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# Embedded Brand: The Soul of Product Development

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**Building Brands at the Intersection of Design and Business Strategy**

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# Embedded Brand: The Soul of Product Development

by Guido Stompff

*In an intriguing and important question, Guido Stompff asks if a brand's essence can be understood and conveyed intuitively. His positive response is based on research done at Netherlands-based Océ Technologies. In that company, analyses done for different divisions in different years revealed a consistent cluster of brand paradigms that Stompff interprets as themes employees absorb as unstated but very real dimensions of the corporate culture.*



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Remember the moment you bought something you really desired—a car, a phone, an MP3 player? Maybe you were surprised by the clever packaging. Maybe you were annoyed by the incomprehensible manual. Maybe you loved the general design, but it angered you that the beautiful high-gloss surface was scratched badly within days. Maybe you needed help to use the product, or perhaps you got it intuitively. Yet all these experiences influenced your image of the brand.

We know that products strongly contribute to the brand experience. They fulfill the brand's promises... or they don't. Durables, due to their longevity, are brand ambassadors that stand on their own. They are bought, taken out of their packaging, tested, used repeat-

edly until they break down or become obsolete. All this time they communicate brand values, both explicitly and implicitly. Products simply exist; they outlive any brand campaign; think of them as a frozen brand communication. A BMW produced in 1995 and driven since then still contributes to the brand, positively or negatively.

The main goal for any brand is to create both a sense of trust in the products or services and a positive emotional response. Therefore, many customer touch-points are addressed, including advertising, packaging, store placements, and customer service. Most brand managers don't think much about the products themselves, let alone their development, as a focal point. But the rules have changed.

Customers are better informed and more powerful than ever because of the unprecedented transparency created by the Internet. Check any product forum and you will learn what a product is really delivering. It may be biased, but it will be honest.

So how can a product—along with the brand experience it represents—align with the intended brand promise? Or should it be the other way around? How can we align the brand promise with what the products can and will deliver? To answer these questions, one needs to understand where the products are coming from, how they are created, and by whom—since a product is, after all, a manifestation of the intentions of its creators.

### **Unconscious brand expertise**

Let's consider successful brands related to durables, such as Apple, Sony, and BMW. Without doubt, these brands can be recognized in the blink of an eye, and using their products produces similar and congruent experiences. Who was responsible for these experiences? Anyone familiar with product development knows that these complex products are designed and produced by large teams, comprising many disciplines, and not necessarily located in the same building, or even the same country. So pinpointing who specifically designed that experience gets messy. Product experiences have many contributors beyond the usual suspect, the product designer. Interaction and graphic designers conceptualize and visualize the interfaces; engineers are responsible for built quality; software engineers have considerable impact on behavior and reliability. So whether a brand promise is fulfilled depends upon the work of a whole range of people within an organization—yet it is hard to believe that every member of the development team is an authority on the brand.

This creates an intriguing mystery: How is it possible that a large, multidisciplinary team of developers—most of them arguably unaware of the brand—create products that are often remarkably coherent with the brand message? One way or another, development teams—or at least some people in them—simply know what is expected of a product from a brand perspective. Over the years, I've been part of these teams; I've

witnessed this remarkable “unconscious brand expertise,” noticing that many experienced developers and engineers had no doubts about what constituted a good solution for problems no brand manager would ever consider. Apparently, there is an internalization process that enables people to understand what a brand is all about, without even talking about the brand. Yet most companies give little attention to this internalization, so it seems to simply emerge.

### **Embedded brands**

In general, it's hard to pinpoint the meaning of brand—even for experts. Perhaps we would do better to call it an essence. The people involved seem to know what it is about, but describing it is difficult, if not impossible. The same can be felt within these development teams—even though they hardly mention the brand, they know why some features, engineering solutions, or design details fit better than others. But don't ask them to explain!

This sheds a different light on the concept of brand. For development teams, a brand effectively refers to a set of shared ideas, values, and paradigms about “what the product of our brand should be.” It includes choices no one discusses, because the developers simply believe it “must be like that.”<sup>1</sup> A product is in a way a crystallization of the beliefs and paradigms of an organization, and a brand can be the label referring to these deepest beliefs.

