Chapter 27

Product Form Evolution

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ABSTRACT

Companies are coming round to the idea that function and form are complimentary factors in improving the user’s experience of a product and competing in today’s saturated consumer goods markets. However, consumer perception of form is constantly changing, and this manifests itself in the evolving forms of the products that they adopt. From clothes to cameras to cars, change in form is inevitable, and design teams must account for these trends in their product design and development strategies. Through literature, semi-structured interviews with design and trend practitioners, and an archival case study of mobile phone evolution, the authors have developed theories about the continuities that occur in product forms over time, and the forces that can disrupt this behaviour. They then go on to suggest how this view of form as evolving trajectories can benefit future product design strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In the design and development of functional artefacts, non-functional aspects such as aesthetics and social symbolism are key differentiators for success in increasingly saturated markets (Bloch, 1995). But societies and markets never stand still, they are constantly changing. Many consumer product categories are cycling faster and faster each year. For example, it has been demonstrated that the development cycles and market life of high tech consumer goods (such as video recorders and DVD players) has reduced rapidly in recent years (Minderhoud & Fraser, 2005). For a product or brand to succeed in this environment, it is vital that managers and product-planners are aware of the dynamic context in which their product or brand is perceived and consumed. The appearance or form of a product is what links its technology and functional content with its context of use and the emotions of the consumer. Thus the challenge is to ensure that a product’s form is attractive and
relevant to its target consumer segment at its time of release, while at the same time following and evolving the strategy and values of the brand.

The form of a product can objectively be described as a combination of characteristics such as colour, geometry, material, texture, details, dimensions and graphics (Crilly, Moultrie, & Clarkson, 2004). When a collection of products share similar forms or characteristic components of form, this is called a style. For example, a minimalist style is not necessarily typified by a single object, but rather by a group of objects that share a similar lack of ornamentation (Cappetta, Cillo, & Ponti, 2006). A consumer’s cognitive response when viewing a product has several layers, Norman (2004) proposes that we process product form on three levels: aesthetic, semantic, and symbolic. In brief, aesthetic impression is the perception of how attractive or unattractive we find the object; semantic interpretation is the understanding of a product’s function and practical qualities; and symbolic association is the social significance of owning or using the product (Crilly, Moultrie & Clarkson, 2004).

Products don’t just have a functional lifespan; they also have a finite period during which their form is attractive and relevant to its context, which can often be shorter. But some products have a longer duration of aesthetic appeal than others. According to Coates (2003), a classic is a product which has a seminal form that “establishes a new visual standard for a class of products and seeds a new trend that competitors are obliged to follow” (p. 151). When this is combined with a product with epochal innovation that “fills a practical need or solves a problem not yet met or does so in a markedly better way than previous products” (p. 151), then competitors have no choice other than to imitate and thus reinforce the authenticity of the original product and brand.

Not all new products can be classics, and imitation is one potential strategy for responsive companies who quickly identify the potential of riding the wave of a competitor’s success. This strategy has a reduced risk associated with it, but also a finite duration of impact as the innovation or form becomes more widespread. Even in highly functional scientific equipment, form can enable products to outsell technically superior competitors and command a higher price tag (Yamamoto & Lambert, 1994). At the other end of the spectrum, the form of a product can make it date quickly – which can actually be desirable to manufacturers in rapidly cycling markets such as mobile phones or consumer electronics, where visual obsolescence might encourage consumers to replace their devices more regularly. This chapter will explore the dynamic nature of form, and provide ideas and insights that will help design managers and product planners to understand how this view of form can enhance their product strategies.

Objectives

The key objectives of this chapter are as follows:

- To present the theoretical foundations of taste change in consumers and society that lead to change and trends in product form.
- To display evidence from previous studies and the authors’ own research that there are identifiable patterns of behaviour in product form evolution.
- To help design managers and product planners to identify where their products fit into an evolving context and take advantage of this position.
- To challenge companies to develop products that respond effectively to trends and cycles, or even to create their own new ones.

Methods/Information Sources

The background for this chapter has come from an extensive literature review of books, journals, magazines and online newsgroups and blogs in a