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We are brand: Brand co-creation as an engine for new forms of welfare services

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Abstract

The paper investigates the role of brands in new forms of welfare services, introducing the concept of brand co-creation as a mean to bring cohesion, motivation and alignment inside the new networks that underlie these services. Three real cases will illustrate the potential of community branding as an engine of belonging and civic engagement, and thus as a new tool in the hands of designers involved in the development of new generation welfare services.

KEYWORDS: participatory design, branding, visual solutions, co-design, co-production

Introduction

Design for services has long been investigating its role inside of a **new generation of welfare services**. These new services introduce innovation both at governance and at operational level. Instead of the hierarchical model of welfare, where the state provides services in a transactional manner, new forms of welfare create dynamic public-private networks able to tackle societal problems in a relational way, by putting the individual at the centre (Maino, 2012). In this frame, branding can be seen as a powerful tool to help the creation and delivery of new forms of welfare services.

Indeed, **brands are more than just a logo**: brands also comprise an invisible part, which contains meaning-intensive values that underlie all the brand system. In new forms of welfare services, this part of brands is fundamental. Brands can be the way organisations define and use meaning-rich values while communicating and operating – with the additional benefit of driving the organisation, and all its individuals, towards more cohesive and impactful activities. Able to comprise both tangible indication (symbol and characteristics) and intangible assets (values and behaviours), brands can broadly influence, for the better, services at organisational, system and interface levels.

However, contrary to the traditional way of managing brands, which is through tools that are fundamentally normative and that create, as Armstrong and Stojmirovic (2011) call them, ‘brand monologues’, designers who use brands as a tool for community-building need to **engage in a conversation** and be open to co-creation. This approach creates a reciprocity which enhances the brand value through interaction of “consumers”, the organisation and its

stakeholders, mutually influencing each other. This goes beyond the traditional consumer–firm dyadic, as mentioned by Voyer et al. (2017).

In a **transformation design** perspective, as described by Burns et al. (2006) and further described by Sangiorgi (2011), and given the nature of these services, brands for new forms of welfare organizations can express its full beneficial effects only if two conditions are met. Firstly, they have to be created in a participative way; secondly, they have to be manageable by internal stakeholders, users and external audiences, thus building capacity, and not dependency on designers. Although this shift of power leads to a loss of control in how brands are traditionally managed, their values, character and culture are directly determined and shaped by the people who use them. When these stakeholders are provided with an infrastructure made of simple empowering tools, they are enabled to engage with the service communication artefacts and touchpoints and to adapt them to different contexts.

From storytelling to storydoing: how brands are changing

Brands are three things in one (Landa, 2005): **brand identity** (conception of a brand from the point of view of the brand owner), **brand image** (constellation of all elements that express the identity) and **brand perception** (ultimate mental image of a brand by each stakeholder).

Brand identity can be understood by looking at brands through the lenses of four similitudes, as described by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2010). As **symbols**, brands are characterised by recurring visuals and metaphors. As **products**, brands relate to the characteristics of the product/service they represent. Subtler is the concept of brand as **person**: this explains how brands seem to have a distinct personality. Finally, brands can be seen as **organisations**: through this lens, we can see how brands contain **values** that underlie the brand system, and that act as beacon to give meaning to the actions of the organisation and the individuals who compose it. These aggregates of meaning are becoming more and more important for brands, to the extent that brands nowadays are more about organisations, and less about products (Fabris and Minestrone, 2004). A distinction, therefore, can be made between the *visible branding* (visuals and product characteristics) and *invisible branding* (values and positioning) (Grimaldi, 2014).

To get an audience to internalise all these concepts, these elements have to be translated into a series of actions and artefacts, which make up the **brand image**. The constituents of a brand image (from purely communicational artefacts, such as a *brand videos*, to very concrete and functional items, such as the *touchpoints* of a service), working as a hypertext, narrate the original brand idea and contribute to the individual understanding of the brand, which is ultimately the **brand perception**. The translation between brand identity and brand image is usually controlled through evocative artefacts that evangelise about the core values, such as brand books, and normative artefacts that mandate the graphical expression, such as manuals. These are usually technical tools, made by designers for other designers.

A summary of this framework is found in Figure 1.

