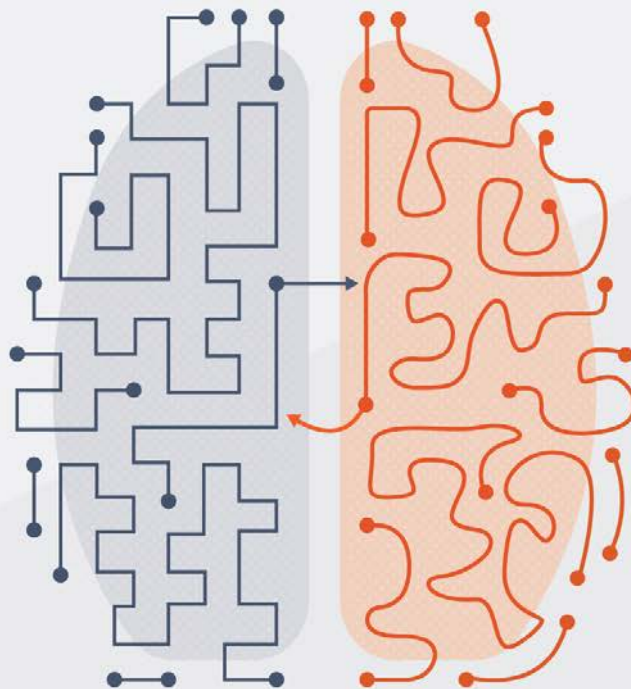WHITE PAPER

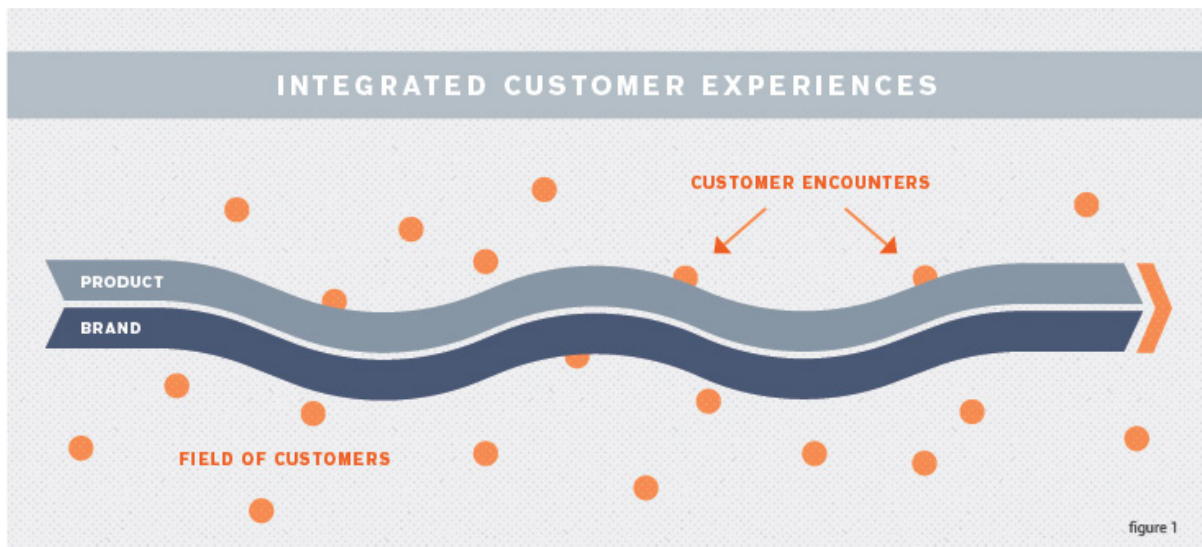# Integrating the Product + Brand Experience

by **Monty Montague**

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Brands are Products and Products are Brands

Products represent the identity of a business. They are the most tangible and enduring presentation of corporate character. Products take on identities that are associated with their brands. Brand recognition and product recognition merge as customers experience the fundamental characteristics of both. A customer's total experience with a product creates a mental image, a brand impression as strong as any image created through marketing techniques. From browsing to purchasing to opening the package, from being delighted (or disappointed) by a product's design and performance to being relieved (or peeved) with its maintenance routine, the holistic experience with a product creates an indelible imprint on the user's psyche, an imprint that is the brand.

Products are, in fact, Brands. Brands represent the fundamental character of products and businesses. Brands are built, packaged, distributed, and sold; they are possessed by the consumer; they are owned, operated, and displayed by you and me as we present our personal identities and voice our opinions. The total sensory experience of a brand—from the

INTEGRATED CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

CUSTOMER ENCOUNTERS

PRODUCT

BRAND

FIELD OF CUSTOMERS

figure 1

digital experience to the point-of-sale environment, from advertising and promotion to purchase and use—creates an image that can inspire loyalty, build trust, and enhance recognition. The brand image is enduring in the minds of the customer. As we consider the purchase of a new car, an investment fund, or a soft drink, we create an idealized image of the product. If we imagine a positive experience with that image, then we make the purchase. The image we have purchased is the brand—whether it is Audi, Vanguard, or LaCroix. The brand is the product.

