Integrated image management:
The contribution of design

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the contribution of design to the process of image construction within the context of organizations, substantiating the importance of its integrated management. It focuses on design's instrumental role in ensuring that the meaning, performance and appearance of an organization's products, services, environments and communication are consistent with both its strategy and goals. The coordination and integration of design within the framework of an organization is discussed in relation to its recent history. A definition of design management is proposed, its relevance and operational boundaries clarified, with a particular focus on image management and the relationship between design and visual identity: the organization's nucleus of identification.

Keywords: design, image management, visual identity, organizations.

Introduction

It was a designer who made the first formal reference to integrated image management as an area in which design could be applied to the sphere of business. In 1964, the term *corporate identity* and its underlying concept reflected a new rationale for Walter Margulies: it framed an activity that, after starting from a specific focus on graphic elements identifying corporations, was moving towards other "controllable" aspects of business communication.

Various reasons explain the growing importance of this "identity management" and the extension of design activities within that context. In the first place, identity moved to center-stage in corporate communication and, in this way, the conversion of identity into communicable elements became the essence of organizational communication itself. Secondly, the following are given as causes justifying this change of position in relation to the market: the need for differentiation as a result of keener competition; the shrinkage in product life cycles; greater segmentation; the rise in mergers, acquisitions and privatizations; diversification and deregulation; media price rises and recognition of the value of integrated communication; globalization and growing internationalization.

Today, the management of communication relations between corporations and the market is a function that is crucial to the formation of the image aspired to. And its field of action has expanded: from an activity centered on the *corporation*, we have proceeded to one with a wider scope and broader aims, one that now involves all types of *organization*, whether private or public, for-profit or non-profit. As a result, *customers* are becoming *publics*, to include consumers, voters and users; *selling* is giving way to *promoting behaviors* – consumer behaviors, whether civic or cultural; finally, the pursuit of *profitability* is being replaced by the *attainment of goals*, which may be financial as much as political or social.

Design makes an instrumental contribution to the process of image construction: this includes ensuring that the meaning, performance and appearance of the organization's products, services, environments and communication are consistent with its strategy and goals. In directly intervening at the level of the organization's formal (and planned) components, the designer assumes the responsibility of capturing a visual representation of what it produces or says; it falls to the management to provide an overall view of communication, on the basis that everything the organization says, does or produces inevitably announces who it is, what its values are and where it intends to go.

The wide range of functions often assigned to design – generally by the designers themselves – is itself controversial on account of the inordinate ambition that it frequently incorporates. When the management dimension is added to the discussion, the already difficult functional coordination and integration of this activity within the framework of the various activities making up an organization become even more complex. This issue is debated under the first point in this article, which describes the present paradigm of *design management* in relation to its recent history: the function is defined, its relevance explained and the fields and limits of action described.

Focusing on *image management*, the next point presents the properties attributed to image and stresses the im-

portance of its being monitored in a market context. It also describes the process through which an image is formed and systematizes the principal factors, on the basis of the three-category distinction it puts forward: functional image, social image and intentional image.

The third and final part of the article is centered on the organization's *intentional image* or, more precisely, on the components susceptible to operational intervention. It addresses the concept of identity, distinguishing the *organizational* perspective (centered within the organization) from the *projected* aspect, which assumes the communicational vision necessary for the framing of the design function. It goes on to develop the field of visual identity, which arises from the organization's strategic options and the framework of reference defined by its positioning. In specific terms, it analyses the relationship between design and visual identity, noting their contribution to the graphic image as the organization's nucleus of identification; it also mentions some of the relevant empirical evidence that exists.

The article closes with a concluding synthesis that summarizes the contribution of design to the organization's image and underlines the importance of its integrated management.

Design management

Within the sphere of organizations, design management as an independent field of activity with specific functions is a relative new-comer[1]. Design management is directly concerned with the formulation of design policy, the co-ordination of its own function with other functions inside the organization, and the identification of important areas of action. The aspects in which it is involved and the nature and extent of this involvement differ, depending on the type of organization and sector within which it is integrated.