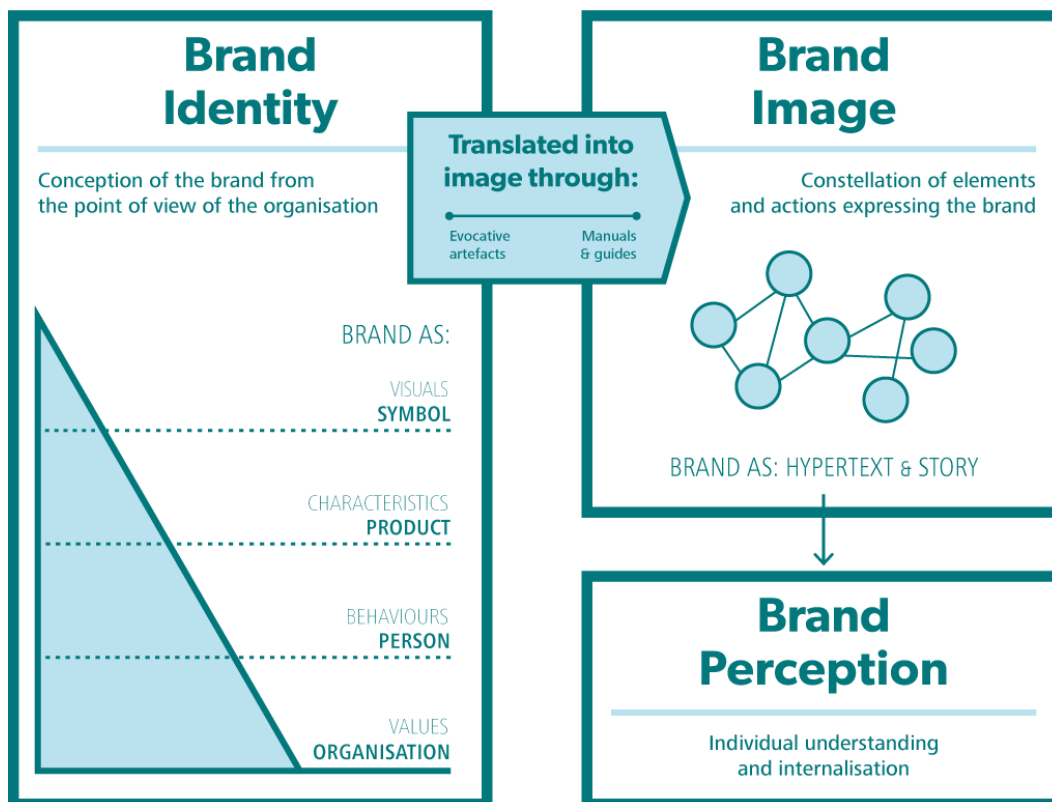


Figure 1 – Brand identity, as a complex system of values, behaviours, characteristics and symbols, is translated into a brand image, which in turn shapes the brand perception

Branding is, intuitively, an expensive activity in terms of time, commitment and money. Therefore, why do organisations need brands? Brands are an effective way to communicate the benefits that the user can expect from using a product/service, and this was their original function: functional, emotional, and self-expression benefits (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2010). This, however, is not the only reason for branding, as this activity can bring **internal organisational benefits**. The value system of brands can help building internal consensus, giving higher sense of mission and belonging in individuals contributing in a community. When a brand and its intangible components represent a shared ground within an organization, members are not only aware of the vision and mission, but also of the organization strategy. Thus, every member of the network is a potential brand agent who can bring a positive external image of the brand, as Monfort et al. (2015) explain.

This new view on brands encompasses more than profit, and therefore can become **beneficial for non-profit organisations**, too. Brands become a strategic asset that serves the mission of the non-profit organisation. In this perspective brands can be the way organisations define, protect and use meaning-rich values while communicating and operating – with the additional benefit of driving the organisation, and its individuals, towards more cohesive and impactful activities and programs. Indeed, due to the blurred line which separates brand consumer and brand creator, the brand value lies in the community.

This becomes possible only if the view on branding changes from a tool of competitive advantage used to drive profit, to a way to **express the unique identity of an organisation**, as already advocated by Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel (2013). To do so, brands must reflect deeply the values and mission of an organisation. Moreover, brands must be managed with engagement, and not normative control, in mind. If brands and the values they underpin are not only passively received, but co-created as well, a **continuous**

extension, re-appropriation and re-socialisation of these values can be made, contributing to the sense of belonging a brand can foster.

Communication theorists and practitioners already advocate this change from profit to value, from manipulation to authenticity and from authority to inclusivity, not only in the non-profit sector, but also as a general and much needed shift in all communicational paradigms.

