

**BEYOND PRODUCTS:**  
designing the brand  
experience

**BY DAVID DUNNE**

The secret of great brands is not  
companies recognized this. [Learn more](#)  
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250 mL (8.4 US FL OZ)

The secret of great brands is the customer experience. If more companies recognized this, brand experiences could go much further in connecting with consumers.



David Dunne

Deep in the night I gaze at a computer screen, its cold, blue light staring blankly back. I press a key. The Web site knows who I am, but somehow misses the point. It addresses me by name and offers me a book I don't want. I know why it does this – I ordered something like this last time – but I'm not in the mood today. I pass on to the next page. The “offer” follows me. I am a valued customer and wouldn't I like a biography of **Henri Cartier-Bresson**? Perhaps a CD by **Yousou N'Dour**? Sighing, I close the laptop.

Why can't my computer know I'm not interested? Doesn't it care how I feel?

Turning around, I see a large cardboard box leaning against the living-room wall. It's a set of bookshelves I bought from **IKEA** earlier today and have been putting-off assembling. Yeah, right – “some assembly required”. But maybe some activity will help me shake off this mood. I fetch a pair of scissors and attack the box, which yields easily enough. An instruction leaflet and a bag of hardware fall out.

When I was a child, my father would spend the long evening hours woodworking, building and repairing items for the home. But unlike my father, I was never a handyman. Perhaps his talent was what put me off ... he was too good, and I felt clumsy, all thumbs. So I approach **IKEA** assembly with some trepidation.

The instructions are laughably, almost insultingly, simple. Smiling cartoon figures put screws in slots, fit pieces together. I follow them diligently, methodically. I know I am not good at this, so I take it slowly. The problems of the world retreat as I become deeply involved in the task. And everything works. It all fits together, perfectly. I have a moment of panic when it seems as if I am short a screw – I curse under my breath because it means I will have to wait 'til tomorrow to call the store and have a replacement sent out – but I

find it under the sofa. I screw it in, erect the bookcase against the wall, stand back and admire my work. I move the lamp a little closer... there. It looks great, and the dark mood of an hour or two ago has vanished.

Redemption by **IKEA**. It sounds absurd, but **IKEA** has hit upon a significant truth: that the secret of great brands is the customer's experience. As much as the price and quality of the furniture matter, my experience with putting it together added a whole dimension of emotional value by helping me shake off a bad mood.

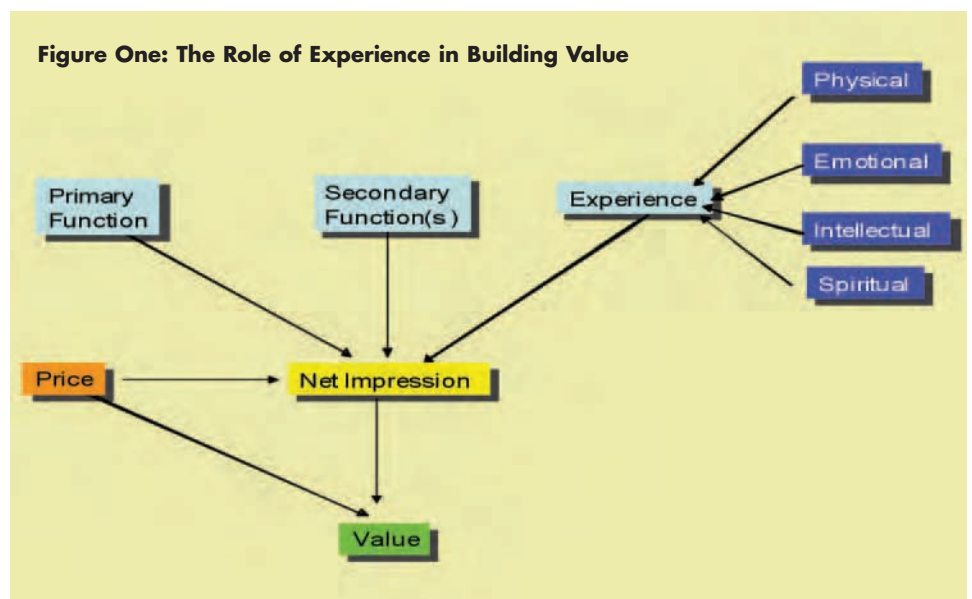
What if more designers took our experience with their products into account? At the most basic level, manufacturers could develop products that make the experience simpler, or more pleasant; but it might even be possible to develop products that sense customers' moods and respond to them.

Modern business is founded on the notion that people are rational decision makers. The logical extension of this is the idea that people seek to maximize the benefit they receive from products and minimize the price they pay. So we expect

that if we make high quality products, cheaply, then the world will beat a path to our door. Cars are about gas mileage or engine performance; detergents are about the best cleaning performance for the price.

But what we often fail to recognize is that people – real people, as opposed to ‘rational’ people – are more complex: they don't just buy products, they experience them, as shown in **Figure One**. Our overall impression of a product is the result not only of its ability to do the job, but of how it feels when we use it. By intimately understanding the user's experience, manufacturers can provide products that are more fulfilling and rewarding – and that can earn consumers' loyalty.