In accepting design as an integral part of the organizational dynamics, the management has to decide, first of all, what design-related aspects are really important to the organization, taking both its internal operation and external activities into account. This allows it to frame an explicit policy that governs all design activities in accordance with particular objectives – towards which all efforts should be directed – and actual parameters – against which results can be measured[2].

The place for design in the organizational structure depends on the group of activities for which it is in demand and the number of areas that it covers. It may or may not

exist as an independent function[3]. The traditional model for addressing *design* management sees the design function as part of the company structure, operationally on a par with the *production* and *marketing* areas. The aim of this interfunctional triangle is to provide a strategic connection between conception, production and market, and to link up financial, social, cultural and aesthetic variables (Cf. Lorenz, 1991, p. 24-28).

This model is now considered rather restrictive in the light of the new circumstances as it reflects in particular the paradigm of industrial design[4]. Though, in the industrial sector, the marketing and production functions are necessarily close to each other, in other sectors this relationship may not be obvious and the model must inevitably accommodate other link-ups. Nowadays, design management is not confined to the specific activity of developing products or services, as maintained by the paradigm that Lorenz describes (1991, p. 24) but, rather, recommends the bringing together of all activities that affect their performance and appearance.

This new approach gained prominence from the beginning of the 1980s, when design came to be considered both an element that contributed to organizational planning processes and a key to the indispensable differentiation of products, services and brands. This was imposed by segmented research and the need to obtain *competitive advantage* in the face of a double constraint: the exponential increase in competition and the slowdown in economic growth.

More recently, the perspective of *design as a differentiator* – or even the averred vision of the profession as especially talented for the abstract task of *problem solving* – has started to be replaced by the idea of an activity that focuses on two aspects. On the one hand, it aims to *create value* by helping, on an integrated basis, to reduce costs – by optimizing processes and using the resources available more effectively – and, on the other, it aims to improve the provision of products or services – by means of intervention regarding their technical properties, improvement in their functional quality and, when applicable, the boosting of their most valued functions.

In line with this approach, design is now viewed as a cultural vector of the organization; its role represents a coordinating mechanism for all *projectable* elements, and its management is responsible for the physical interface between the organization and its primary publics[5]. Design management is thus focused, in particular, both on the elements that connect the organization with the exterior – in the planning processes for the things it produces and uses,

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[1] The first attempt to identify the concept and the first formal definition date from 1966: "The function of defining a design problem, finding the most suitable designer and making it possible for him (or her) to solve it on time and within an agreed budget" (Farr, 1966). Since then, the scope of design management has progressively broadened, releasing its operation from eminently project-related concerns and moving on to the involvement of communication policy, organizational behaviour, and inclusivity, among other areas that go beyond the field of design in its strict sense. A detailed and comprehensive discussion of the subject may be found in the key publication *Design Management: A Handbook of Issues and Methods* (1990), co-ordinated by Mark Oakley. It brings together 45 articles on the topic.

[2] A design policy should define: (1) the specialist areas necessary and the relative level of participation; (2) the type and nature of the results to be achieved, in absolute terms and as a contribution to other activities or courses of action; (3) the approach – integrated or fragmented – depending on whether or not it is intended to project a single identity; (4) the degree and timing of the changes to implement; (5) the use of internal or external designers. See Topalian (1990) for more on this topic.

[3] As an independent function, a positive contribution by design depends on an appropriate strategy and clear goals – defined in terms of the results to be obtained and not in terms of specific or solution-oriented characteristics; otherwise, the design process may be exhausted too soon and, accordingly, numerous potentially useful approaches eliminated. The success of its integration with other functions in the organization requires the assignment of decision-making and executive responsibility at the level of planning, administration, monitoring, and activity control. When design does not exist as an independent function, its position in the institutional hierarchy is influenced by two factors: its specific function and the department on which it depends, i.e., marketing, research and development, production or operations.