Some would call this brand identity—but it is not the same. Brand identity as, for instance, Kapferer describes it, is meant to define and to position a brand: “The purpose... is to specify the brand's meaning, aim, and self-image.”<sup>2</sup> What the developer team is really doing is not so much defining what the brand is or should be but rather what it *could* be. Call it an embedded

1. Cf. Peter Jones, “Embedded Values in Process and Practice: Interactions Between Disciplinary Practices and Formal Innovation Processes,” *Design Management Journal (Academic Review)*, vol. 2 (2003), pp. 20-36, in which a case is described in which software product managers and designers “were able to distinguish designed-in values they associated with well-known software products... [but] were unable to identify values in products they designed.... These features were necessary, not value-laden.”

2. Jean Noel Kapferer, *The New Strategic Brand Management*, third ed. (London: Kogan Page Ltd., 2004), p. 99.

brand—a brand that derives from the deeply rooted, often unconscious paradigms, values, and beliefs of an organization and that will manifest itself in many subtle ways within the products. The design of the product or its interface is merely the most explicit of these manifestations, not the only one.

### Theoretical background

This cultural connection is chosen deliberately because the concept of embedded brand can be largely attributed to perspectives on organizational culture, such as, for instance, the insights of E.H. Schein.<sup>3</sup> He discerns three levels of culture. The first level covers the visual cues manifested by an organizational culture—in the architecture of its building, for instance, or the ways in which its people address each other, the agreed-upon dress code, and so on. Though these are easy to observe, they can be misleading because, as Schein points out, “one’s interpretations will inevitably be projections of one’s own feelings and reactions.”<sup>4</sup>

On a second level, there are the organization’s espoused values and beliefs, its more or less formal values. These are often better described as espoused theories—that is, what an organization believes it *should* be, not necessarily what is in line with daily reality. The deepest level concerns basic assumptions, beliefs, and values and is the hardest to pinpoint. As Schein points out, basic assumptions are “so taken for granted that one finds little variation within a social unit.... Other premises are inconceivable.”<sup>5</sup> Sometimes, they are still discernible as a rationalized belief, but often they are submerged beneath the level of consciousness. At this level, an organizational culture is an accepted truth, and questioning it will most likely lead to resistance. Culture is based on shared learning and, consequently, it has a strong evolutionary character. Where companies are concerned, product successes and fail-

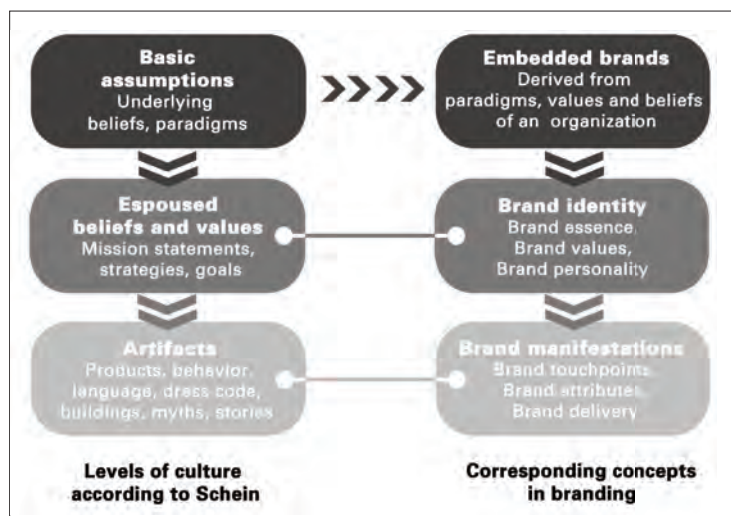


Figure 1. E.H. Schein’s levels of culture compared to popular branding concepts. The deepest levels of basic, shared assumptions are often unconscious and taken for granted within an organization to the point of being indisputable. They are extremely hard to change. An embedded brand derives from this level.

ures result in deeply rooted assumptions, identifiable by what might as well be called myths surrounding their development.

