

# BEYOND AESTHETICS



The smoothness or roughness a consumer feels when turning a control knob is one of the many non-visual product attributes that affect brand perception. Determining consumer perception of non-visual attributes can often be achieved by tests using blindfolded consumers.

*Product branding is also established by non-visual experience.*

by gregg davis

*Gregg Davis is principal at Design Central, Columbus, Ohio.*

Conventional wisdom about design is that the identity of a product has relied on aesthetic presentation alone: its design. No one is debating that this first impression is still a valid marker, but to succeed, designers must recognize that the visual is only part of the end experience for consumers with each and every product.

A product's visual characteristics provide the initial indicator of brand, but after the first impression, people interact with and learn much more about other aspects of the product's functions and decide if those deeper levels hold true to their initial impression and to the brand itself.

The notion that visual aspects alone are insufficient to propel a product can be illustrated with an example of a marketplace dud. A well-known maker of small appliances had a highly respected stand mixer product. Because of the brand's success, the company charged its team with expanding the product line to include toasters and coffee makers. They embarked on a quest to determine what visual brand characteristics were most valu-

able to their customers.

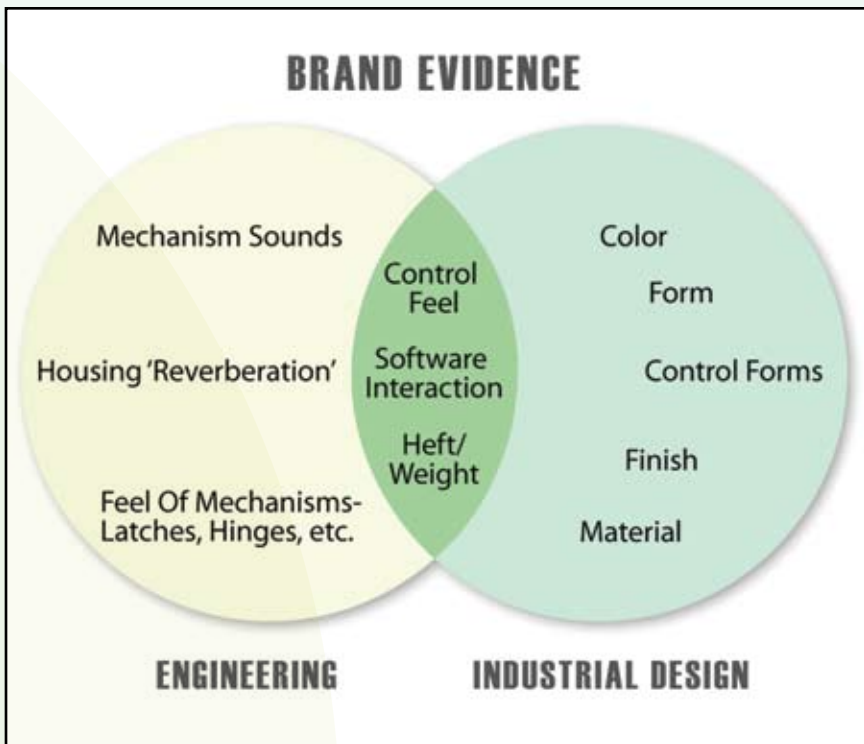
The company hired a design firm and learned all there was to learn about their brand's visual characteristics. The company then applied this learning to its new toaster and coffee maker.

While the product exteriors reflected the brand, the team overlooked the non-visual aspects of the product, choosing noisy mechanisms and using lightweight plastic that just didn't align with the brand. Not surprisingly, the new products wouldn't sell, even at very low prices.

The team was confused. They had, indeed, created a well-crafted set of visual design characteristics; yet the product bombed in spite of its beautiful design. They were sent back to the drawing board to see what went wrong.

It's a common mistake to assume that a consumer's impression of a product's brand is embodied purely through its appearance, its form or its visual qualities. Just as people evaluate most experiences in life beyond the visual first impression, so does a consumer

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**Brand Evidence.** Engineering and industrial design work in concert toward brand experience.

evaluate products using all of their senses.

The weight, or heft, of a product, counts every bit as much as the visual form. It might even be that the sound of a switch, a mechanism, or the deep-throated hum of a heavy-duty motor communicates as much about the brand as does its silhouette. Only when all characteristics, both visual and non-visual, are orchestrated in concert can one truly make certain the brand is compelling and on target.

## Design plus engineering

Industrial design has historically worked in partnership with the marketing division to embody brand and appeal. Mechanical engineers have historically worked under engineering as its own stand-alone discipline.

Marketers have long known that the visual design of a product is developed by industrial designers. They bring in a team to produce a beautiful design, and then they test it through consumer research to determine the most compelling attributes. However, if industrial design over-extends its influence on a product's design, the form can be wonderfully

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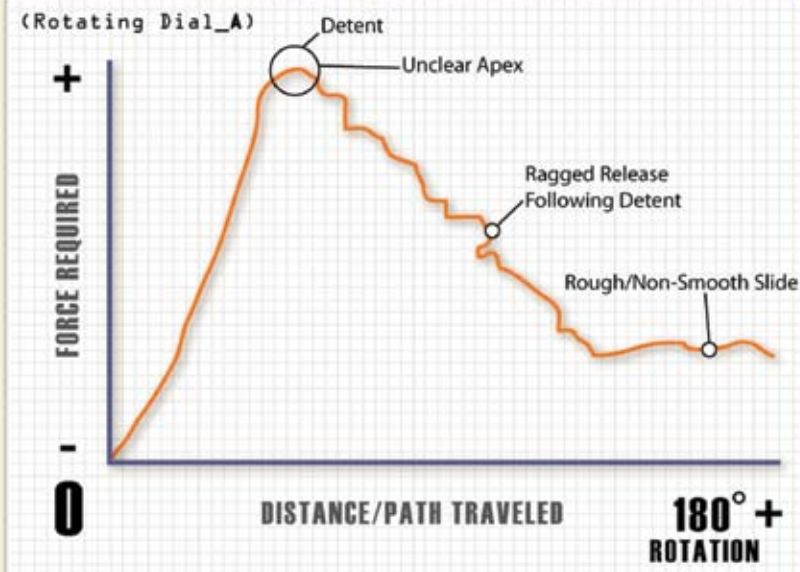
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## MECHANICAL SIGNATURE



### CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF MECHANISM

- un-reliable
- low cost
- prone to break

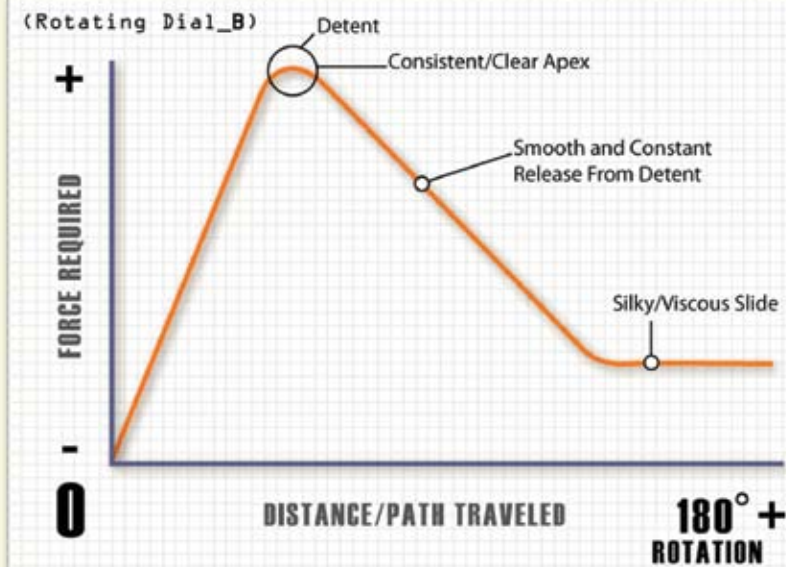
Rotating dial A yields a dynamic tactile response that does not support impression of a quality brand.

appealing, but to the detriment of performance, cost or manufacturability.

Often the engineering of that same product is not linked with the brand message. If engineering overextends its control, the end product might be an unattractive galvanized-steel box on wheels that works exquisitely, but that no one wants to own.

However, when the two disciplines of industrial design and engineering work together, they result in holistic integration of all brand attributes. Companies like Denon Audio produce performance design solutions that are equally believable in their industrial design as they are in their engineering.

## MECHANICAL SIGNATURE



### CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF MECHANISM

- technically superior
- high cost
- long lasting/durability

## Static vs dynamic qualities

To understand how to manage all of the brand characteristics, it is helpful to identify them in verbal form so that they don't get overlooked during product development.

There are two key groups of characteristics, static and dynamic.

Static characteristics include form, finish, color, weight/heft, and the fit of parts.

Dynamic characteristics include:

**Mechanism sounds** (switch sounds, dial sounds, sliding control sounds, and latch sounds).

**Force** (resistance to turning a knob or pushing a lever, smoothness, presence or absence of detents, etc.).

**Viscosity** (whether movement of something like a slider is silky or rough, whether mechanisms are damped to create a solid, quality feel).

**Reverberation** (whether a housing or hollow component sounds solid when tapped, or whether it rattles or makes a tinny sound).

With these concepts in mind, designers at Design Central are exploring new methods for charting forces and viscosities, as well as the sound waves created by products that

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consumers judge to be high quality and reliable — products that command a higher price point.

When designers couple these dynamic qualities with more conventional static qualities, they find that not only are brands able to command higher prices, but they can also leverage more cross-selling from one product to another under the same brand umbrella.

## The blindfold test

One method for researching consumer perception of non-visual characteristics is to blindfold consumers then ask them to interact with a product's controls — knobs, mechanisms, levers, and dials, etc. — then ask for their impressions of the quality of the feel. They may use terms such as precision, quality, reliable, sloppy, flimsy, or professional-feeling. While these are subjective impressions, they can reveal specific details about product attributes that may or may not align with the goals of the brand as defined by the marketing group.

It is also possible to chart the forces, sound waves, and viscosities of mechanisms to identify

their characteristics, which collectively form a signature. This signature allows a comparison of actual mechanics of a design against the subjective impression of that mechanism by the consumer in the blindfold test.

When a pattern of repeatability is observed between the characteristics comprising the mechanical signature and the consumer's impression of high quality, then it is possible to harness those design characteristics and align them with the brand.

## The outsourcing issue

The concept of achieving effective non-visual branding becomes more problematic for companies outsourcing their products, with the degree of the problem dependent upon whether they are outsourcing merely manufacturing, or design and development, as well. A growing trend among many companies is to buy products already designed and developed off-shore, then apply the company's brand logo to the products. This trend is alluring because of its low cost and quick-timing appeal, but it diminishes a brand's credibility.

It can often encourage companies to throw brand out of the window to achieve a quick fix in their product offerings.

The practice is a short-term answer that can result in a loss of market share when consumers' belief in the brand is eroded. Companies should carefully examine the potential pitfalls of pursuing this strategy. Often, a far better course is to perform the design and engineering domestically and only outsource the manufacturing overseas.

## The possibilities

Considering both visual and non-visual characteristics provides a way to harness brand in a holistic way. Smart companies do not envision visual and non-visual attributes as being in conflict, but instead understand how both attribute sets can be combined to work together in concert to design a compelling product that commands the highest price point possible. ■

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