[4] Alternative proposals for design management models may be found in the seminal article by Dumas and Mintzberg (1991). These authors put forward a means of systematizing the models under four distinct versions: Encompassed Design (Single Function), Decomposed Design (Isolated Functions), Dominated/Visionary Design (Leading Function) and Cooperative Design (Interactive Functions). For a theoretical discussion on the connection between design and management see Sebastian (2005).

[5] Design management is also responsible for the promotion of a permanent discussion between the organization and its *publics*. The latter consist of all the people with whom, in one way or another, the organization enters into contact. Many of these are close to it and have a special relationship with it – they are described as interest groups or stakeholders and include customers, competitors, suppliers and local communities. Others are not so close, e.g. opinion leaders, lawmakers, journalists, analysts, associations and the general public.

the services it provides, what it supplies, and the means with which it communicates – and on the form in which its activities are perceived.

Fundamentally, the need to make use of design arises in four areas: products and services, equipment and space, information and communication systems, and visual identity. This classification necessarily involves a degree of overlapping, given that the areas are naturally interlinked. Recognition of this fact calls for their integrated management, balanced in accordance with their relative preponderance, on the empirical presupposition that everything in the organization represents it and communicates something about it.

For this reason, no entity can allow itself to ignore the impressions it creates: inevitably, everything it does, shows or utters, directly or indirectly and intentionally or unconsciously, reaches the people with whom it interacts – each public with whom it interacts forms its own opinion based on the entirety of the *signals* transmitted by the organization. As it is unrealistic to hope that communication can be totally controlled or even think that it can be effected on a mutually exclusive basis (i.e., by isolating *audiences*), it remains for the organization to search for strategies that simultaneously minimize the impact of the factors that may affect it negatively and allow it to protect and strengthen its image[6].

Image

An organization's image is a matter of influence: it determines the way it is perceived and the way people relate to it. Accordingly, it requires particular attention and dedicated management[7].

The importance attached to image arises from a belief in its ability to affect attitudes, which, in turn, influence behaviors (Vilar, 2006). Image is credited with a series of instrumental qualities – of encouraging positive attitudes and feelings; allowing differentiation; assisting with the interpretation, processing and retrieval of information; creating reasons to join in, acquire or use, and facilitating this decision. At the base of this set of capabilities lies the conviction that actions regularly have an image to support them – i.e., a mentally constructed *reality* – made up of beliefs and feelings and abstracted into a set of simplifications (Boulding, 1956)[8].

An image is the mental representation of a set of associations with meaning; in the case of an organization, the image takes shape in the group of descriptors that identify and define it in our minds: physical and symbolic features, facts and opinions, benefits and feelings, personalities, situations

and environments, and graphics. Images are formed, developed and altered in accordance with our own experience or by means of stimuli resulting from communication activities.

The image's *determining factors* may be grouped into three main areas. The first is associated with the organization's behavior and performance and sums up the ways of acting established by functional and strategic policies: it constitutes the *functional image.* The second is linked to more subjective factors such as the organizational culture and ideology, internal images (i.e., the internal publics' perception of and identification with the organization) and the relationship with society: it signifies a *social image.* The third area takes its form in the communication and visual identity resulting from formal policies (generally identified as the *organization's image policies*): it represents the *intentional image* that the organization seeks to project (Villafañe, 1998; Vilar, 2006). The synthesis of these three *images* – functional, social and intentional – forms the organization's image, which also varies, depending on the public whose perspective is being evaluated and in accordance with the minor contribution of the context variables[9].

Intentional image

Strictly speaking, an organization cannot create an image. The image is not what the organization thinks but what the public believes or feels about the organization – on the basis of its observation and experience, what it knows about its performance, what it hears the organization say about itself, and what others say about the organization.