The concept of an embedded brand can be portrayed according to Schein’s levels (Figure 1). Clearly, the products, as outcomes of a development process, appear on the artifacts level. Brand values are on the level of espoused values, since they are by definition clear manifestations of the values formally expressed by the company. This is the level from which a traditional brand proposition is derived—conceptualized from the perspective of what the brand should be, but inherently running the risk that it lacks some realism within the daily routines of people involved. An embedded brand corresponds to Schein’s third, or basic assumptions, level—that is, “the brand is what we believe we are” (though, for insiders, this is likely to be seen as truth, not a belief).

Yet this concept of an embedded brand raises two questions:

1. Is it possible to tap into this deepest level of values and assumptions in the first place?
2. Will the result be a usable brand? *Usable* implies it is not only authentic but also consistent, ambitious, and relevant for all stakeholders. Indeed, there is a risk of targeting its perhaps glorious but, in fact, long-gone past.

3. E. H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, third ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

4. Ibid, p. 27.

5. Ibid, p. 31.

These questions cannot be answered easily. However, the following case study, in which unrelated groups at the same company performed “brand-eye” routines and arrived at many of the same conclusions, should demonstrate the potency of the embedded brands concept.

**“Brand-eye” methodology to derive a brand**

There are several ways in which to investigate underlying assumptions of organizations, but most of them are not directed at branding or at design. A more designer-oriented way of understanding a value system is by means of a brand eye. This is a method for getting a coherent and visually supported portrayal of a brand, but because it also explores the value system of the organization involved, it is essentially a tool for deriving an embedded brand. Brand eye is used by several large companies, including Unilever and Ford.<sup>6</sup>

The brand-eye process starts by exploring the brand and the company through its products, its internal values, and its history and ambitions. Here’s one example: The team discusses flagship products in the portfolio and why they are seen as such, and why other products in the portfolio are not. Put another way, the team starts with the artifact and espoused values levels but tries to grasp the paradigms behind them. The collection of relevant data should be done beforehand and carefully, going beyond matters that are simply the talk of the day. Through questioning, for instance, why certain products are considered less important, underlying assumptions may be revealed.

The second step is a creative session, in which what has been gleaned is translated into values in a structured way. First, participants write down words and phrases that seem relevant to them in this context (such as *driven*, *reflective*, *afraid of emotion*), and these are discussed and filtered. These words are then categorized as answering such questions as: Where did this organization come from? What does it strive for? What is it afraid of? Doing this should expose some gaps and lead to further exploration. Afterward, all the outcomes are discussed and filtered once more into a palette of values that serves as input for the brand eye.

The third step is to create the brand eye (Figure 2). At its core is the eye itself—the very heart of the brand, its essence. Surrounding the eye is a range of core values that add meaning to that essence. The outermost layer describes the brand’s characteristics or attributes—how the brand manifests itself. The outer two levels are essentially explanatory and facilitate a better understanding of the essence.

Unfortunately, it is not easy to create a brand eye. First, brands often imply ambiguous values. For instance, they may incorporate humanistic, as well as technological, values that are at first sight contradictory. Second, and most obvious, is the problem of separating the deeper-lying brand essence from its values and characteristics. For example, is “creative” part of the essence, or is it simply a value derived from “being unpredictable?”

The last step can vary, depending on the goal of the brand eye, as will be seen below. But it is essentially about exploring and translating the still-abstract brand eye in designerly ways, such as vivid images, songs, and even videos.

**Case study: Tapping the source of Océ**

Océ is a large multinational company that, put simply, specializes in copying, printing, and scanning. It develops the hardware, software applications, and services to share information

6. Erik Roskam Abbing, “Brand-Driven Innovation: Fulfilling Brand Promise Through New Product Development,” 2003, [www.branddriveninnovation.com](http://www.branddriveninnovation.com), pp. 75-81.

