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Not another logo! Designing corporate identity systems that drive change within institutional culture: A case study in participatory design.

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Not another logo! Designing corporate identity systems that drive change within institutional culture: A case study in participatory design.

Abstract

The most prominent expression of an organisational restructure and change in corporate management is frequently a new Visual Identity System (VIS), (Milewar, Hussey, Srivoravilai 2005). This paper uses a case study approach to question and evaluate the role in the design process in ensuring the effectiveness of a VIS in driving and expressing change. It takes as its focus the development and implementation of a new VIS for Museum Victoria, the largest museum organisation in Australia. Developed within an organisational climate of managerial and institutional change, the development of this VIS is innovative on two counts. Firstly for raising awareness and appreciation of the potential offered by thinking about design not simply as a provider of graphic elements but as a provider of strategic communication systems. Secondly its use of a participatory process that brought museum staff from all levels into the design studio to be not only involved in the design process but also encounter at first hand the nature of design practice and thinking. The paper demonstrates how this process ensured the successful implementation of the new VIS and with this, a fundamental change within the Museum's organisational culture together with a shift in attitude towards the potential usefulness of design.

Paper

The most prominent expression of an organisational restructure and change in corporate management is frequently a new Visual Identity System (VIS), (Milewar, Hussey, Srivoravilai 2005). However, Baker and Blamer (1997) argue there is confusion, especially in daily business and design practice, around the differences between corporate identity, visual identification, and branding with its emphasis on the identifying logo. This is despite efforts by scholars such as Melewar, Hussey, Srivoravilai (2005), Balmer (1995), Burmann and Zeplin, (2005) and Baker and Blamer (1997) to articulate the differences and inter-relationship between these concepts in order to build a consensus of understanding that will lead to more effective business and management practice. Increasingly there is agreement that corporate identity refers, as Olins (1978) proposed, to the 'real' identity of a corporation as in 'what an organisation is' and that which makes it distinctive. This, includes its 'corporate culture, corporate behaviour, market conditions, strategy, products and services, communication and design' (Baker and Balmer 1997). In contrast the VIS comprises the visual identifying expression and communication system of this bigger culture and its structure, ideals, behaviours and services, or as Blamer (1995) phrases, the manner in which the 'organisation

uses logos, type styles, nomenclature, [and] architecture to communicate its corporate philosophy and personality. According to Baker and Balmer the value of the VIS is that it:

- (1) Symbolises a change in corporate strategy.
- (2) Reflects a change in organisational behaviour including culture.
- (3) Underpins the corporate communications strategy of the company.
- (4) Shows that the organisation is up-to-date with its use of graphic designs...’.

In agreeing that the VIS is an important strategy for the organisational/corporate identity change Meleware, Hussey, Sirvoravilai (2005) question why greater research attention has not been paid to understanding the complexities of the design process, production and implementation of the VIS which, as they note, is central to the successful marketing of an organisation and its services.

While little research has been done into the designing process that shapes a VIS and its daily implementation, ongoing moderation and adaptation, there is consensus that its success is reliant on its acceptance by the entire organisation and most especially by the employees. As Meleware, Hussey, Sirvoravilai (2005) note most new corporate identity programmes are prompted as a result of internal changes or external turbulence. As an expression of structural, strategic and management changes they affect the entire community by giving visual form to possible changes in established work cultures, identity and purposefulness. This as Burmann and Zeplin (2005) argue, creates problems for implementation given that corporate/organisational cultures involve people and with this social complexities such as shared assumptions, values and norms, patterns of thinking, decision making, behaviour and issues such as compliance, identification and internalisation. The major challenge therefore is how to involve all of the organisation’s stakeholders within the process of change in order to ensure the successful implementation of the new VIS and the resulting repositioning within the marketplace.