However, though the image *belongs* to the public, the organization may intervene in its decisive components[10]. Thus, as the organization's external image depends in particular on factors related to its performance and identity (and also depends on the way these aspects interconnect and are communicated), these attract the greatest intervention. However, from a perspective common to all sectors of business activity, executive responsibility for the organization's intentional image generally falls under the management of *identity*, with particular emphasis on the operational components that allow strategic intervention, e.g. positioning and visual identity.

The projected identity

The concepts of identity and image are often confused and their terms frequently used indistinguishably[11]. Contributing to this situation is the fact that the term *iden-*

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[6] Acknowledgement that each of the various publics will form its own opinion on the basis of the impressions transmitted as a whole and that, for this reason, there must be a general image that is consistent and common to all, does not preclude the fact that the organization's main communication drive should be directed towards the social groups/segments whose behavior most determines its success.

[7] Organizations that devote themselves exclusively to the management of *reality*, concentrating solely on their performance, on the assumption that this is most important and will ultimately and inevitably be reflected, believe in a world where communication exists in a kind of vacuum: immune to external circumstances, the activities of others and their own idiosyncrasy.

[8] This view involves accepting that: (1) the image effectively *belongs* to the recipient and not to the originator; (2) the recipient's contribution to the conceptualization of the stimuli received is decisive; (3) its validity is not put in question by the fact that it may be based on incorrect or imprecise convictions (Vilar, 2006).

[9] The image also depends on a set of key factors that are extrinsic to the organization: the country of origin, the sector's image, the context, the economic situation, and indirect third-party communication. These variables are often formed on the basis of concepts that summarize a series of beliefs, generally stereotyped, and may act as a filter through which the entity is perceived. At present, on account of the internet, the communication arising from third parties, especially that carried on social networks, has a progressively greater presence and predominance.

[10] With specific regard to corporations, these are above all the factors connected with the marketing mix – i.e., the set of variables that traditionally underlie the operationalization of the marketing strategy: product, price, place and promotion.

[11] Vilar (2006, p. 76-77) provides a model that establishes the relationship between the concepts of identity (emi limitations, and constant feedback – operates as a stimulus that generates an experience in the recipient (i.e., the image itself) and is also mediated by this recipient (through his or her attitudes and perceptual and cognitive processes) and by the nature of the organization's action, which allow it to give strategic and intentional emphasis to this or that specific feature.

tity itself contains a certain ambiguity, in referring to the intrinsic characteristics of an individual or organization and, at the same time, to their identifying signs as a whole. On the management level, identity precedes image: in an organization, it consists of what is central (its essence), distinct (what differentiates it from others) and permanent (what remains uniform over time); it crystallizes how the organization sees itself and how it would like to be seen from the outside; it is the result of the experience accumulated since its establishment, and it is reflected in the set of features that its members use to characterize the way they view their work (Fombrun, 1996). Identity is thus determined by organizational culture; by the *mission* statement, which articulates the organization's philosophy and defines its position; by its formal policies, which lay down its orientation and the structure adopted; finally, by the systems for controlling and applying strategy. In addition to these factors, the organization's identity is defined by the symbols that it chooses to represent it: they are a visual expression of the image to which it aspires.

In contrast with the organizational perspective of identity[12], the *projected identity* focuses on the connection between the organization and the outside and is conceptualized as a management function. It takes on an operational character in considering identity as a *process*: the means by which the organization's strategy can be transmitted to its publics, for the purpose of establishing a favorable external image. This is the approach that is generally accepted by those who have a *communicational* view of identity, in particular designers and those with executive responsibilities in the management of its visible aspect.

Positioning

Although the involvement of design normally relates to the physical representation of the organization, its imaginary territory falls within the concept of positioning[13]. In expressing the relativity of the organization's image according to the dimensions it displays, and placing it in the space where it competes, its positioning adds a reference framework to identity that is indispensable to the start of any development in projection.

