MANAGING PRODUCT CHARISMA  
Fine-tuning the development of meaningful products: The Philips Essence and Signal cases

Josiena Gotzsch

Keywords: Design management, product design, semantics, emotional product value.

Abstract
A product’s design might communicate company identity or elements of its user’s personality. These and other expressions in a product contribute to its attractiveness and commercial success. Therefore, companies that produce consumer products in a competitive context need to efficiently include these attributes in their products. Which methods do design-experienced companies use to create meaningful products? A sensitive user-focused approach appears to be essential. A variety of methods, however, were found in case-study research. This article examines the creation of three toothbrushes for Signal and of a range of small kitchen appliances products by Philips. It identifies how these products received a meaningful expression.

“As a consequence of our design approach, we have a clear identity and style. With this consistent image we can clearly differentiate our products in today’s scattered market” (Account Manager for Food and Beverage at Philips Design)

“We believe that the design of a product is a question of imagining what the end product will evoke for the user ... ” (Barré, B. and Lepage, F. 2001).

People at Philips and Barré & Associés who participated in interviews and discussions made the following two case studies possible. My sincere acknowledgement for their participation in this project.

Introduction
In the current competitive consumer goods market, product expression is used to distinguish a product from competition because this gives a competitive edge over equally functional, but more mundane products.

In this article, we will study how three toothbrushes for Signal and a range of small kitchen appliances for Philips received an expression that aims to appeal to its user. A case study interview guide was used for the interviews. In the interviews five aspects were specifically analysed: the company’s design culture, the product development process, the process leading to the identification of the type of expression needed, the intention to develop the product’s expression and the influence of competition.
The Signal and Philips products have in common that they are designed for a competitive consumer goods market. The methods that were used to develop an attractive product expression, however, varied significantly from spontaneous idea generation, to user-involvement in the product development, to broad market research before the development phase.

**The Philips Essence Products**

Between 1997 and 1999, Philips Domestic Appliances and Personal care (Philips DAP) and Philips Design developed a new product range called Philips Essence. A new marketing approach was behind this project.

![The tabletop products in the first Philips Essence range.](image)

Information for the Philips Essence project was obtained from interviews and discussions at Philips DAP and Philips Design - in Groningen and Amersfoort, in the Netherlands - with two Design Managers at Philips Design, the Vice-President of Strategy and Planning at Philips DAP and the Concept Manager for the first Philips Essence. Multiple publications concerning Philips Design and some of the Philips Essence products were also used. This was combined with information from the Philips website and from the Philips Design press service.

**Philips**
The Royal Philips Electronics group employs approximately 189,000 employees in 60 countries. Philips Design is part of this organisation and is, with approximately 500 employees, one of the largest design studios in the world. Philips Design’s headquarters is in Eindhoven (the Netherlands) and design studios are located in Europe, the United States and South East Asia.

![The Philips Design locations in 2002](image)
Philips DAP (Philips Domestic Appliances and Personal care) develops, produces and commercialises products for electric shaving, beauty care, dental care, home care and food and beverage. Philips DAP has approximately 10,000 employees, 8 production sites in 7 different countries, and national sales organisations in more than 40 countries.

**Philips High Design process**
Stefano Marzano, the Chief Executive Officer of Philips Design since 1991, defined the following mission statement for Philips Design:

> "We are driven by a vision: to create a harmonious relationship among products, people, and their environment, both natural and man-made".

Philips Design has a design approach that is called the High Design process. The High Design process consists of a multi-disciplinary project organisation in which research is combined with intuition. With "this research-based design approach", products are developed based on investigations in social, cultural and visual trends.

**Working relationship between Philips DAP and Philips**
At Philips DAP, design has become part of the total marketing plan. Marketing works closely together with the internal Philips designers. The marketing and the design department are located in the same building in Amersfoort.

The design department has gained a high standing in the organisation, because design is important in the market of small domestic appliances. Within its price range, design often is the most important sales argument.

**Market analysis for the philips essence project**
Around 1997, the product groups “Food” (food-preparation products) and “Beverage” (coffee-makers) were in a difficult financial position. In this delicate context, managers of these two independent activities decided to cooperate and to develop a common marketing strategy. The new Business Unit Manager in the Philips DAP organisation who came from Unilever had a strong market-orientation and stimulated changes in the organisation.