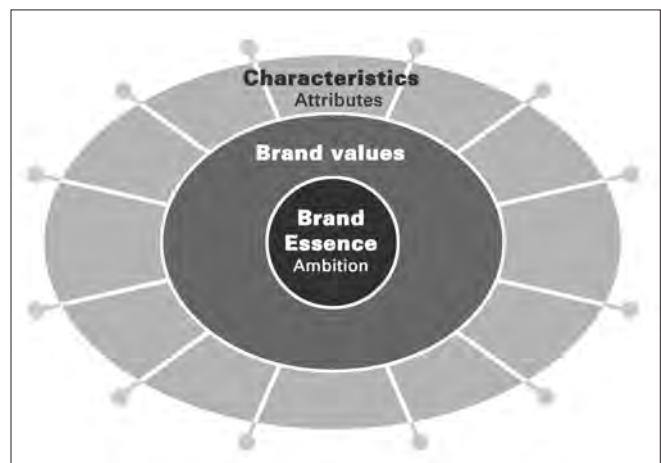


Figure 2. A brand eye is a method of deriving a coherent and visually supported portrayal of a brand. It can be used to explore values systems and, therefore, as a tool for deriving an embedded brand.

effectively among people. It is active in a range of markets, such as offices, CAD, display graphics (large posters), and book printing. It is also a venerable company, having been in existence for 130 years. Océ is active in more than 90 countries, has a workforce of 24,000 employees, and has achieved revenues of more than \$4 billion. Many of the company's products are developed at its nine R&D sites.

Océ has been rapidly renewing itself over the past decade, driven by a changing perspective on doing business. What was once essentially a product-driven organization has now shifted toward the service side. Meanwhile, several large acquisitions have extended the portfolio considerably and resulted in some unrest concerning the company's core identity. It was with a sense of purpose, therefore, that the company welcomed the performance of three brand-eye routines over the last four years. The routines were primarily focused on internal organizational values and assumptions and, interestingly, were carried out by teams working on three different projects. Did they come to similar conclusions? Let's see.

**Project #1: A human face**

Océ's first brand-eye initiative took place in 2003. This was a project carried out by the company's product designer team in close conjunction with a team of consultants from Ingeni, by then the external design house of Ford Motor Company and a group with experience creating and managing durable brands. This "product" brand eye distilled an essence consisting of three values: *independent*, *professional*, and *human*.

*Independent* referred to a particular way of thinking that is manifest within Océ products and technology. *Professional* expressed both a strategic choice to specialize in business-to-business markets, and the character of the products themselves. The *human* aspect clearly revealed itself in the way in which Océ conducts business, by means of direct sales and a strong service organization. The team distilled 19 characteristics and seven core values in describing the brand essence.

The final step was translating the semantic brand eye into a visual brand eye by means of imagery. The process of finding specific images helped the team emotionally relate to the numerous terms used, which were often abstract and could be interpreted in multiple ways. In fact, the designers involved considered this the most inspiring part; the language of collages and mood boards was familiar to them and allowed them to use an extended vocabulary. (Typically, when the brand eye was presented to colleagues from the management side of the company, most felt more at ease with the linguistic brand eye.)

But the translation into design language was not exact. Most participants described Océ's products as *powerful*, *robust*, and *reliable*, but never as *friendly* or *inviting*—clearly demonstrating that the designs communicated the *professional*, but not the *human*, aspect. Consequently, the brand-eye project sparked a search for and eventually resulted in a completely new design language, one with a stronger iconic quality and a softened, less geometrical approach (Figures 3 and 4). All of the company's



Figure 3. The Océ Colorstream 1000 was designed after the first brand-eye workshop (the inset shows its predecessor). The design language had changed considerably. Rigid geometrical shapes were softened, surfaces were more refined, and parts were more fluently integrated within a total *gestalt*.



Figure 4. More examples of the design language derived from the first brand-eye workshop. Though still geometrically based, the lines are fluent, integrating all the underlying parts. Surfaces are softened, yet still well-defined.

recent introductions show product designs that are strongly affected by that profound insight, and recent international research on the perception of Océ products indicates that the balance between human and professional has improved considerably.