Positioning allows the organization to establish two things: firstly, unequivocal identification of its corporate purpose and, secondly, its differentiation from the universe to which it belongs. This approach is clearly associated with intentional image management, in assuming that the absence of any deliberate promotion in this direction does not prevent each organization from always having a position in the public mind, whether or not it is the intended one[14]. Positioning arises as a response to two situations:

on the one hand, the need for effective differentiation in the era of *"me-too products"* and the recognition that this objective may be achieved by means of a significant and distinct *position*; on the other, the urgency for more effective communication in a society in which an overload of information limits and erodes that effectiveness.

Positioning strategy forms the basis of the design program, in that it defines the concept of the organization and its products, brands and services and sets out its *promises*. This process begins with the establishment of its position in relation to the *competition*, which is achieved by directly comparing the most important (i.e., perceptually most valued) differences in features, benefits, occasions for use, user type, category and quality/price ratio. The success of the strategy outlined also depends on how effectively the position aspired to is transmitted – communication and performance should consistently and pro-actively identify and uphold the difference selected[15]. Finally, to represent a real orientation for action, the positioning needs the support of identity policies and the effective visual reflection of them in its specific programs.

Visual identity

At the heart of the image projected by the organization lies its visual identity. As the physical expression of the intended image, the visual identity should guarantee unmistakable recognition of the organization and, at the same time, automatically evoke its activity; it should also aim to ensure a consensual meaning, arouse positive feelings among its target public, help to create a sense of empathy and a favorable attitude, and give rise to desirable references from the media and the general public (Henderson and Cote, 1998). Visual identity aims, in particular, at creating familiarity on the assumption that people tend to give preference to the entities that they know/recognize and like. Beyond these primary functions, the visual identity can itself constitute an *association* of the image[16], by analogy, allegory or logic, or in an emblematic or symbolical manner (Villafañe, 1998).

Visual identity necessarily flows from the organization's options on communicating its strategic positioning and allows it to demonstrate how its different parts interconnect. The function of design in this process includes making the type of relationship intended visible – or invisible – and guaranteeing the relative *'distances'* that have been set out.

Visual organization generally reflects the choice of identity structure: *monolithic*, when the same visual style and name identifies the whole organization, irrespective of the closeness to or distance from the areas in which

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[12] In the literature on the organizational and behavioral aspects, the discussion on identity revolves around the concept of "organizational identity", whereas the marketing literature prefers the term "corporate identity". Organizational identity refers to what individuals perceive, feel and think about the organization to which they belong: it represents an understanding, shared by all, of the characteristics and values that set the organization apart. What is commonly called corporate identity, which we prefer to call projected identity, focuses on the organization's relationship with the outside.

[13] This approach was originally developed by Al Ries and Jack Trout (2000), from 1972, as a creative strategy that does not pursue the development of anything new or different and concentrates on the "manipulation" and (re)consolidation of the perceived links between products (brands, organizations, people) and associations (features and benefits). The concept was based on the recognition that *brands* generally occupy positions in the minds of the public and, thus, for each brand, there may be a distinct image (position) that allows its differentiation. Positioning focuses on what constitutes the products' *subjective* rather than *objective reality*.

[14] The intentional nature and the goal of the action are evident in Kotler's definition of position: "The act of designing the company's offering and image so that they occupy a distinct competitive position in the target customers' minds" (Kotler *et al.*, 2009).

[15] In general, positioning strategies include the pursuit of (perceptual and effective) leadership in factors such as size, price, quality, speed, convenience, technology, innovation, flexibility, consumer relations, prestige, know-how and value.

[16] According to the definition, adopted here, of image as a set of associations with meaning.

it is involved; *individual*, when the organization operates through a series of independent brands, products or services, which are intentionally unrelated with itself or each other; *endorsed*, when there is a deliberate association between the organization's name and the designation of its products or subsidiaries[17].