The idea behind the new marketing approach was to develop logical clusters of products with the same quality level and product styling. Developing consistent product ranges instead of “mono” products and positioning these product ranges as sub brands of Philips was new at Philips DAP.

The market research took place in Germany, Spain and England. This market analysis resulted in a consumer segmentation that was based on the “consumer’s attitude and behaviour in the kitchen”. In 1998, five different consumer groups were defined. Two groups were chosen as being very interesting to start developing product ranges for.

One of these user groups was called the “quality oriented traditionalists”. The consumers in this group are defined as mature, high-end quality oriented consumers. They are interested in the “quality of the end result” (of cooking activities), are slightly older, have a higher education, more money and like to dine in a nice way. They prefer to spend more money on a good product than buying a product of low quality. Products targeted at the “quality-oriented traditionalists” were given the brand name Essence. Essence is positioned as a sub brand of Philips and stands for “perfect end result”.

**Expression of the philips essence products**
Within Philips Design a special team, the **Visual Trend Analysis group** (the VTA group), is dedicated to following visual trends in different world regions. The VTA group looks at changes in different aesthetic fields including...
fashion, interior and automotive design and other cultural domains such as contemporary art and web design. From this research, the team generates a prognosis of the development of aesthetics, the so-called aesthetic roadmaps (Bevolo, 2000).

For the Essence project, the VTA group worked with trend watchers in New York, Paris and Tokyo to obtain a vision of future trends in colours and product shape that would please the quality oriented traditionalists. This research showed that Essence consumers look for peace and tranquility in their homes. These consumers also have an above-average interest in design, but are suspicious when confronted with radical changes. Essence products, therefore, do not make a loud design statement. They have a calm, serene and traditional image. Changes in the visual language of the Essence products should be carefully planned and the Essence style that is designed at present will be different from an Essence design in 3 years time.

To facilitate the discussion of the Essence concept, a “book” was developed that visualises the Essence concept. This book gives an answer to the question: “what is good design for the quality oriented traditionalists” and visualises how to deal with form, materials and colours for this consumer group. This visualisation facilitated the discussion with marketing and clarified the design objective.

In the Philips Essence range, visual and tactile references to noble materials such as ceramics, stone and metal (chrome controls) are used to respond to this user’s group preference for quality. Two colour palettes were developed by the VTA group that are used for all products in the Essence range. An off-white colour scheme gets close to the quality feeling of ceramics, which expresses tradition, quality of care and craftsmanship (Marzano, 2000). The other colour is a distinctive grey.

The essence coffeemaker
Four “breakfast” products, the coffeemaker, the toaster, the citrus press and the water kettles, form the core of the Essence range because these products are visible on the tabletop and aren’t stored away in a cabinet after usage. These products were the first products of the Philips Essence range to be launched. Many other products, such as a mixer and blender, compliment the Essence range.

It would have been ideal to directly design a completely new line of products, but this called for too much time and budget. For the first Essence range, the choice was made to develop some entirely new products and also to redesign some existing products. With this mix of new designs and redesigns it was possible to introduce the Essence product range in 1999.

The importance of the “product experience” in a coffeemaker made it logical to start the Essence range with this product. Within Philips DAP, a coffeemaker is perceived as the most “emotional” product among other small domestic appliances. Drinking coffee is a social ritual, which binds people, and that is associated with waking up.

In its product portfolio, Philips DAP had a coffee maker called the Café Délice. Its level of performance, its finishing and its “distinctive product styling with controlled lines” corresponded to the expectations of the “quality oriented traditionalists”.

An internal designer of Philips Design did a face-lift on this coffee maker to get it as close as possible to the Essence identity. The Essence team that worked on this redesign included the Product Manager, the Essence Concept Manager, the Essence Concept Designer, the Design Manager and different technical people.

Fundamentally changing the shape of the Café Délice would have resulted in an entirely new product development process and expensive new moulding tools. Hence only small elements, such as the jug and the lid of the coffeemaker, were changed and the Essence colour scheme and graphics were applied.
According to the design manager of this project, the design possibilities in the Essence coffeemaker project were limited (because it was a redesign), but a satisfying result was accomplished with a relatively limited investment.