The notion that the experience of a brand can (and should) equal the experience of a product drives an approach to the customer encounter called integrated experiences (figure 1). Through experiential integration, a customer's entire history of encounters with the product and brand are coordinated by design. Integrated experiences are derived from an integrated design and development process. Through this integrated design effort, organizations can pattern the ways in which customers are touched by products and brands—weaving the encounters together to create a comfortable blanket of images and memories.

The Promise / Delivery Equation

As we look at the range of experiences that a customer has with a product and brand, an interesting equation emerges. The "promise" made by the brand identity and the product appearance creates a buzz, compels customers to buy, and brings new market segments to the table. The "delivery" provided by the product design, the product's performance, and the sustained communication of the brand creates lasting impressions, develops loyalty, inspires referrals, and empowers the product + brand to extend itself into new areas with ensuing products and sub-brands. Through good design, the promise

creates an expectation, and the delivery meets and exceeds that expectation. Together, they become the total experience of the product and the brand

Whether you are a corporate buyer walking the floor of a trade show or a consumer exploring the web, the lure of a promise combined with the memory of past deliveries creates a mental construct that guides your purchase behavior. A first-time purchase of a new product is influenced not only by the promise of that product + brand, but also by the delivery experienced through other related products and brands.

Unfortunately, in many companies brand marketing is so far removed from product development that the promise / delivery equation is complicated by disparate goals, disconnected timelines, and competing voices—and further complicated by wildly different procedures, techniques, and technologies. An integrated design requires a unified product and brand design team. This team, composed of product and brand design specialists, serves as a liaison between the corporate functions of brand marketing and product development.

Companies that take advantage of the promise / delivery equation realize the crucial role that design plays in the integration of product and brand experiences. Nest upended the mature thermostat market through a combination of innovative design that people loved and an authentic brand that had meaning to the consumer. Nike continues to create outstanding design under the banner of a powerful brand through its massive design group that has direct input from the top of the organization. Corporate policy at Herman Miller is driven by a mission to create good design. Each of these organizations looks to its designers to integrate the product and brand in a way that makes bold promises, and then delivers exceptional results.

Strategies for Designing the Integrated Product + Brand Experience

Business managers can create integrated product + brand experiences for their customers using a few key strategies.

1. Start with "The Big Picture"

Like most good ideas in business, the strategies for designing the customer encounter start with a vision. A new corporate brand, product brand, or product design strategy often provides the impetus for updated statements of vision, mission, and purpose (or the creation of these statements for companies that never had one!). Once vision / mission / purpose are defined and documented, specific goals and strategies can take shape to support them.

To effectively manage the customer encounter through the product + brand experience, an organization builds the use of design into its strategy. These strategies can include:

- Using design to help empathize with the people who buy and use the product / brand, identify needs within the target market, and meet those needs through innovation

- Using design as a strategic advantage against competitors

- Using design to communicate the company's corporate character

- Using design to attain the desired market positioning for the product and brand

The product and brand portions of a corporate design strategy drive the first phase of the integrated design process shown below.

2. Weave the Design Process

Like a woven cord that is stronger than the sum of its threads, the synergy of an integrated development process creates a much more powerful design solution than its separate parts could ever hope to attain (figure 2). In the integrated process, the product and brand activities run in parallel, overlapping at key intervals until they reach a single cohesive solution. The cross-functional team includes both product and brand design specialists. The same overarching strategy and positioning goals influence the design criteria for the product and brand. Our process weaves product and brand development through three phases:

- Strategy. Identifying customers and users, understanding their needs and expectations, and devising a plan for meeting those needs and exceeding those expectations.

- Creation. Envisioning the customer encounter through the various elements of product and brand, generating ideas to meet that vision, then evaluating the ideas through both designer intuition and real world validation.