If we take a broad view in defining and framing the concept of visual identity, this implies accepting that all the organization's visible and projectable elements (products, facilities, communication and clothing) contribute to its image. Nevertheless, the relative contributions inevitably have different impacts. For this reason, it is usual to grant their identifying core – name, symbol, logo and color – a synthesizing function for identity and thus give it a key role in the process of image formation[18]; of all the identity system components that identify and represent the organization, this is the set of variables on which the greatest efforts are concentrated and where the intervention of design is most evident.

The importance of the *graphic image* and *permanent* visual elements, when compared to other components with occasional functions or a fairly momentary reach, arises not so much from any intrinsic qualities – though some are necessarily better than others – but from their pervasiveness, in being the element presented most in the different forms of communication and publicized in the most varied types of medium. In theory, the graphic image should provide a visual foundation for the organization's identity and serve as its banner; it represents an ongoing and cumulative investment, with an influence on the perceived value of everything that it identifies. Its impact on the overall image is, above all, indirect, via its contribution to awareness; this impact is greater in situations involving prior evaluation of the organization – i.e., when the image especially depends on promotional factors, in particular the advertising message – and gradually decreases as experience and personal contact increase (Vilar, 2011). But the graphic image is also an effective tool to indicate change or reflect new situations: a modification acquires a strategic dimension when it signals a new positioning[19] (it is often the first sign that something has changed) or an instrumental dimension when, for example, affirming a new leadership – often with no other justification than simply to advertise a transfer of ownership.

The merits of visual identity have been amply promoted, in particular by the specialists in the sector. In reality, the solutions and models presented to organizations are normally based on the experience of professionals and their adoption almost always results from the subjective and idiosyncratic perspective of those responsible for this decision. Generally speaking, research of a commercial nature maintains that the evaluation of brands or organizations is affected by the public's evaluation of their visual image. It also suggests that, over time and with an extended exposure, the empathy created with the visual image is transferred to the brand or organization (Interbrand Schechter, 1994; Thompson, 1994).

From an academic point of view, the superficial framework of scientific reference that exists (cf. Lencastre, 1997) has contributed to a certain scepticism regarding the real return on the implementation and maintenance of a visual identity system, in relation to the expectations raised, on the one hand, and the associated costs, on the other. Despite recognition of the indispensability and value of the visual identity system in its functions of identification, the extent of its contribution to an organization's success or failure or to the formation of its overall image is still to be established on a rigorous basis (e.g. Dowling, 1994; Vilar, 2011)[20].

Conclusion

Design makes an important contribution to the image of any organisation. With the correct framework and orientation it becomes an integral part of its management, bearing particular responsibility in the configuration of the interface between the organization and its publics and in the establishment of the way in which this relationship is created.

A well-managed organisation possesses a consistent, clear and shared vision of what its values and intentions are and also reveals a perfectly defined idea of what the tangible expression of its business activity should be. The stimulus for design management lies in leading people to grasp and accept this key idea. The attainment of this goal requires the effective coordination of formal and functional image policies and the rigorous management of communication. This demands an effort to standardize and integrate the organization's image resources and instruments and the implementation of a coherent visual identity system that has real meaning for its internal and external publics – although it is fundamentally important for the organization to be identified *by its symbols*, it is also crucial for it to be recognizable *in them*.

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[17] In the *monolithic* structure, the whole shares the success or failure of each of its parts; in the *individual*, the organization creates brands in line with each product or service and makes their management and lifecycles independent; the *endorsed* option reflects an intermediate strategy in which the independence of products, services and organizations (and their markets) coexists with a set of common values and goals. A description of the three types of identity with their origins and objectives, plus a comparative analysis, may be found in Villafañe (1998).