**Project #2. Sharing the same Ocean**

Over the past decade, Océ has rapidly expanded its software portfolio. Many applications—or even the software houses that developed them—were acquired, but their varied origins made them equally various in their look and feel, putting strain on Océ’s one-brand company policy. For their part, the acquisitions were reluctant to implement a general Océ style. In 2004, Océ’s graphic and interaction designers decided it was time to develop an entirely new design language that would, they hoped, inspire management and all the teams involved to be, once again, a one-brand company.

The team, which consisted mainly of interaction designers, graphic designers, and software developers from the parent company, considered the results of the first brand-eye initiative, but decided that its outspoken focus on products made it inadequate for their purposes. The aim of the software brand-eye sessions was to develop a shared vision concerning design language to ensure everyone involved understood the reasons behind the conceptual choices that were then made. The result was a smoothly executed design project that led to the so-called Ocean style guide (Figure 5), which was soon easily implemented by a number of subsequent projects. The intrinsic quality of this considered design language, which offered a restricted yet fresh color palette and a crisp clear layout, puts usability up front, refraining from the blatant logos considered normal in this line of business.

As the Ocean initiative developed, it became clear that the conclusions reached by the software brand eye shared a great deal with those from the product brand eye. The projects may have come up with different descriptive words, but both teams recognized that the underlying essence was effectively the same. It seemed logical to integrate the two brand eyes into one, a project that was carried out by members of both teams. Another level was added though—this time, the brand eye was converted into a small video clip with music and dynamics. Thinking

was that this could better communicate the dense information of a brand eye in a somewhat poetic way.

**Project #3. Beyond the ordinary**

In early 2006, Océ management decided to rejuvenate the style guide for the company’s marketing communications. Inspired by a project carried out by 70 students in the master’s program for industrial design at the Delft University of Technology,<sup>7</sup> Océ’s senior vice president for communications started a brand essence program, executed by a commissioned brand team. The results of this program were intended to last for years and would affect all the company’s marketing communications. This time, the roughly 20 members of the team itself were mostly marketing or communication managers drawn from both headquarters and national sales organizations; there were also some art directors. This had two consequences: one, the involvement of senior managers meant time was scarce, so the entire session had to be squeezed into a weekend; and two, although a brand-eye session is a creative session in which ambiguity is part of the process, most managers felt more at ease with a left-brain type of methodology, so the tactics were tweaked accordingly.

In the unsettling environment of a soccer stadium, the team began by analyzing previous

7. Jan Buijs, “Design Management Education at the Delft University of Technology,” *Design Management Review*, Summer 2007, pp. 63-68.

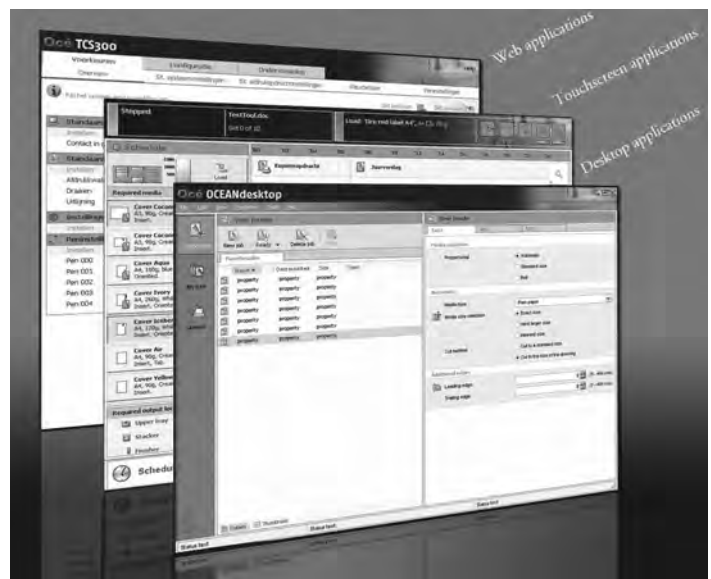


Figure 5. The Ocean style guide was developed following insights gleaned from the second brand-eye workshop. It covered GUIs, software, and web applications.

research results. They established two salient qualities of the company—the face-to-face way in which Océ prefers to conduct business with its clients, and the way the company explicitly relies on its own development capabilities. They derived a range of characteristics, as well as four values: *involved*, *pragmatic*, *drive*, and *eigenzinnig* (a Dutch word that is essentially untranslatable but means “independent-minded” or “going your own way”—in a positive manner).

