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization members.” Knapp (2000, p. 7) states that, “In order to be a brand, a product or service must be characterized by a distinctive attribute in the consumer’s mind.” Knapp defines a ‘genuine brand’ as comprised of an internalized sum of impressions, a distinctive position in the mind and the perceived functional and emotional benefits a product or service provides (Knapp, 2000).

A brand is made up of the associations consumers make with it on four levels: perceiving a brand as a product, as an organization, as a personality, and as a symbol (Aaker D., 1996). In the context of this chapter, brand is defined as the sum total of consumer experiences including both the intangible attributes of a brand (voice, mission, promise and proposition) and the tangible attributes (form, color, material and texture) that make up that experience. In essence, brand is seen as a system of beliefs the truth-value of which is obtained through consumer experiences. This definition of brand best addresses the complexities of the consumer mind in that it takes into account all the touch points of a brand both tangible and intangible.

Brand/Product Attributes and Conceptual Knowledge

Product designers hold a certain portion of the responsibility for managing the conceptual knowledge and meanings attributed to form, color, material and texture from the earliest beginnings of the product design process (Swann, 2002). Jane Darke (1979, p 181) states that there exists a “primary generator” that functions as a “visual image” that arises early in the design process and that it is “…a group of related concepts rather than a single idea.” Post and Cramer (1989, p. 1) define conceptual knowledge as, “… knowledge that is rich in relationships. It can be thought of as a connected web of knowledge, a network in which the linking relationships are as important as the discrete pieces of information. By definition, a piece of information is part of conceptual knowledge only if the holder recognizes its relationship to other pieces of information (Hiebert & Lefevre, 1986).” Conceptual knowledge is also perceptually or visually represented in the mind as opposed to being verbally represented (Kan, Barsalou, Soloman, Minor, and Thompson-Shill, 2003, Darke, 1979). The connection between conceptual knowledge and design lies within the visual relationships which consumers create in their network of knowledge regarding products.