[18] The name, symbol, logo and associated color palette lie at the heart of the graphic system that forms the organization's permanent visual identification. In situations in which it is difficult to distinguish between products and services, these may become its main source of differentiation. The name lies at the root of all communication; ideally, it is distinct, relevant, memorable and flexible (i.e., it does not preclude sectoral or geographic extensions). Symbols bring together functional and formal determinants and can – on their own – guarantee the necessary familiarity. Their virtue lies in their potential universality (i.e., the ability to bypass language barriers), though this quality is, at the same time, a design problem, as the symbols can take on adverse meanings depending on the cultural environment to which they belong or can prove difficult to recognize when not linked with a name. In fact, confused recollection is quite common, i.e., the association of a symbol with the wrong entity (Henderson and Cote, 1998; Vilar, 2006). To overcome these limitations, designers generally recommend employing the symbol and the logo jointly or, as seems to be the recent trend, merely using the latter. As a graphic representation of the organization's name, the logo is subject to rather different design principles: its identifying mission requires a guarantee of legibility/interpretability, which means that the designer is challenged to express something more than the simple juxtaposition of print letters or calligraphic characters. Finally, color may be used intentionally as the overall identification of the organization and, at times, be the dominant factor in its communication strategy; in being especially effective in transmitting emotion and provoking sensations, it depends on two basic considerations for this effect: its association with natural phenomena and the relationship with the cultural references in each context.

[19] *Signaling theory* is a distinctive communication theory that aims to correct information asymmetries between an organization and its publics, by means of symbols (variables) that may be perceived by the target public and not easily imitated by those who have nothing to *signal* (Koku, 1997).

[20] The results of the insubstantial empirical evidence are hardly consistent. In a study of multinationals, with specific regard to the standardization of the visual identity system, Melewar and Saunders (1998) empirically detect, as advantages, a rise in awareness, an increase in sales and better recruitment. On the other hand, a study on the value of the graphic image as applied to popular brands not only identified a considerable number of situations in which there were negative contributions but, more surprisingly, an effect considered negligible in around half of the cases analyzed (Schechter, 1993).

With regard to the image of organizations, the challenges for design today are the result of the need to adapt to the new economy, that is, in particular, to remain abreast of the demands (and consequences) of a digital and globalized society. The internet and the appearance of social networks is generating new conditions – interconnectivity, disintermediation, remediation – with a reach and effects on image that are still difficult to predict: though *obligatory*, being online and interactive also means running the risk of becoming a target of unwanted communication and instantaneous, exponential, uncontrollable and perpetual proliferation. Furthermore, the qualities seen as vital to a visual identity – consistency, stability, continuity –remain as points of reference, yet, in a certain way, are contested by others such as flexibility, immediatism and universality.

In times of transition, such as those of the present day, an effective image strategy involves understanding the process of dematerialization that is taking place, envisaging its reach, and being able to anticipate the situations that alter in accordance with it. It also involves adaptation to the dynamics of virtual media (with special attention to portals); the broad and synergetic exploitation of the new media – coopting, in particular, audiovisual and multimedia aspects; and the creative use of information technology.

With respect to the practice of design, this offers an environment with an array of opportunities, though it demands wide-ranging skills and, at the same time, a vision that covers different areas. Designers are responsible for the complex task of managing the uncountable options and combinations available, the obligation to resist the bedazzlement that they easily provoke, the need for a permanently critical attitude, and the adoption of an ethical position with their peers and before their publics.

When the connection between design and scientific production in the sphere of image is examined, there are still important gaps requiring attention. Although there is already a body of solid theoretical approaches, it is generally difficult to transpose these to the field of the project or its management and they have proved to be of little use to those who need real tools to solve specific problems or underpin decisions. There should be greater emphasis on the development of an academic – empirical research oriented – facet that realistically supports practice and, at the same time, is capable of systematically helping to broaden the conceptual corpus in this field.

Finally, irrespective of the view adopted, there is no alteration in the essence of the relationship between image and performance – and the key responsibility of design in this construction: "Image is a reality. It is the result of our actions. If the image is false and our performance is good, it's our fault for being bad communicators. If the image is true and reflects our bad performance, it's our fault for being bad managers" (Bernstein, 1992, p. 244).

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