Designing the Customer Experience

The old saying, "you can't tell a book by its cover", is really only partially true. In today's marketing environment, in many cases you can tell a book by its cover because the publishers are using the cover to communicate something about the book. Of course, this does not mean that all the hype on the cover isn't just that – hype. But it does mean that the outside is designed to tell the buyer what he/she can expect on the inside.

The trend in recent years among marketers has been to integrate product design and packaging into the segment that has been known as "customer experience". The intent is to establish a deeper and more loyal relationship with a customer based on a broader and more satisfying experience.

Certainly there are many examples that support this approach. Apple is perhaps the premier example of a company that incorporates design into its customer experience strategies. The ipod, for example, comes in an attractive box that makes the experience of opening it and interacting with the new ipod exciting. The product itself – the ipod – with its now-famous navigation wheel, was initially all about design. The wheel changed the way people interacted with the product – thereby changing the experience people had with the product.

The centrality of design has permeated almost every sector, from health and beauty and electronics, to pharmaceuticals and financial services. The use of design as one of the primary factors that engage and sustain the customer relationship – because it enhances or defines the customer experience – is redefining marketing.

Of course, design has always been part of the marketing process. Packaging, for example, has always been used as a way to communicate perceived value. But the actual design of the product has always been in the hands of the engineers whose primary responsibility and concern was the functionality of the product. Today, the design of the product is established at the product development stage, while the functionality is evolving. Today, the assumption is that the design of the product is no less important than its functionality. It is recognized as being an integral part of the experience the user has with the product.

Perhaps the driver for this focus on design is the new way we live our lives – always communicating and constantly engaging media. We are interacting more often with so many of the devices that touch our daily lives that it is as important to us how they look and how they function, as which functions they deliver.

Cell phones, for example, have become almost a fashion accessory, as people are driven as much by how the phone looks as they are what the phone enables them to do. Ease of use is critical, but in many cases not as essential as physical design. Collectively, the design and the function become our experience with the product and we evaluate the product and consider our purchase based on the sum total of this dual calculation.

Another potential driver for this focus on design is competition. As new, particularly foreign, competitors enter the marketplace, companies are in need of new ways to establish their points of difference. Insofar as most manufacturers are able to produce

products with similar functions, the design element became the only remaining way to distinguish a product. The use of design – not only in packaging but on the actual product – became central to the company's capacity to compete.

Certainly in today's global economy many companies are approaching design from an international perspective, using designers from a variety of cultures to influence how products look. This could be similar to the way multi-national teams of engineers have been gathered by great companies to produce innovative products.

The placement of the design team at the beginning of the process, instead of at the packaging stage, is also a major change that has led to improvements in customer experience. The designers have a sense of how things should look, and also how they should be interacted with. By approaching the product from the complete experience perspective, as opposed to a more narrow functional perspective, the designers at the development level have been able to add beauty to function.

The customer experience is more than just what a product does. More and more companies are coming to realize that it is also how a product looks, how the user interacts with the product, how the product is packaged, and even how the consumer acquires the product. All of these elements are combining to make for a new approach to marketing that incorporates many aspects in order to build a relationship with customers. The design aspect – because of its visual appeal and "fashion" power – is becoming one of the most critical aspects of the customer experience. It can no longer be ignored. In today's crowded and hyper competitive market you need to pay attention to design and make certain you look good enough to compete.