- Implementation. Managing the development and production processes to ensure a timely result that meets all program goals.
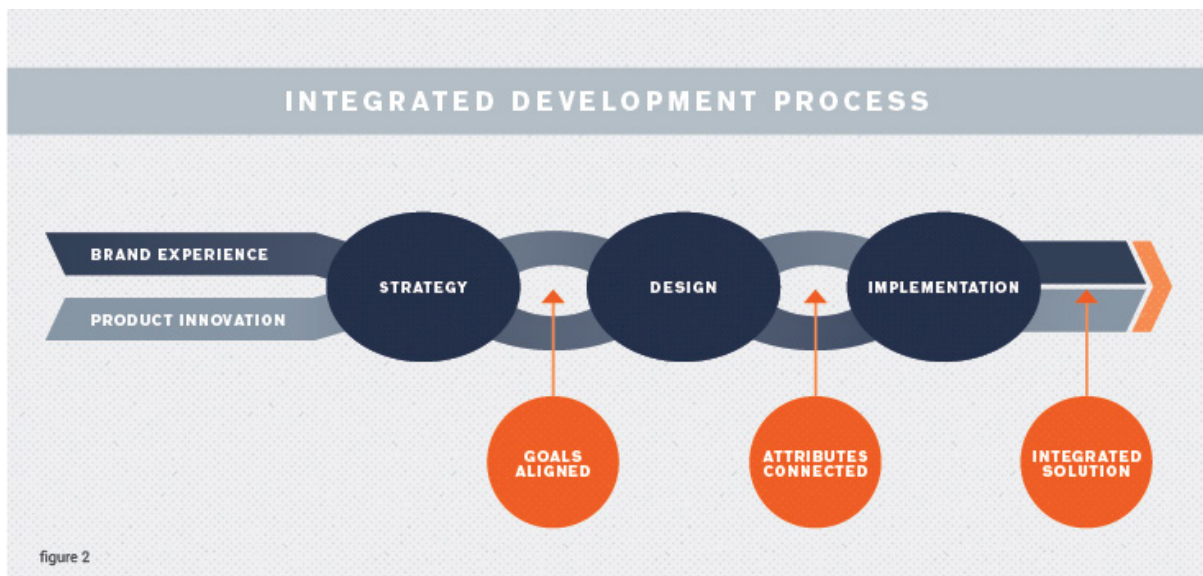

figure 2

3. Research Use It—Don't Abuse It

Market research in the development process is like gasoline —essential fuel, but dangerous when misused. Misconstrued research data can send a design program down the wrong path, and misused focus groups can squelch innovation in a flash. It's been said that market research is like driving a car using your rear view mirror. It tells you what people were thinking yesterday, not what they will think tomorrow. One must understand what research can do and what it cannot do. Traditional market research relies on interviews, discussions, and surveys, and therefore, can capture only what customers actually recognize and can articulate. While important, this type of information is often not adequate for an integrated development program. However, when augmented with observational research, which looks at actual behavior within the environment of use, the combined data provides a detailed picture of the customer and the user. Mix in research into lifestyle trends and technology advances and you get a rich body of knowledge that can predict how people will behave.

BOLTGROUP has formulated a blend of research techniques to answer the question: What design attributes and market positioning will inspire the customer to buy? And what does the user need within their specific environment? With astute analysis of the resulting data, the two techniques complement each other and provide a deeper understanding of needs and expectations. The design criteria and positioning goals generated through this blend of research apply to both product and brand, thereby guiding the integrated design process.

4. Don't Rely Too Heavily on Advertising

Advertising is, of course, crucial to the positioning and marketing of a product + brand. It cannot, however, take the place of good design. Advertising is fundamentally about selling. Design is fundamentally about making things, and making them better. It's about solving problems and meeting needs. It's about creating ideas and creating culture. The hollow claims made by advertisements for a poorly designed product + brand echo in the minds of customers long after the disappointing experience.

5. Develop a Design Partnership

Create a partnership with designers, whether they are consultants or in-house staff. Designers are trained to look at problems from various perspectives, and to explore multiple solutions and communicate them through illustrations and models. They are also trained to ingest information about customers and culture, and then formulate images and ideas. Ask your designers—both product and brand—to envision the total experience for your customer. Feed the process

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with research and test the ideas with customers, but don't discount the designer's intuition. Also ask your designers to build a design ethos within your organization. A design ethos is a corporate culture that includes a system of shared beliefs about design and a design perspective of everything the company does. Any organization can benefit from the key tenets of product + brand design—innovation, customer appeal, æsthetics, and user-friendliness.

6. Take Advantage of Your Customer's Intra-sensory Perception

Intra-sensory perception is the composite experience of the environment assembled from the various inputs that enter through all the human senses. This amalgamation of sensations and memories influences how a customer experiences a product and brand. Every way a customer encounters a product and brand becomes a part of the intra-sensory experience—the journey a person takes in owning and using a product.

Retailers have discovered the importance of intra-sensory perception. From Apple to Anthropologie, retailers have created websites and stores that entertain and inform by engaging the senses. In the brick and mortar environments the entire experience—the sounds and smells, the interplay of graphics and lights, kinesthetic sensation of the space—all are designed to communicate the product + brand message. In these environments, the medium truly is the message. A shared inflection, emotion, and expression are apparent in store signage, music, merchandising, packaging, and the products themselves.

Intra-sensory perception goes beyond the store. The annoying squeak of packing material being removed from a new computer creates a negative sensation that is logged in the customer's mind. The smell of a new car during a test drive brings back positive memories that blend with other perceptions to create a "story" in the mind of the customer that influences the purchase decision. The story is the message—the message communicated through the product and the brand.

Touch the customer at every chance you get. Engage the customer at every opportunity and through all the senses. But engage with clarity. Communicate a clear, consistent message—a message that is unified through an integrated product and brand.

MEET MONTY

As co-founder of BOLTGROUP, Monty Montague has worked with hundreds of clients in wide-ranging industries, including Fortune 500s like GE Lighting and Herman Miller. His name is listed on over 30 patents, and he has received the highest international design awards, including four Gold IDEA Awards, ID, iF, and MDEA Gold Awards