**Two essence water kettles**

Two water kettles were specifically designed for the Essence product range. Very early in the development process a functional specification was made and it was decided that the kettles had to fit into the Essence quality and image. The Essence team knew from previous product development experience what it meant to design a product that vehicles the Essence concept.

The design manager of the project explained that the Essence concept doesn’t feel like a harness, but like a directive. It limits the freedom of design, but also is a support for the designer that can be used to create consistency in a product range.

The development started with the large kettle (1.7 litres) and the development of the smaller compact kettle (1.2 litres) followed 6 months later. The development of the two kettles took between 18 and 24 months.

The almost simultaneous development of the two kettles made the standardisation of different components possible and avoided at the same time important visual compromises. For each kettle, the body is different, but the lid and the base with the flat heating element are the same. This facilitates production and reduced investments in tooling. This standardisation also gave the two kettles a family look. According to the designer of the two kettles, the compact kettle looks “cute” and the larger kettle looks like its bigger brother being “more serious and stately”.

In 2001, the Essence Compact Kettle received an IF Product Design Award.

**The essence toaster**

The toaster was specifically designed for the Philips Essence range. The Essence Concept Manager feels that the team succeeded particularly well in integrating the Essence identity in this product. The Essence toaster design seems to have a connection with the past, which fits the quality oriented traditional.

According to Marzano (2000), the Essence toaster design represents the next aesthetic step in consumer product design, moving away from humour and character into a more calm, serene and traditional image.

**Future of the essence project**

The Essence project team intends to obtain greater understanding about the rational and emotional sensibilities of the target group. Knowing this consumer thoroughly allows new ideas to be developed.
The Philips Essence project continued after this first project. A second generation of Essence products was introduced in September 2002. This was exactly three years after the introduction of the first Philips Essence range in September 1999. According to the Essence concept manager and the design manager, this second Essence range is even more in line with the Essence concept than the initial Essence products and has become a mature product range with a strong visual identity. Everyone in our organisation now accepts this approach.

After this description of the development of some of the Essence products, we will now look at the creation of three Signal toothbrushes and then compare how meaningful product expression became integrated in these products.

The three Signal Croissance toothbrushes

Around 1990, the French design agency Barré & Associés proposed its product design services to Elida Fabergé, a company that is specialised in dental care products. In the 10 years that followed, Barré & Associés designed three toothbrushes for this company. The toothbrushes are part of the Elida Fabergé's Signal Croissance products – a range of toothbrushes specifically for children.

Information for this case study was obtained from interviews with Bertrand Barré – co-founder of the design agency Barré & Associés and responsible for the Signal Croissance toothbrushes projects and Frederic Berard – commercial manager who was very much involved in the Signal Croissance projects. The Barré & Associés design archive and the publication “Vision Oblique” by Barré, B., and Lepage, F. (2001) were also consulted.

The first signal croissance toothbrush in 1991

The agency’s calls its vision of design: “Vision Oblique”. This approach is based on searching innovative possibilities that competition has not yet used. In order to identify new opportunities, the agency’s design method is centered on the product user. The agency also identifies products’ weak spots and aims to improve them, whether they are related to the product’s functionality or appearance.

The concept for the first Signal Croissance toothbrush was developed in a simple and creative way within the agency. To stimulate creativity, the agency's team listed negative aspects of toothbrushes for children that were available at that moment. Once a list was established of these negative points, the agency tried to solve them and specifically focused on an aspect that had the potential to differentiate the product from competition.

In three short phrases, this method is composed of:

- Finding negative product aspects
• Repairing these aspects
• Finding the improvements that are most appealing

During the development of the first toothbrush, the agency realised that in the early 90’s, toothbrushes for children looked like miniature versions of adult toothbrushes and also that three to six year old children were not at all interested in cleaning their teeth. Playing, however, is very important to small children. The agency, therefore, took the opportunity to make teeth brushing fun and to attract the child to the product. The first Signal Croissance toothbrush (see the drawing below) looks alive and is standing up. The toothbrush is placed on a separate support that has two feet. With this design, the agency aimed “to take the drama out of brushing teeth” (Barré, B. and Lepage, F. 2001).