Nevertheless, the core of the brand eye—the essence—was still not established. This time, the goal was to describe the brand essence accurately, by means of a phrase rather than distinct words, but that proved harder to do than expected. However, when it *did* happen, several team members referred afterward to that point as “the magical moment when it all fit together.” The phrase they arrived at was “make things happen beyond the ordinary,” and it was articulated by an art director. The wonderful lesson I take from this is that the moment the branding puzzle is solved, everyone knows it.

The brand essence proposition we arrived at doesn’t seem to relate to Océ’s core business, and yet it pinpoints something essential about the company, something that goes beyond the realm of daily business. Considering that Océ has been capable of changing its core business more than once in its long history, this difference between the daily business and the essence, which more or less describes a mindset, is not unusual after all.

The whirlwind meeting at the soccer stadium

resulted in a new marketing style (Figure 6) characterized by a more emotive approach and deliberately refraining from the emphasis on professionalism. This is similar to what happened with the first project, when the brand eye created the insight that the product design language was too professional and lacked a human aspect. The new marketing style includes a daringly colorful graphic design, with naturalistic photos, mostly showing people in their working and private lives. If products are shown, it is done through a straightforward, honest display. Though the new design represented a huge change from the conservative international business style Océ used before, it was so well received by the operating companies that the biggest problem was getting the huge job done quickly so that the new design could be used.

**Results over three exercises**

Most striking here is how the crystallization of deep-lying values and assumptions surpass the differences that doubtless exist among organizational groups within Océ. In all three exercises, the same essence was derived, although the brand eye was performed by different teams. Looking back at the brand-eye diagram shown in Figure 7, consider the value *eigenzinnig*. This value appeared in the first product brand eye as independent; in the second, it was termed *eigenwijs* (literally, pigheaded, but in the same sense as independent). The other defined brand values—*involved*, *pragmatic*, and *drive*—have sim-



Figure 6. These brochures were drawn up after the third brand-eye session, which was aimed at a new design style for marketing communications. They offer a bold use of color, an organic and friendly design language, and an unusual feeling of clarity.

ilar counterparts in the earlier brand eyes.

After the sessions, the team members understood and felt ownership of the Océ brand, becoming true brand custodians. This helped bring about an instantly recognizable new face for the company’s products, software applications, and marketing communications. Because all three projects started by exploring the unspoken and underlying values and assumptions of the Océ organization, they essentially communicate a one-brand company, creating an even more powerful consistency of brand.

**What can be learned**

Earlier in this article, introducing the concept of an embedded brand, I brought up two questions. The first was: Is it possible to tap into this deepest level of values and assumptions in the first place? The Océ case study demonstrates the outcomes of three brand-eye sessions, performed by three teams divided by organizational groups and by time. The outcomes are intriguingly consistent, although the teams were of different “blood groups.” This indicates that a brand eye touches the deepest level of organizational culture because, arguably, it is hard to get this consistency without shared (and mostly unspoken) values and assumptions. The real bonus is that the methods used are amiable and positive, avoiding the cynicism that tends to emerge with

the use of assumptions. Not only that, but the nuances of values and beliefs, which can be hard to pinpoint, are relatively easy to capture using imagery, video, moodboards, and music.

The other question is: Will the result be a usable brand? Again, looking at the case study above, we know it is authentic because it is based on a unique internal value system. We know it is consistent because similar conclusions were reached in three separate brand-eye sessions. And we know it creates a deep mutual understanding among brand managers and designers, ensuring consistency at a further level. We also see that, internally speaking, an embedded brand is likely to be relevant and inspiring for those involved in defining it. But does an embedded brand improve a company’s bottom line? This is a hard, if not impossible, question to answer since only hard financial data will adequately tell the tale and, typically, there are too many factors involved. The only indication we have is that following these brand-eye exercises, senior management became more interested in the visual design of products—to the level of personal involvement.