As Morace (2017) has said [translated from Italian]:

To face the future of communication, we need to understand the shift from storytelling to storydoing, which is telling what we are doing, [...] What will keep brand identity together will be the tale – in real time – of what that brand is doing, which projects is activating, which social and civic mobilisation it is able to back, in a rich and varied manner.¹

The author goes on in explaining how manipulation will become an ineffective way of communicating, as users become much less passive consumers, and much more “*consumAutori*”, that is, in English, *authors-consumers*, users who become originators and protagonists in the tale of a brand. This paradigmatic shift is explained in Figure 2.

As designers involved in the creation and management of new generation welfare services, we recognise the potential of branding, but we also understand the needed change from traditional ways of managing it. Therefore, we focused on **co-creation** tried to understand how it could be applied in branding with and for welfare organisations.

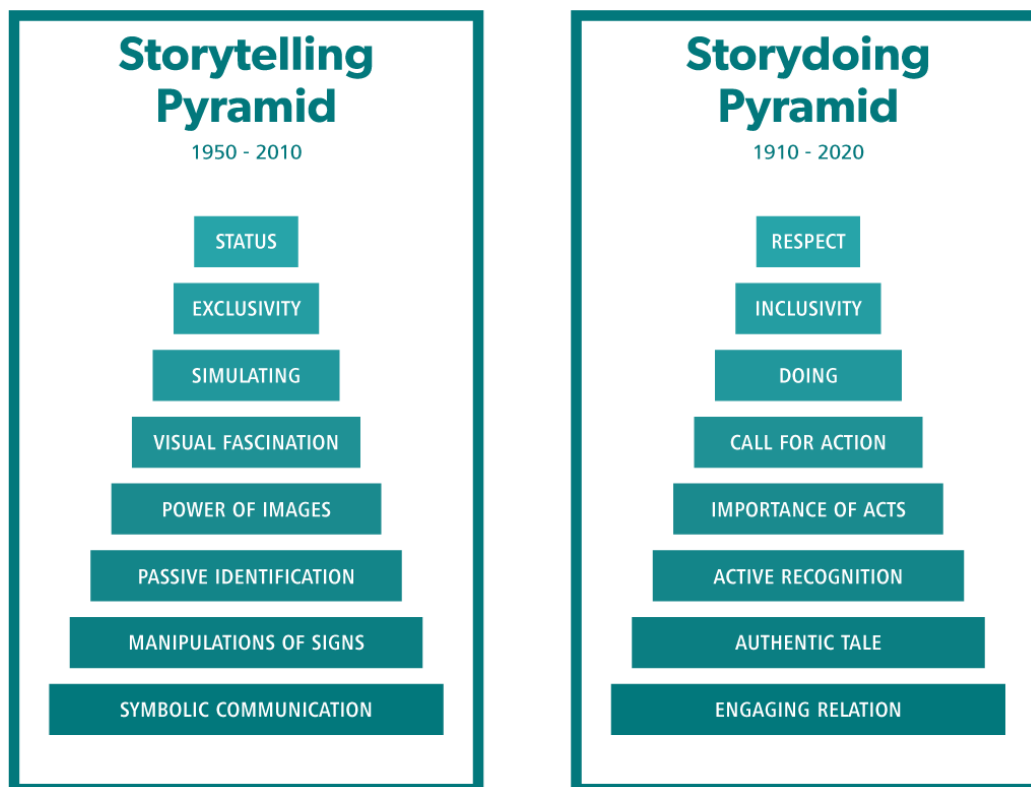


Figure 2 – Storytelling / storydoing, translated from Morace (2017)

¹ “Per affrontare il futuro della comunicazione, dobbiamo comprendere il passaggio dallo storytelling allo storydoing: raccontare ciò che si fa [...] Ciò che terrà insieme l’identità della brand sarà il racconto – in tempo reale – di ciò che la brand sta facendo, quali progetti sta attivando, quale mobilitazione sociale e civile è in grado di sostenere, in modo ricco e variegato. [...]”

Brand co-creation: co-design and co-production applied to community branding

The theoretical frameworks on co-creation are many, often with conflicting or ambiguous terminological boundaries around the words **co-design**, **co-production**, and **co-creation**. In this article, we take co-creation as the umbrella term that comprises both co-design (designing with users, at design time, before use) and co-production (delegating production and design decisions to users, at use time, after the design process is concluded, without the direct presence of designers). Figure 3 illustrates this framework, along with fundamental references in literature.