The first Signal Croissance toothbrush was very successful. Signal’s European market share increased from 8 to 42% (Bertrand Barré). In Barré, B. and Lepage (F., 2001), this success is explained as follows: “we transformed an inanimate object into a playmate”.

The second signal croissance toothbrush in 1994
This first success established the use of product design services at Elida Fabergé. Competitors soon also designed toothbrushes specifically appealing to children and maintaining 42% of the European market shares became difficult. A higher budget was attributed for the design of the second toothbrush because losing a large market share was at stake. Children were involved in the development process of the new toothbrushes. Seven to ten children participated in this exercise that was organised by external animators who have experience in working with children and who are specialised in this activity.

The children were first asked to react to the agency’s drawings. Then they were asked to draw a “lively toothbrush”. After the creativity session, the agency analysed whether the children drew, for instance, the head at the place of the brush or elsewhere. The agency proposed new designs based on the children’s reactions. In a much later stage of the project, models of the product proposals were tested. The agency then received feedback on these models from the 3 and 11 year old children and from mothers.

The result of this process was the second Signal Croissance toothbrush. This toothbrush has a support with arms (see figure 4 and the previous figure 2 - the toothbrush in the background).
THE THIRD SIGNAL CROISSANCE TOOTHBRUSH IN 1995 – 1997

In 1995, after several years of leadership in children’s toothbrushes Barré & Associés wanted Elida Fabergé to commission the agency to create a third toothbrush design. Elida Fabergé found it interesting to develop accessories that could be added to the toothbrushes, but decided to continue with the existing toothbrush. Hence many accessories were created. Barré & Associés found one accessory that was launched in Italy in 1997. This was a box to keep baby teeth, which can also be used as a support for the toothbrush and to protect the brush.

The design agency, however, not only searched for the design of new accessories, but also looked for the design of a completely new toothbrush without commission from Elida Fabergé.

“They [Elida Fabergé] wanted to re-launch and maintain the product. We [Barré & Associés] wanted to innovate strongly, because competition was reacting. It was important to do something more ambitious” (Bertrand Barré).

During the search for a more “ambitious” design, the agency criticized the existing two toothbrushes. The team assessed that the toothbrush often falls over and team looked for a support that could hold on all types of surfaces. The agency thought about a system with a suction disc. A model of this idea was made with an existing Signal Croissance toothbrush to which a suction disc was attached. This model made the idea clearly visible. The agency also discovered that no one had patented this concept.

Elida Fabergé liked this new product proposal. It was decided that this third toothbrush design would be produced in two sizes for children of different age groups. The third Signal Croissance Toothbrush with the suction disc was launched in 1997 and Barré & Associés was paid for every toothbrush sold. The picture below shows the toothbrushes with the suction disc in two sizes. The toothbrush sticks to a glass surface with a suction disc.
Case study comparison and Discussion

Several points heard in the interviews were specifically analysed because they were expected to influence the process of integrating a meaningful expression in the product. I would like to discuss three of them:

- The influence of competition
- The intention to develop the product’s expression
- The process leading to the identification of the type of expression needed

Influence of competition:
Staying ahead of competition was effectively found as the principal reason to create the Philips Essence products for a precisely defined consumer group. This included both the product's functional quality level and its calm quality oriented traditional styling.

In a competitive mature market, such as that of Philips small domestic appliances, product expression is particularly important because functional improvements are difficult to make. Philips has put an organisation and a design method in place based on market and trend research that intends to integrate the right product expression, based on profound knowledge of its consumer group. In the Philips Essence case, the organisation has put more weight than in the past on the front phase of the process by analysing its consumers before beginning the product development process. In such a competitive market, refining the product's expression has become one of the crucial aspects for product success.

At the time of the development of the first Philips Essence range, Philips DAP was, from a design viewpoint, in a more difficult position than Signal. The Signal Croissance toothbrush, designed in 1991, was a breakthrough in its market because rival firms ignored at that moment the potential of toothbrushes that appealed to children. When competition is not or is still less focused on product expression, this might be a great opportunity for product differentiation followed by commercial success.