Another caveat: The Océ case study also found that it was significantly harder for employees who were not part of the brand-eye projects to understand the outcomes of those sessions. Even with the addition of other media,

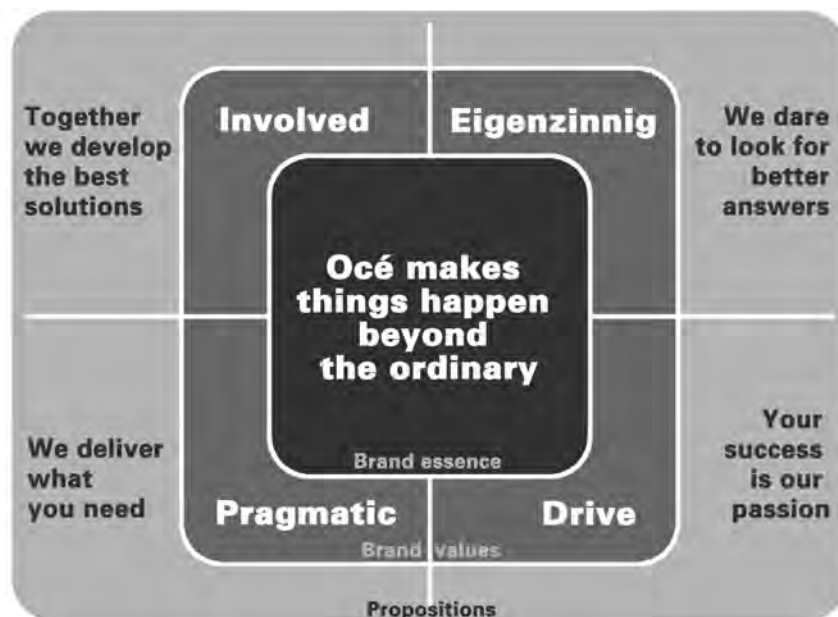


Figure 7. The third brand eye was developed for a new brand proposition and marketing communications design style. *Eigenzinnig* translates generally into independent-minded.

such as music and video, it was difficult to make them understand. However, when those outcomes were translated into product designs or style guides for software or a new style for marketing communications, they were well-appreciated and embraced and supported immediately. Apparently, the process itself is inspiring and creates a shared understanding of hard-to-grasp values and essences. For nonteam members, however, that understanding will not be comprehensive until it is translated into solid design proposals. Put differently, it is only in the brand-eye interactions that the real inspiration will surface; further translation is usually necessary.

### **Discussion**

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It is known that there are strong differences between organizational groups within a company, such as between marketing and R&D.<sup>8</sup> Yet there is also a strong underlying source that binds an organization—a unique organizational culture that manifests itself in many subtle ways. This is a source for deriving a strong, embedded brand. Critics justly raise two issues. The first is that there are many unpleasant aspects of an organizational culture (such as bureaucracy) one would rather not derive and bring to a client's attention. When one becomes aware of negative-

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8. Deborah Dougherty, "Interpretive Barriers to Successful Product Innovation in Large Firms," *Organization Science*, vol. 3, no. 2 (May 1992), pp. 179-202.

ly valued assumptions, it is wise to refrain from these when deriving an embedded brand, as organizational culture and brand should be congruent but not the same!

The second issue is whether an embedded brand is relevant for clients. Indeed, the case study gives no indisputable results on this point aside from a greater appreciation of the form language of products. However, durables are often developed and marketed by organizations over a period spanning decades. Assumptions and values are, in a way, the collective memory of an organization—an evolution brought about by successes and failures. If an organization survives that long, the underlying assumptions and values are likely to be not only rock-solid, but salient, as well. Embedded branding is about being yourself.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Suggested Readings**

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Schein, E.H. *The Corporate Culture Survival* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999). ■

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