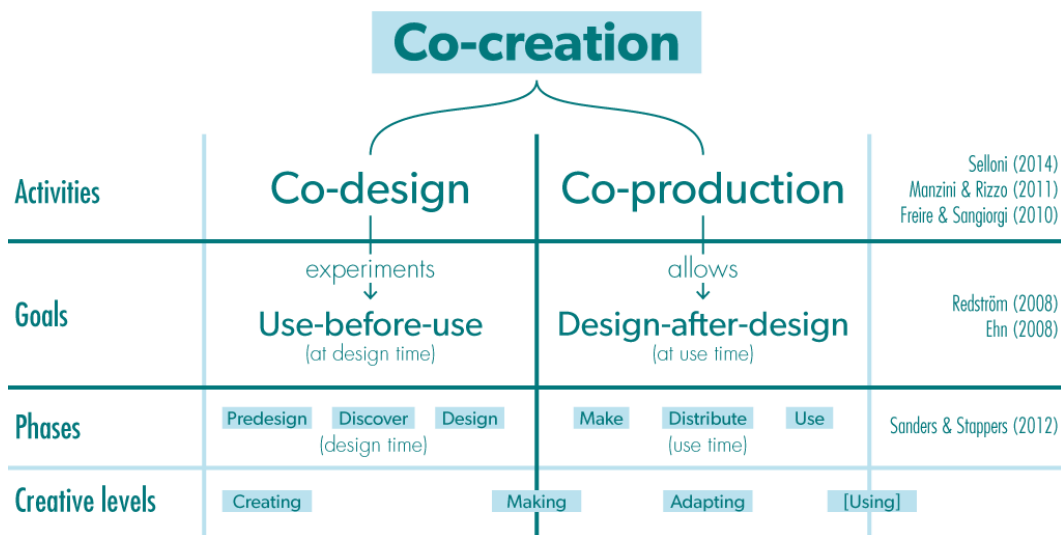


Figure 3 – Comparison between co-design and co-production

How can we apply co-creation to branding? We can see brand identity as something that is created a priori, before it is translated into a usable brand image. In this **use-before-use** analogy, **brand identity can be co-designed**, by involving users and stakeholders in the definition of a shared set of values (the “invisible”) and symbols/images (the “visible”). Of course, deciding what parts of the brand identity are to be co-designed and what parts remain traditionally designed is up to the designer’s sensitivity.

Instead, **brand image**, as act of translation of brand identity into a tangible, visible set of artefacts, offers **opportunities for co-production**. The translation, instead of being fully designed, can be left partly open for **design-after-design** by users. In this sense, designers help building the social, cultural and technical infrastructure that empowers final users and service deliverers as designers and producers of the artefacts that express the organisation’s brand. As in brand co-design, not all elements of the brand image have to be co-produced, but only a strategical subset.

It is not excluded that the co-production of brand-image elements could have a feedback into the definition of brand identity: the fact that final users and deliverers are asked to engage with the brand makes it possible that the brand identity itself, in the long term, is changed and realigned. Such manipulation of the brand allows to define new meanings and to create value-in-use which is defined and shaped over time by its co-producers, making it a living entity.

A synthesis of the concepts of brand identity co-design and brand image co-production is found in Figure 4.