Brand experiences can be thought of as having four domains: physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Many brand experiences are rooted in one domain, but there can be potential to grow by encompassing others. Each of the four domains of brand experience can provide a company with new ways of connecting with its customers on a much more intimate level.



### The Physical Domain

This includes sensory experiences such as taste, smell, feel. Fragrances and food are obvious products that emphasize the physical experience. The aroma of coffee and the crustiness of bread, for example, are critical. But there are physical aspects to other, less obvious, products too: think about that ‘new car smell’, or the unique sound of your cellphone.

An unusual example of customer experience in the physical domain is **Buckley’s** cough syrup, which “tastes awful, but it works”. Here, the foul taste of the product – an unpleasant experience – is used to give the brand its credentials. ‘If it tastes this bad, it must work’.

### The Emotional Domain

The emotional domain encompasses our sense of well-being, security, and happiness. Oatmeal, for example, offers security and warmth; cosmetics offer self-confidence; SUV’s offer security. Emotions can also play a part in our experience of investment – how do you feel when you look at your portfolio? Happy? Sad? Afraid? If your financial institution took your feelings into account, perhaps you would receive a phone call from your advisor when you need it, instead of a monthly statement.

**British Airways** some years ago developed a famous advertising campaign that showed scenes of happy people connecting with each other and with British Airways service personnel. The soundtrack said, “It’s the way we make you feel that makes us the world’s favourite airline”. While an airline is often chosen because it’s the fastest, most economical way of getting from point A to point B, British Airways was arguing that there is more than one way of getting there: it’s the *journey* that counts, not the destination.

### The Intellectual Domain

In the intellectual domain, brands provide us with ‘food’ for our minds. Obvious examples include newspapers, books and computers. But how often have you sat at the breakfast table and read the information on the back of the cereal package? We have a constant hunger for knowledge and intellectual stimulation. This could be provided by such products as cellphones, but

we could obtain information from or play intellectual games with almost any product: a bottle of wine might include information about grape varieties; a pack of seeds could include a quiz about birds.

### The Spiritual Domain

The fourth domain is that of spirituality and belief – our sense of transcendence beyond everyday existence and of behaving ethically. Traditionally, this element has been provided by religion and associated products, but in today’s secular world we can derive it from products and services. Some will find it strange, not to say offensive, that products can fulfil a spiritual role. But think of companies like **The Body Shop**, which built its business on the idea of behaving ethically towards animals, or of ecotourism packages that offer the opportunity to travel while minimizing one’s environmental impact. Or think of the growth in popularity of yoga clubs, equipment and retreats as a means of moving practitioners to a higher plane.

**Starbucks** is clearly very aware of the impact of the brand experience on its customers. When I enter a Starbucks store, I am surrounded by warmth, aroma, soft music, low lights: it is a retreat, a ‘womb’ of sorts in which I can take refuge. In the words of **Scott Bedbury**, Starbucks’ format chief marketing officer, a few years ago:

“We are transitioning from a very retail-centric view about the brand to a view that allows us to say that Starbucks’ role is to provide uplifting moments to people every day. Notice, I didn’t say coffee. If you go beyond coffee, you can get to music, you can get to literature, you can get to a number of different areas. It can also become a license to dilute the brand. Therefore our goal is to remain true to our core, coffee. After all, we are the protectors of something that is 900 million years old. Just like when you drop a rock in a pond there will be ripples that come outside that core, Starbucks is not just a pound of coffee, but a total coffee experience.”

Starbucks has defined its offering as not just coffee, but an experience; and in doing so, it is able to charge the previously unheard-of price of \$4 for a cup of coffee.

In many ways, this isn’t a revolutionary idea: restaurants, for example, know all about the importance of ambience, and

there are service categories – high-end hotels and entertainment come to mind – where the ‘product’ is the experience.

But if it is not a new idea, why didn’t Starbucks’ competitors come up with it first? Perhaps some of them dreamed of selling their coffee for \$4. What probably stopped them from going ahead was that they saw coffee as just a drink. So they probably saw \$4 coffee as absurd – and it is, if all you are selling is coffee. But if you are selling an experience, consumers – some of them, at least – are prepared to pay more.

Currently, Starbucks is introducing listening stations in some of its stores where customers can download music. What is interesting is that the company has chosen to expand by building on customer experience, rather than by trying to make its coffee better.

The brand experience is also emphasized by other retail outlets and manufactured products. Grocery stores are increasingly defining themselves as “food environments” where customers smell and taste new foods, take cooking classes and eat sit-down meals. **Nike’s** Niketown stores are a visual, auditory and sensory experience that surrounds and transports the consumer: in effect, they are Temples of Sport. The **IKEA** experience is all about design – not just how the furniture looks when assembled, but how easy it is for the user to assemble. Paradoxically, by offering the consumer a lower level of service, **IKEA** allows her to experience the emotional rewards of building her own furniture. The user becomes a *participant* in the design process.

But brand experience can go much further. Imagine products that really connect with users – that know how they feel and respond accordingly. Let’s go back to my computer. What if it could sense my mood? If I hit the keys very hard, perhaps I am angry today; or the amount of moisture on my fingertips could be sensed as an indication of how much stress I am feeling. Perhaps it could block out overly-emotional e-mails for a few hours, switch off my phone, or suggest I take a break for some green tea. Now that would be an experience ...

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