This paper brings the voice and experience of the designer into the equation and with this an analysis of how design expertise and thinking can assist in encouraging changes in cultural behaviours and attitudes necessary for the successful implementation of a new VIS and with this, organisational change. In contrast to Baker and Blamer (1997), Meleware, Hussey, Sirvoravilai (2005) this paper argues that the design of a VIS involves much more than graphic elements– logo, type, colour, form etc. Rather it presents a more contemporary understanding of Communication Design practice as a mode of strategic thinking involving a participatory process that places the users of a design artefact or systems at the centre of the design process and decision making.

As an emerging field of design research and practice, participatory design is indicative of changing attitudes in the creation and management of environments for people (*Design Studies* 2007:28). Carroll and Rosson (2007) argues its premise that stakeholders and users be directly involved in the process of design, so that they can offer expert perspectives and preferences regarding the activity that the design will support and most likely transform. While morally sound, this thinking is grounded in the pragmatic proposition that directly including the users' input will increase the chances of a successful design outcome. Within participatory design the designer's and the design studio's role becomes subtle, nuanced and complex. Instead of creating the design him or herself, the designer becomes a collaborator and facilitator who develops strategies for engaging stakeholders within the design process. By inviting stakeholders into the design studio or taking design into their environments in a process of education, exchange and problem identification this ensures the design is specified, implemented, delivered and used in a meaningful manner. As we will see in this paper, this participatory process has the potential to improve the internal management of corporate identity systems by building new understanding of design thinking as an organisational strategy rather than just a graphic image. It can also assist in changing the internal culture of an organisation and raising consciousness about the VIS ensuring its effective ongoing implementation by integrating design thinking and practice more purposefully into its daily culture.

Case Study

Project Brief

This case study focuses on the development and implementation of a new VIS for Museum Victoria, the largest Australian museum organisation. Museum Victoria is the governing body for the museum's collections, heritage buildings and outreach facilities in the state of Victoria, Australia. The organisation includes five venues: Melbourne Museum, Immigration Museum, Scienceworks, IMAX Theatre Melbourne and the UNESCO World Heritage listed Royal Exhibition Building.

The design brief issued to the newly appointed design manager by Museum Victoria in 2003 was that the new VIS should reflect the organisational structure that was being implemented by the CEO Dr Patrick Greene. Prior to Greene's appointed in 2000, Museum Victoria's five venues had traditionally operated with five distinct management teams and visual identities with no visible links between the sites. With the intention of creating a new centralised and networked organisation, Greene led a restructuring that integrated all departments, managers and staff and their responsibilities across all venues. His vision was to also create opportunities for staff to become actively involved in the creation of this networked

organisation by empowering them as responsible decision makers in areas relevant to their experience and expertise. The visualisation of the networked organisation via a system of visual communication and identity was intended to facilitate this process. But first there was a need to break down entrenched barriers between staff resulting from the old hierarchical and silo-based structures and allay the fears expressed by staff that the venues would lose their sense of autonomy as represented via their independent logos and associated communications.

In marketing terms there was a real need for a new VIS that would increase a public awareness of Museum Victoria as the parent organisation of its venues. Market research had revealed low recognition and understanding of Museum Victoria and in particular highlighted confusion between the Melbourne Museum venue and Museum Victoria. There was a clear need to communicate the networked organisation in order to maximise leverage opportunities between venues, encourage cross-venue visitation and raise the profile of the parent organisation Museum Victoria. The VIS also would be required to embody and visually communicate the organisational and venue values, increase the reach of MV communications and deliver a reduction in the cost of producing communications.

Internally, however, there was a real need to address the venues and their staff's fear of losing their sense of autonomy and identity under the VIS, by explaining how their distinctive qualities and important characteristics would be enhanced rather than depleted through a visually connected system. In order to foster the idea of the networked organisational structure and link this to the development of a new VIS, the term 'family of brands' was introduced early in the process. This language was strategically chosen to promote the notion that staff at all venues belonged to the Museum Victoria family and much could be gained if staff adopted a collaborative rather than a competitive stance with one another. The fear was contained by assuring staff that the system would provide for the independent voice of each venue, while still maintaining a strong visual link to the family of brands.