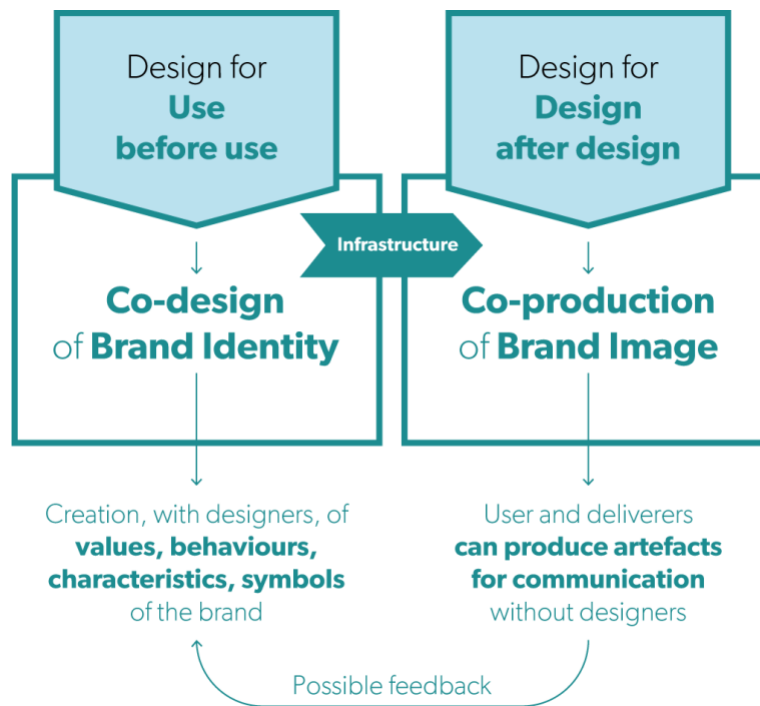


Figure 4 – Integration of co-creation and branding

Experiences from the field

1 – Brand as foundation for a non-profit organisation

When a new service is being born, co-designing the brand identity could be the first step of a series of engaging activities. ANFASS Borgomanero was upgrading its system of residences for disabled individuals, starting from a complete restore and refurbishing of an old structure in Gozzano, Novara. Users, caregivers (generally parents of users) and educators of these Centres are the “living infrastructure” of the Organization; their beliefs, affections and behaviours may keep people close to the cause and to the activity of the Organization itself, or not. A professional designer was involved, since the beginning, in the process of re-thinking about the identity of the new Centre.

Apart from users, unluckily too compromised for being part of an exercise of this sort, both caregivers and educators have been involved in a co-design activity, in three sessions. The first session was about ‘naming’: a guided brain-writing activity, focused on keywords and icebreaking interludes, got the goal to collect a shared semantics' cloud capable of "giving voice" to the big idea beyond the new service (Figure 5a). Second session's goal was an open discussion to assign the concerted brand identity to the right brand image, by choosing between a series of options developed by the professional (Figure 5b). The third and last session was dedicated to strategic design, enabling future production of communication materials. Needs of communication, channels and contents' priority have been widely discussed to achieve a shared planning that was given, again, to professionals responsible to execute the artefacts.

The process allowed to align visions about the future of the Centre and strengthen the values linked to the Organization and to the cause. In addition, caregivers and educators gave a great feedback: it was the first time they have been close to the organization ‘head’. Co-design sessions created deep sense of belonging and had a positive impact on brand perception, as individuals that have been engaged are both inside the cause and part of external community.



Figure 5a – The first co-design session, entirely devoted to play with concepts and words, by freely brainstorming them and then clustering them.

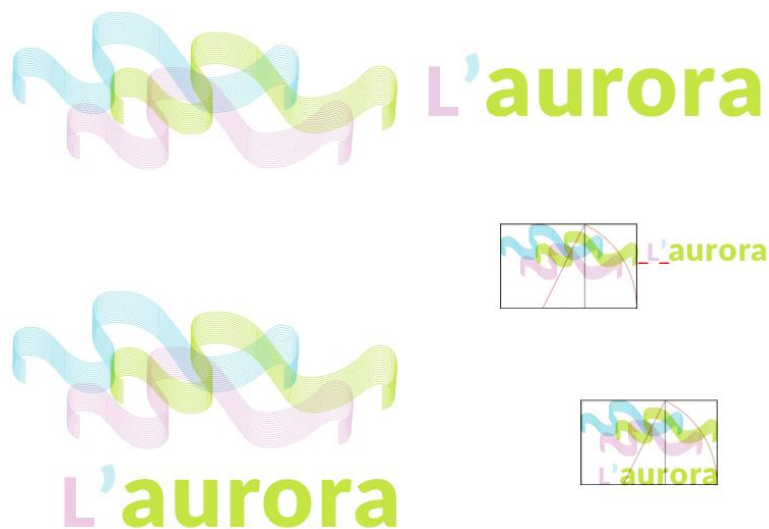


Figure 5b – In the following sessions, through the input and proposal of the designers, the final set of visual symbols have been collectively defined.

2 – Brand identity as a vehicle for community value re-generation

Welfare Lodigiano di Comunità (WLC)² is an innovative welfare project that aims to support people who are dealing with a moment of temporary crisis. Through a solid network of associations, local businesses and volunteers, WLC supports people in the whole Lodi district, a constellation of 62 municipalities close to Milan. The innovation driver of this project is to go beyond the traditional welfare models, providing people with tools that can empower them to get through the hard time they are facing. Therefore, the project operates on three vulnerability areas, which constitute the three main actions: food distribution, social housing and business counselling.

When the design team joined WLC, a logo was already been developed, but there were some inconveniences: in reality, the brand perception did not suit the brand identity, not even for the stakeholders involved. The first decision of the design team was to refresh brand values with a participatory brainstorming session (Figure 6a). This activity allowed convergence in terms of visions and vocabulary: this was mainly a process of re-appropriation and realignment. Within a context with a substantial number of stakeholders, internal alignment represents a key factor to define the organization identity and to communicate it externally.