In both the Philips and the Signal case, the companies looked both for functional improvements and for innovation of refinement of product expression because the competitive market situation does not permit working on only one aspect. Both Philips and Signal designed their products with a user group in mind. In the Philips case, the user group is very precisely defined and the market research looks at consumer behaviour.

Intention to create product expression:
The Philips team had the clear intention to develop the Essence products that appealed to a specific target group. The budget to reach this objective was big because the organisation invested in understanding the sensitivities of the quality oriented consumers and people in its organisation were responsible for this.

At the start of the Signal Croissance toothbrushes project, creating a toothbrush that appealed to children created an important differentiation from competition. This objective was developed in the beginning of the project when the team looked for ways to differentiate the product.

Identifying preferences for product expression:
The process leading to the identification of an attractive expression is different in the Philips and the Signal projects. In the Philips Essence project, the characteristics of the user group were thoroughly analysed with market research. The styling characteristics that would appeal to this user group were also examined and resulted in conclusions concerning this user’s group preferences for product shapes, colours and materials. This was used as input in the design process.

All three Signal Croissance toothbrushes were designed to appeal to a specific age group of children. The methods that were used to identify what a child of this age group would like (or dislike) in a toothbrush varied from a creative idea development to product development involving children.
From the beginning in 1991, the toothbrushes were developed with the child as a user in mind. For the first toothbrush this was done in a spontaneous way, using the creativity in the design agency. In the later stages, when competition also started to design toothbrushes, creative sessions with children were organised to make the design of the toothbrushes appealing to children (and their parents).

### Summary of findings in the Philips and Signal case studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competitive situation</th>
<th>Design possibilities</th>
<th>Intention to integrate product expression</th>
<th>Method used to integrate product expression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philips in 1997</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Product expression is refined</td>
<td>Market research before dev.process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>clearly present from the beginning before the development process</td>
<td>Trend research Organisational structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signal in 1991</td>
<td>Quite high, but still possibility for a design breakthrough.</td>
<td>Product expression is based on a surprise effect</td>
<td>Creativity User-involvement (children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Developed in the beginning of the process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Conclusion and Further research

In competitive consumer markets, fine-tuning the product's communicative value is one of the ways to obtain a superior design in comparison with rival products.

The two company cases show the importance of product charisma in a competitive consumer goods context. Different methods were found to identify the user's preference for a product's expression. More research is needed to examine how other design oriented companies handle the process that leads to products having an attractive expression.

Comparing small and large companies, internationally known for their design excellence, would be highly interesting because their resources and hence their work method might vary.

Comparing international companies would also be good because the use of product expression is influenced by cultural differences, with for example in the North of Europe a more moderate product expression that in countries such as Italy.

More research concerning the creation of product charisma would serve executives to refine the design management process and consequently, increase wisdom in design.
References

Sources for the Signal Croissance case-study
Interviews and discussions at Barré & Associés in Limonest, France
Design archive of Barré & Associés

Sources of the Philips Essence case-study
Interviews and discussions at Philips DAP and Philips Design in Groningen and Amersfoort in the Netherlands

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE
José (Josiena) H.J. Gotzsch obtained her Master of Science (MSc). in Industrial Design Engineering at the University of Technology in Delft, the Netherlands. Currently she is Associate Professor in the Department of Technology Management at the Grenoble Ecole de Management (ESC Grenoble) in France. Professional experience includes, since 1991, the management and teaching of courses for business students in the field of Industrial Design and Technological Culture.
Experience, from 1986 – 1992: one year as Industrial Design Trainee at Pentagram in London, England and three years as Industrial Designer at Philips Corporate Design in Groningen, the Netherlands (Domestic Appliances and Personal Care Division). Then two years as Product Development Manager at the Group Sommer Allibert in Grenoble, France.

Research interests:
Design Management, Success Factors in Design Management, and Communicative Aspects in Product Design

Address for correspondence:
José (Josiena) Gotzsch
Groupe ESC Grenoble / Europole / 12, rue Pierre Semard / BP 127 /
38003 Grenoble Cedex 01 / France
Gotzsch@esc-grenoble.fr / +33 4 76 70 60 38 (direct)