Project challenges

The biggest challenge for the project was to communicate the need for a design strategy. Before the appointment of the design manager, much work had been undertaken to determine the brand values of Museum Victoria and its associated venues. However no work had been done to establish a way to proceed through the design concept and design development phases of the project. It was assumed that the in-house designers would develop a new visual identity by simply redesigning the logos. Organisational values had

been clarified and developed but there was no strategy for a process to translate the values expressed via text into a visual system.

The challenge for the design manager was to communicate that more than logo redesign was required. Delivery of a system was required to address the complex needs of the brief and to break the cycle of merely replacing logos every twelve to eighteen months. It was perhaps surprising for senior management to hear a design manager express the opinion that the VIS project required nine-tenths strategy and one-tenth design. While the design manager believes that strategic thinking is central to an effective design process the Museum's understanding of communication design practice was limited to the graphic visualisation of ideas. While the testing of ideas via a process of visualisation is critical, a strategy and plan are also required to direct and navigate this process and arrive at a consensus outcome.

To this end the actual production of the VIS was delayed for twelve months, during which time an additional budget made it possible to conduct a detailed visual communications audit across all venues, and to employ a design consultant who in collaboration with the design manager investigated possible organisational architectures for the new VIS. This process included consultation with various staff across Museum Victoria and executive management with the aim of resolving complex relationships issues between departments, venues and sub-venues. This consultative process resulted in the agreement that the graphic element that would link MV brands would be based on the interpretation of the letters M and V. This was critical in narrowing the options requiring exploration in concept development, which in turn made it possible to meet tight timeframes and a limited design development budget.

Another project challenge was to manage and overcome the fact that many of the museum's staff were cynical about the project and perceived it as yet another 'bloody logo' change. It was important to communicate that the project would deliver real value to the organisation and not waste valuable resources that could be allocated to things considered more important. In a strategic move the phrase 'not another bloody logo' was adopted by the design team to get people to listen to explanations of how the new VIS would deliver specific objectives and not just adjust aesthetics at a superficial level.

It became obvious that it would be essential to provide opportunity for staff to contribute to and be part of the development process if we were to gain support and commitment to the system and what it could deliver. One of the most important audiences of a visual identity system is an organisation's staff. For a system to be effective in a service-based organisation

the staff must understand the communication strategy, support the values it carries and contribute to its implementation on a daily basis.

It was also clear that the successful implementation and ongoing management of the new VIS would rely heavily on the in-house design team. In determining the strategy it became clear that opportunities for in-house design to contribute to the system's design and development would be essential. The design manager had awareness of large corporate identities failing at the point at which the appointed external design agency hands the system over to be implemented by internal design staff. Internal staff are often critical of the lack of local knowledge demonstrated by external agencies in the design system provided due to lack of institutional context. Given budget and time restraints external design or brand consultancies assigned are not always able to fully understand an organisation's culture and its complexities. Typically the budget runs out in the implementation stage leaving in-house staff left to try and implement a system they have little commitment to or respect for.

On the other hand in-house design teams are generally limited in their effectiveness in developing a comprehensive system based solution, due to the demands of daily servicing the multiple design needs of the organisation. Thus was the case at Museum Victoria and its in-house design studio, that the potential and full scope of the project may have never been realised. The resulting fall back may have been a superficial logo replacement based outcome, that would fail to engage design as a strategic management tool and fail to support the institution's vision of creating a networked organisation.

The solution employed was to form a second design team at Museum Victoria dedicated to the development of the VIS. A consultant worked in partnership with the Museum Victoria design manager. Local designers were selected to join the team who were attracted by the opportunity to work in collaboration on a significant cultural communication design project. This studio operated on a three day a week basis to allow the designers to continue to manage their own businesses and existing clients. In addition members from the MV in-house design team were co-opted to the VIS team providing opportunity to utilise their extensive museum design knowledge and experience in designing in a museum context. Importantly it gave them some ownership of the project which was critical as eventually they would take over the ongoing implementation and management of the system.