The next challenge was to co-design, with all the stakeholders involved, a system of visual references for the different actions of the project. Through a series of workshops and iterations lead by the design team, in which members of the municipality and the local associations ideated about the hidden meanings of the service, the group built a set of common values to be used for the design of the service touchpoints. This phase was fundamental to create a shared understanding of the project mission and purpose, and to activate the participants as brand-service ambassadors.

After unveiling the invisible part of the brand, the focus shifted on the creation of principles to guide the design of the service touchpoints (brochures, postcards, social media, events) across different channels (Figure 6b). Through a participative process, the team worked on two main aspects. First, the team defined the semantic values of the logo colours and of the visual brand components to design a set of guidelines for each of the three project actions, creating different visual declinations of the main brand image and remarkable elements such as prefix #RI (which stands for the prefix re- in English, to underline the concept of iteration). Then, the team investigated the use of the brand for building a series of artefacts with different communication goals and able, at the same time, to maintain the philosophy of the project itself, which is to empower people. The insights gained during this phase were the base for the design of user booklets and job-sheets that support the dialog between different service providers (housing, food, job services) and the users, and ease the engagement of external stakeholders for structuring a shared collaboration plan with WLC (Figure 6c).

This approach helped the organization members to design tangible elements that not only embed the brand values per se, but also use the communication to assist the service itself. Within this framework, co-design becomes a driver to define solutions that are not always visually refined, but rather are meant to foster engagement, create a sense of ownership within an organization.

This outlines new scenarios in which the brand image becomes an open system that can be manipulated in different ways by a variety of actors.

² The project was developed in the context of “Welfare in Azione”, an initiative curated by Fondazione Cariplo, one of the biggest Italian philanthropic organizations.



Figure 6a – In this case, as well, the group of stakeholders have been engaged into a words and concepts initial session.



Figure 6b – In subsequent sessions more technical aspects have been dealt with. This asked for more complex tools to be used with actors involved in sessions.

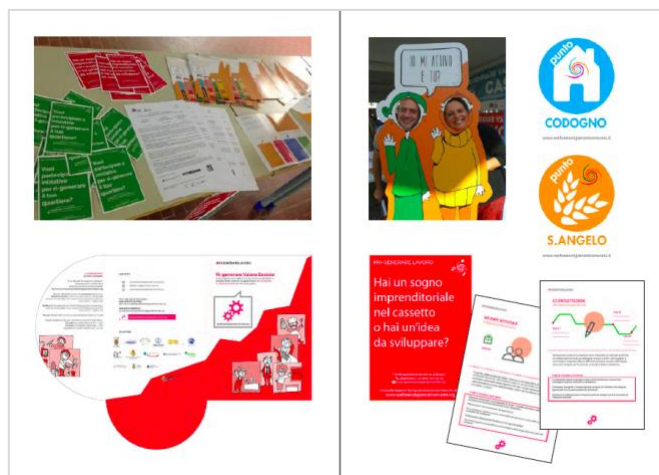


Figure 6c – As a result, with the choices made during sessions, designers have been able to develop new communicational artefacts.

3 – Più Segni Positivi: from co-creation to co-production with the community

Più Segni Positivi (*More Positive Signs*) is an innovative public-private welfare organization based in Sondrio. The project aims to support people with economic difficulties through informal aid and community networks of volunteers and associations. By giving the possibility to rise stronger from personal and family issues, the organization's goal is to empower users and make them a "positive sign" for other people.

The project comprises three sub-projects: Cantieri, which pursues the education and the job placement of jobless individuals, Emporion, a social market where selected beneficiaries can have free access to food and services that can bring them psychological and physical well-being, and Diffuso, the connection unit between the organization and the local communities.

Più Segni Positivi brand has been open, since the beginning, to a participative co-design process, whose result was a set of distinct values and behaviours, characteristics and symbols. The whole process was carried out by a team of designers through a series of community workshops and public activities to engage the local community.

The co-design of the brand identity involved the organizational board of *Più Segni Positivi* and the whole network of internal stakeholders. During these sessions, the group developed the values of the brand: positivity and hope, cohesion, and the will to challenge the common definition of crisis. These deeper values of the project can suggest the behaviour of the current and future actions: *Più Segni Positivi* traces temporary, light, smart interventions on and with the territory and its community.

In order to extend the set of values and to involve people from the local community, a public-activity was carried out: the broad public of Sondrio was asked to contribute, during a public event, to the value-system of *Più Segni Positivi*, through engaging visual artefacts (Figure 7a). As a result, the gathered keywords have been integrated in the brand, and have been often used in subsequent artefacts made by the design team.

