The Strategy of Brand Design

Adapted from an article written by Maria Casini and Camille DeSantis, and printed in Future Pharma Magazine

Product development strategy isn't just about deciding what your laboratory should invent or figuring out who'll buy it. It's also about deciding how to communicate about your invention to a world of potential investors, recommenders, regulators, and potential users. From practically the moment your team is ready to 'show and tell' their idea to others, many successful development leaders now recognize it's a dollars-and-cents necessity to have a visual design strategy anchoring these discussions.

Why? Because in today's highly complex and competitive world, brilliant innovations, super-smart scientists, and cogent verbal descriptions often aren't enough, on their own, to sway potential stakeholders. Many audiences are struggling to keep up with rapid advances across a bewildering array of life science frontiers. Without well thought-out visuals accompanied by strategic sound-bites, it's often easy for novel ideas to get 'lost in translation' as your new molecules, devices, diagnostics, etc, seek to be understood and to be appropriately valued. Competing with more easily-recognized choices in internal and external debates over funding, it's survival of the clearest—or at least, the clearest path from bench to bankroll. A strong visual identity, even at this early stage, is an important key to the cash-drawer.

Too often, however, development teams leave this until late in the pre-commercialization process. They forget that most audiences remember visuals far better than words. They often dont realize that design is strategy made visible. And their delay of brand development including distinctive visuals becomes a strategic error with costly consequences.

Fuel your brand

Why visual support of brand strategy matters even early on

Other experts in the field may immediately 'get it' about what your team's innovation could mean for scientific progress. But non-expert audiences often lack training to do so, and to see its commercial potential. It's often these non-experts, too, who still have funds to invest, not yet committed to other lines of inquiry or development. The better you can place your ideas and findings in a context they can quickly comprehend, through a diagram, illustration, visual metaphor, or similar, the sooner they'll get a fix on your creation and its potential value - and the faster they'll pull out their checkbooks for you.

There's a bonus: by giving people a simple, memorable kernel of an idea that they can use to describe what you've invented, you're also helping its reputation to rapidly spread.

It's important, though, that you do this in a way that constantly sets apart your team's product from potential others—through color, illustration style, typography, layout choices, and all the weapons in the designer's competitive arsenal. You're going to want all your communication elements, from a back-of-the-napkin sketch to publications, VC presentations, IR/PR, and ultimately advertising, to make consistent and positive impressions on varying audiences. To achieve this, it's useful to create a visual identity: a distinct look and feel that sets your idea above and apart from others. A strong **visual identity** takes complex concepts and turns them into memorable images that are relevant to the interests of your most important stakeholders. It's a highly intentional, disciplined process that calls for design experience and expertise.

A strong visual identity is just a subset of a visual language that you'll develop to help consistently associate your innovation with positive expectations from all audiences. For example, your visual language guidelines should control how your quantitative information — epidemiological data, key performance metrics, and so on — looks and feels, so that you 'own' it in audience minds. Charts, graphs, and tables that maximize readability as they echo your brand's overall typographic and color tonality subtly make the case that your creation is not only buttoned-up, prepared, and ready to move ahead, but yours, and yours alone.

Picture power

From the standpoint of making communications persuasive, the visual side of brand design is as strategic as the verbal side, and arguably more powerful. Some of science's most powerful ideas are visual depictions or metaphors: the double helix of DNA, the 'lock-and-key' fit of an enzyme to its substrate. Yet the visual side of science is usually the side most neglected by development teams, especially when they rely on audiences' imagination to 'see' submicroscopic phenomena. What color coding best communicates the relevant DNA base pairs, for example? (Don't forget that about 5% of the male population is red-green color blind.) How best to depict RNA transcription? Which part of the mode of action deserves to be the center of attention? These are important, not trivial, choices to a development team, and benefit from bringing in experts. Inventors and new product teams spend many hours crafting words to describe their products to other scientists and engineers, but typically invest far less in choosing visuals that make their creation remarkable. Words, however, offer far more standardization than the language of visuals for representing complex ideas. The tougher, higher-payoff task is often the visual one.

Consider: two product teams present new molecular entities for angel or VC funding. Both teams present using PowerPoint, but Team A spends little time on how its presentation looks, pouring their data into an off-the-shelf slide template, deploying armies of warring fonts, font styles, and sizes on each page, and illustrating a point or two with cutesy 'clip art'. Team B comes in with a uniquely clear and balanced design style, reader-friendly typography, and vivid illustrations that bring to life their product and its potential. Which one gets the funding?

It's clear: From the moment product development teams begin to illustrate their talks and writings about their discoveries, they are making strategic choices that determine how quickly their invention will catch on. A wise person (some claim it was Will Rogers) once said, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." The first visual impression a brand makes can powerfully direct its fate. So savvy development teams know that brand design isn't something that can wait until late in the process. True, their brand will evolve over time, as trial data revealing new perspectives on uses, efficacy, adverse effects, etc. change perceptions and shape strategic direction. But they also know that the sooner they've crystallized the visual lexicon that make it easiest for audiences to understand their brand and its potential, the faster evolution will occur. Clarity and purpose make a 'virtuous cycle' of support that builds on itself. That's why brand design is one of the first and most important strategic investments a development team can, and should, make.

"Design is strategy made visible"

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