Within this process a new design studio was developed in an unused exhibition space within the heart of the museum environment. This enabled in-house and externally appointed designers to rub shoulders with public and visitors to the museum and to witness and hear

people engaging with the surrounding exhibits. It gave them a daily context for the project that communicated a great deal to them about the values of the organisation that could not be captured via a written brief or by a few visits. They became part of the museum community for nine months.

Creating an open studio and a participatory process

The role of the design manager within the development of Melbourne Museum's VIS became that of providing a methodology to navigate the complexity of developing a visual system that encapsulates and consistently communicates the values and essence of the organisation to its present and future audiences. To ensure the project was design ready required the resolution of issues regarding brand relationships and architecture and the production of a definitive brief clearly outlining the communication objectives. In this in-house design environment it was also necessary to provide a method that included many staff in the process, inviting people into the design process, demystify it and educating people via a visual demonstration of the thinking behind the strategies being developed. Creating space within the process where judgement is suspended is essential for innovative idea development. Finally the design manager was responsible to empower and lead the creative processes ensuring the brief was fully answered. To this end it was helpful to promote the idea that good ideas can come from anyone and that ideas must be tested in a visual form before judgement can be made on their value. The notion that ideas tested and rejected will lead to new ideas to be tested was also useful.

In order to break down staff caution about the new VIS, and to implement Greene's idea of engaging staff in decision making relevant to their expertise, MV staff were invited into the design studio at each stage of the design process (positioning board development, design concept, design development and design refinement), initially to view work in progress plastered to the large studio walls and then to informally chat with the design team about their process. A presentation communicating design thinking and visual outcomes was made for each stage to more than one hundred stakeholders. A broad cross section of the MV community was represented including the CEO, directors, leadership team, venue managers and staff from marketing, public programs, operations, finance, collection management, exhibition development, facilities management and IT.

The feedback gathered from staff at these sessions was systematically documented and care was taken to demonstrate actions taken to test the ideas at the next presentation stage. This process led to a reduction in the fear associated with change as participants were engaged with the strategic thinking that had led the visual development. They began to

realise that design process is not about individual creative expression, or 'flashes of brilliance' but a methodical, disciplined and collaborative process that creates an environment that is open to new possibilities. As a result, trust for the process increased and levels of resistance decreased. The tendency for general and dismissive comments diminished as their input and respect for the thinking behind the communication ideas and strategy increased.

This approach placed the user at the centre of the design process. The process of gathering ideas and testing them in an open and transparent way, builds an understanding of the design process and leads to collective decision-making conducted from an informed position. As this process progressed the willingness of staff to defer personal aesthetic preferences in favour of the bigger picture fulfilment of the overall system increased. As did their understanding of design thinking and design processes. Realising that they had a role to play and that their feedback was directly contributing to ideas tested and to the system development, staff became more confident in sharing their knowledge knowing that their input was central to the design team's ability to solve a complex set of issues. This helped pave the way for the final VIS to be accepted and embraced by the MV community.

Another benefit of this process was financial efficiency. External designers were contracted for set periods and in-house designers were liberated from day to day design tasks to be involved. The brand consultant was responsible to project manage stages of development, which left the Museum Victoria's Design Manager with the responsibility to ensure the overall creative vision expressed in the brief was delivered in the final system outcome.

Shortcomings

The strategy to provide buy in for in-house design staff by including two in-house designers in the process did not totally deliver on expectations. After design development it became apparent that the in-house designers not involved did not feel informed nor part of the decision making process. Expecting communication to flow back to the broader team without providing a process for this limited the effectiveness of the model.