Once the brand image was defined, the design team has tested a co-production process to develop the communicational artefacts for the daily operations of Emporion. Thus, a system of technical, social and cultural elements was infrastructured to facilitate the communication between users and service deliverers, while staying in brand.

As for the technical infrastructure, a price tag system, a wayfinding system, and a system of chalkboards used to share money-saving recipes were set up (Figure 7b). All these elements were designed to be usable and modifiable by the team of volunteers that run Emporion, allowing them to self-produce visual artefacts.

Without a social infrastructure, the use of these elements would however be sporadic. Therefore, the coordinator of Emporion got assigned the role of brand hero, to make sure that all communication stays on brand, giving guidance and recognition, and fostering the use of the artefacts. To ease the process for service providers, which are not professional designers, a "behavioural manual" was conceived (Figure 7c). This little book, the co-production version of a brand image manual, aims to instructs the co-producers about the brand and the modalities of use of the artefacts they can produce, allowing them to communicate effectively.

This set of technical, social and cultural interventions is what can really enable deliverers and users to become active co-producers of the communicational values and materials of the service, giving to the community a powerful tool to design an end-to-end communication system.



Figure 7a – Public event in Sondrio

During the public event of *DonoDay* (“Gifting Day”) we asked people of Sondrio: “What is your positive sign?”. The collected keywords became an important set of concepts, used in subsequent artefacts.

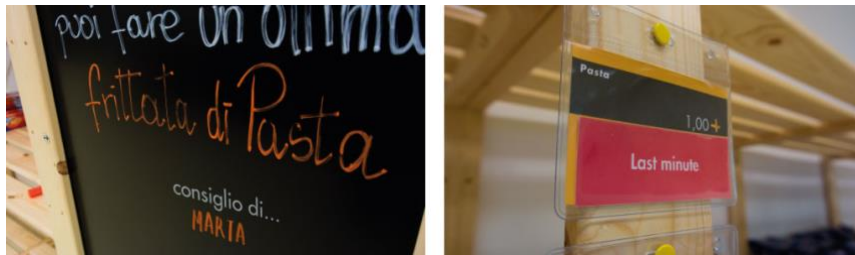


Figure 7b – Artefacts open to co-production

Inside Emporion, artefacts have been designed so that deliverers could freely use them, while keeping brand coherence. For “money-saving hacks” blackboards, deliverers are encouraged to share tips and tricks on a defined *template*. In the case of price tags, the *modularity* of the system allows the necessary flexibility.



Figure 7c – Behavioural manual

The first part of the behavioural manual is devoted to convey the fundamental values of the brand. The second part instead illustrates the use of artefacts through tips and examples.

Conclusions

Brands sit between organisational and interactional levels of a service and thus can bring benefits both in communicating the intangible characteristics of a service, and in building consensus, alignment and engagement in communities, which are a fundamental asset for new generation welfare services. As services are inherently human-based, brands can be a powerful instrument for service designers. Theory and practice show that it is possible to co-design brand identity, and co-produce brand image: by doing so, the positive effects of brands on services are amplified, and the brand stays truer to the individuals who compose the stakeholder community of a service.

As designers focus more on processes and less on final outcomes, the core goal of design is not concentrating on form and function per se, but producing shared value. This, applied to brands, makes brands tools for creating community bonding and sense of belonging. As Manzini (2015) says:

We can recognize some emerging modes: expert designers [...] are progressively shifting from dealing with traditional products and communication artifacts toward design processes in which what have to be designed are hybrid, dynamic artifacts where products, services, and communication are systemized and presented as a whole. (Manzini, 2015, p.42-43)

This means shifting power and responsibility from professionals (who only conceive a process) to users, who are now able, as highlighted in this paper, to contribute to brands in a more “hands on” way, mediated by a structure/process conceived by designers, yet uncontrolled. This loss of control is highlighted as an empowering tool not only across design discipline, but also in marketing literature regarding brand co-creation: see, for reference, the extensive paper review by Ranjan & Read (2016).

As seen in the first case study, brand identity co-design can be the kick-start for a new service, whose structure and operation may be already defined, but whose deeper meanings and motivations may be still hidden and poorly aligned within the community. By starting with meanings and values and, through subsequent co-design activities, by translating them into visual symbols with which everybody can identify with, the community of deliverers and users is driven by a common set of values, towards a shared goal. The structure of these co-design workshops is not inherently different from the usual co-design activities widely theorised and practiced in the last years, but the tools used focus more on the expression and collection of concepts, and on the translation of them into images.

