Visual aesthetics in product development
A balance between commercial and creative imperatives

Ingela Lindahl

Abstract

The literature presents a number of advantages regarding companies’ strategic focus on product design, arguing that the dimension of visual aesthetics in products may help a company to create commercial success, e.g. through product differentiation and as a means of company brand recognition. However, developing new products that have visual aesthetics as an important dimension is not without difficulty, and may lead to a number of managerial challenges.

The purpose of this doctoral thesis is to describe and analyse how companies develop products that have visual aesthetics as an important dimension. The thesis describes and analyses: how the dimension of visual aesthetics affects the characteristics of the new product development process; how companies strike a balance between commercial and creative imperatives during new product development; and how companies source and collaborate using artistic design resources during new product development.

Based on findings from five new product development projects and from interviews with managers at twelve Swedish designer furniture manufacturers, the thesis concludes that the dimension of visual aesthetics in products affects new product development in different ways. First, companies’ development of visual aesthetics calls for a more creative, artistic development process whereby, for example, idea generation and evaluation are often flexible in relation to plans made. Moreover, the different and subjective judgement of the aesthetic value of products has implications for new product development, e.g. that the company needs to address and balance imperatives stemming from different audiences, i.e. the designer’s self, peers, and the mass market, during product development. Also, it is concluded that the sourcing of designer resources and the composition of designer portfolios are both critical and related to companies’ desired brand image. A close and trustful working relationship between the designer and the manufacturer is a basis for companies’ successful product development.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the product development literature through its findings on companies’ new product development processes in a seldom researched context, i.e. the development of designer products. Additionally, it contributes to the literature on design outsourcing by presenting new findings on the interplay between artistic design resources and managers. Moreover, it also contributes to the marketing literature by providing fresh insights into how companies balance their commercial and creative interests when developing new products.

Keywords: visual aesthetics, product design, product development, furniture, designer products

Department of Management and Engineering
Linköpings universitet
SE-581 83 Linköping, Sweden

ISBN 978-91-7519-485-1 ISSN 0345-7524