Another major shortcoming was the lack of time to effectively develop an implementation strategy that required dedicated scoping and planning. This process was not adequately provided for. The implementation budget was also cut resulting in the rollout happening over a longer time frame. The major impact of this was that it took longer than desirable to reach the critical mass of communications necessary to establish the new identity. As a result staff had to wait longer to experience the benefits of the new system.

Outcomes

Staff have embraced the new VIS across Museum Victoria. The smaller venues, Scienceworks and Immigration Museum, have realised that their initial fears of being overshadowed by the parent organisation was not a threat. Rather the VIS strategy that works on elements such as graphic patterns, colour palettes and hero images determined by a concept specific to each venue, allows for the individual expression of the venue identity and character while at the same time establishing the family link. Pleased with the result, staff have embraced the overall look and feel, sometimes at the risk of over using elements of the system within their environments. Staff have also started to identify themselves as members of the Museum Victoria community while maintaining their identification with their specific venue location.

On an administrative level the VIS is providing efficiencies and cost effective production of communications through provision of templates and the ability to convey a consistent look and feel. Previously there was no coherent and comprehensive system requiring each communication to be designed as a one off. This resulted in a lack of continuity between the communications as highlighted in the initial communications audit. Now that the system is in place, work practices are changing. The designers whose time was previously spent designing one-off middle level communications such as brochures and flyers can now be freed up to undertake sophisticated design work, requiring strategic thinking and problem solving. As the Museum's collective understanding of the strategic working of design grows, better use is being made of the design team in diverse areas including exhibition identity development, publications, public programs and merchandising, with significant positioning and marketing results for the Museum. Recognition of the value of design to the strategic planning and problem solving process is evident in the recent decision to provide a new design studio with facilities specific to the fundamental needs of design practice – open space conducive to collaborative processes, collective meeting areas and wall space to display work in progress. This new studio has been secured in part through the participatory design process which brought Museum Victoria into the temporary design studio that was established for the VIS project development.

The VIS project created greater ongoing awareness of design as a provider of strategic thinking and creative problem solving. It demonstrated that a complex set of issues can be solved by providing an opportunity for the input of knowledge by many staff combined with a strategic approach to design thinking. A by-product of this participatory process has been increased understanding, reduced fear and increased organisational respect for the design

process. There has also been an increased awareness that design can contribute to development of systems that lead and support positive changes in the institutional culture. For the designers involved there was the challenge that good ideas can come from anybody invited into the process.

The VIS has provided a solid foundation from which to launch more progressive advertising strategies and campaigns by establishing a practice model that facilitates contributions from in-house designers and external design specialists and as well as users. The effectiveness of this model influenced the manner in which the organisation chose to approach the tender process conducted at the end of 2007 to select a new advertising agency. When a suggestion was made that two presenting applicants work collaboratively for the creative presentation phase of the process, the committee of ten was open to the idea based on the success of the VIS approach. Eventually the two companies were selected to fulfil the contract. This resulting partnership comprises a media strategy company and a design company with a proven track record of delivering press advertising reflecting the new VIS guidelines. Significantly it will also use the broader participatory approach of inviting museum curators and public programs staff into the process of developing content for advertising, drawing on the expertise and knowledge of staff to engage and provide opportunities for audience response.

Conclusion

The strategy of using a participatory process for the VIS project and in the process raise the level of design expertise and thinking within MV resulted in an outcome that has been accepted and owned by the users—that is the staff, and continues to reinforce a collaborative and inclusive culture across the organisation.

The process provided an opportunity for museum staff to be directly involved in design process and encounter at first hand the nature of design practice and thinking. This example has been useful in demonstrating how design thinking can be applied to support the delivery of strategic organisational objectives.

The power of this project to induce and lead cultural change at Museum Victoria was due to the participatory processes that resulted in a communications system designed to consistently give form and image to the organisation's values and the concept of a 'networked organisation'.

The fact that this model is being replicated in other Museum Victoria projects demonstrates that participatory design process is gaining momentum and is providing an important example of how a networked organisation can fulfil its potential.

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