It's interesting to reveal, to non-experts, the “hidden” potential of a brand. By working together on the pyramid base of the brand (the “invisible branding”, as Grimaldi, 2014, calls it) it is possible to drive the group from shared values (the foundations), to the extraction - and abstraction - of peculiar characteristics establishing the self-perceived “competitive advantage” (or, for social sector, the “core” of the cause or of the service), gradually climbing up to strategic positioning, crucial for all sorts of public messages.

Brand co-design can also be used as a recovery for a poorly perceived brand, as seen in case two. Again, by starting with values and gradually, with the help of designers, by conceiving an imagery, stakeholders are asked to rethink, negotiate and re-appropriate the deeper values of their community, while also building a set of symbols able to communicate them to even more people. In this case, expert designers pull the group above the line of invisible branding engaging the stakeholders also in visual development. Brand identity co-design results in brands that are more in tune with the involved community, and this makes community engagement a natural consequence.

In the third case, the use of brand co-creation has been more broad and open to experimentation. Since the beginning, the service brand has been conceived as an open system. Not only it has been initially designed with iterative co-design workshops, but it also

made use of public events as a tool to gather more values from the broad community. On the other hand, the experiment of brand image co-production inside Emporion, the social market, made possible to build an infrastructure on top of which users and deliverers alike could become active bearers of the higher message coming from the value system of the brand, without direct intervention of designers. Brand image co-production provides for the necessary flexibility that allows users and deliverers to engage with the service touchpoints and modify them to the context, avoiding that the service is perceived “too closed” for the users to be fully involved. Following this line of thought, the success of a brand is measured not only by the extent of exposure and recognisability, but also by the degree of usability by users and stakeholders.

The tools used to achieve brand image co-production are not necessarily complex and can be as simple as a blackboard with a fixed template, but have to be conceived with modularity and templates in mind, so that user-creators can combine elements with freedom of expression, while ensuring brand recognisability. In addition, these user-creators also need cultural tools to fully embrace the brand.

In practice, during the process of brand identity co-design, designer can be the orchestrators of co-design sessions, while also providing design proposals (mostly in the graphic design part of a brand system), to be discussed during consequent sessions. Moreover, to set up the infrastructure for brand image co-production, designers have to design a system in which recognisability is assured by the process of production, and not necessarily by the use of normative instructions regulating the form in all details. Given this principle, opening the production of some elements to non-designers does not necessarily undermine recognisability of the brand, if the infrastructure helps co-producers to maintain some fixed elements.

In general, as the experience in many other design fields has suggested, designers have to take the role less of an author, and more of a facilitator. In this shift, designers lose control of parts of the process and of the result, but they become able to create solutions that are more relevant for the individuals for whom and with whom they design.

Further development

Further work can be done in validating and monitoring impact on such endeavours. We would like to conclude this dissertation with some proposed qualitative checks that might be done in short- and long-term perspective, both on brand identity co-design and on brand image co-production.

Even if brand identity co-design is participated in nature, the outcomes of it still need end-user validation, especially if the co-design group was a small subsample of the final public, or even more narrowly (as shown in the three case studies) the stakeholders of a new, growing service. Endeavours such as the public engagement activities illustrated before, even if not rigorous, can be useful to test and iterate the co-designed brand with a broader public, while also taking the opportunity to gather more input, negotiate some of the main brand values and make the brand richer and more shared.

On long term, instead, the role of designers should be to continuously challenge the brand as status quo, to make sure that, as the user base grows in number and diversity, the brand still is inclusive, and its mission is really shared within the organisation, at all levels. This continuous check can be achieved by constantly involving stakeholder and users not only in the definition of the core brand, but also in its brand image manipulation.

Concerning brand image co-production, designers have the role to collect feedback and to adapt the system to emergent users and infrastructure needs. Moreover, it's fundamental to validate the relevance of the tools used by the co-producers, and how they apply them, since

this has a vast impact on how the brand is perceived by its end-users. In this task, the key people that comprise the so-called “social infrastructure” (e.g. *brand heroes*) can be act as bridge between designers and the wider community.

In the long run, the positive impact of brand co-production relies on the relation between the brand constraint, represented by the brand ideas system and the creative freedom of its stakeholders. A success factor within this context, is the ability of the co-producers to translate the brand identity and strategy into artefacts which are still effective, albeit not refined as traditional design outputs.

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