

The design value of business

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Abstract

In this small essay I will explore the notion of *the design value of business*. Interpreted as merely a play with words, such a statement may be regarded as a bearer of little value. But, taken as seriously as the more common question, what the business value of design is, it turns into a critical examination of basic conceptions of what design is for. It also paves the way for the critical claim that design value precedes business value

KEYWORDS: design, value in use, business, strategy, embodied cognition, situated cognition

Introduction

Certainly you have heard the call for explaining, or even have been asked to define, the business value of design. At first glance this might seem as a valid and relevant question. Under certain assumptions it is; but assumptions can always be altered.

The idea to paraphrase the question “what the business value of design is” started out as a figure of thought, based in a critical stance towards how conceptions of phenomena become institutionalized. This figure of thought turned into a valuable criticism of taken-for-granted hierarchies and a forefronting of experience, value and context. In this essay I will therefore start the exploration of the notion of *the design value of business*.

In order to do this I will first state some preliminaries that are the basis for this exploration, ending with a critical claim. This critical claim then will be discussed through examples from research and finally criticized on its own premises in the tradition of hermeneutics and critical theory.

Preliminaries

If we want to explore notions of design and its value we have to uncover some of the basic premises on which arguments about design artefacts and humans are made. These will be the basis for constructs of the reasons given, for the judgments of precedence, because these arguments will characteristically appeal to values and norms, and thus will reveal the underlying conceptions of value and precedence. In this essay we will rely on two theories.

According to the theories of situated cognition (Dourish, 2001) (Merleau-Ponty, 1989) (Merleau-Ponty, 2002) knowing is inseparable from doing, and it is claimed that all knowledge is situated in activity bound to cultural, social and physical contexts.

According to the theories of embodied cognition (Clark, 1997) (Hutchins, 1995) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) our capabilities of experiencing and our cognitive abilities are tightly coupled.

To say that cognition is embodied means that it arises from bodily interactions with the world. From this point of view, cognition depends on the kinds of experiences that come from having a body with particular perceptual and motor capacities that are inseparably linked and that together form the matrix within which memory, emotion, language, and all other aspects of life are meshed. (Thelen, Schöner, Scheier, & Smith, 2001)

Human experience and human activity thus are primary. If we agree on these aspects of being, more specifically there are three things that form a basis

- » Purposeful action
- » Shared activities
- » Embodied experience

If we agree on these premises, a consequence of this would be to claim that *design value precedes business value*.

Discussion

We will present three examples drawn from other research projects, in order to form an understanding of how the critical claim plays out as a concept.

Design as driver

In the work on procurement of usable IT-systems Artman, and others (Artman, 2002) (Holmlid, 2004), design and discuss a method for procurers of IT-systems. In this method procurers take responsibility for the usability of the IT-systems, instead of assuming that the system developer can, will have time and possibility to manage usability issues. In effect it means that the procurer assumes that expressing the requirements for an IT-system in a way that includes use and usability, and not only technical requirements, will eventually lead to a better system.

Markensten (Markensten, 2005) suggests a model where interaction design activities are included in the preparation of the request for proposals. The documentation in his model contains personae, evaluated lofi prototypes, and scenarios. This can of course be understood and analyzed in many ways (see e.g. (Lantz & Holmlid, 2010)), but in this context I would like to highlight one specific issue.

If we look at it as a general model of practice, instead of a specific way of procuring IT-systems, it is an example of how businesses, in Markensten's case a system development company, have to formulate the design value of their proposals. That is, it's as if the procurer is saying, "here is a design, show me how your business can bring value to this design". The embodied experience, constructed through meaningful activities, is the basis for at all talking about making business.

In Markensten's case this would also mean bringing design value to the procurer organization's clients, customers and employees. This in turn would bring business value to the procurer's organisation.

The practice that is suggested by these researchers is a way of making design value precede business value.

Practical presence

The presence of objects, and the acceptance of construing their meaningful presence in our daily lives, has been discussed by Redström and Hallnäs (Hallnäs & Redström, 2002). They are distinguishing between use, which is a construct mainly concerned with functional features in their view, and presence, which is the existential essence of a thing in relationship to a lifeworld of someone. That is, we don't primarily relate to and describe the chair in our kitchen with its functional features, but with its existence. And the same goes for a whole range of things:

Even the old bike I have at our summerhouse and only use once a year certainly has a place – and a presence – in my life although I rarely even think about it. (Hallnäs & Redström, 2002, s. 108)

With this perspective the embodied experience and shared activities construct a meaningfulness that goes beyond the business value of any singular thing. And in that existential perspective there is no business value for the individual, only design value that is construed over time. It's a real challenge to sell that experience of the bike in the quotation above, especially as a lifelong experience. Clearly design value precedes any business value conceivable here, and business will have to struggle to present their propositions as possible to integrate in those meaningful life worlds of people. They have to demonstrate the design value of their business proposal.

Value created in use

One of the foundational premises in the service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008) states that the customer is always a co-creator of value, and another that the enterprise cannot deliver value, only offer value propositions.

Design and value in this way of thinking are co-constructs, in the sense that value is emergent in embodied experiences and understood through shared activities and purposeful actions. As a consequence artefacts, services, systems, etc, all need to be designed in order to become part of this process. In contrast to the other two examples the businesses in this case are continuously participating in the creation of these values, in a process of co-determination. As this process is directed by people, mediated by touchpoints, the design value relies on understanding these actors as resourceful. As a consequence design value precedes business value, and business has to show its design value for customers to co-create value.

Critique

The critique presented here will take as its starting point a critical claim; *design value precedes business value*.

The way in which critique is developed here, as part of the exploration of the ideas and conceptualizations, it avoids becoming a distanced and uninterested reflection (Blanchot, 1963). By combining a hermeneutic approach with a critical theory reflection (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 1994) (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1968/1991) a small set of questions will be used as drivers of critique; do the critical claim reproduce or reinforce the claim it is a critique of?

Does the precedence of design value reproduce that business value is primary?

Depending on the business logic one is using a business value either 1) increases as value is added in a value chain, 2) the value is expended in a purchase, or 3) the value emanates from use, or context. The third logic was discussed above.

Under the goods logic if design value is regarded as primary, and that business has to explain its design value, it might be argued that in order for any value to exist some value has to be added to a baseline. In this logic it is indifferent whether this value is a monetary value, a technical value or a design value. That is, the precedence of design value does not reproduce that business value is primary under this logic.

Under the second logic the value of what is sold is taken as a granted, and the customer judges in the situation of the purchase whether the values expressed and explained fits her. Those judgments are not based on the business value construed before the moment of purchase, but emanates from the premises stated in the preliminaries section. That is, a company that does not manage to present a product/service proposal that a customer judges to become a part of some meaningful future, will not generate sales. It is rather the case that this logic reproduces that design value precedes business value.

Does the precedence of design value reinforce that business value is primary?

If one adheres to a value chain logic of business, the precedence of design value can be used to reinforce business value, but does not render business value to be primary. As a matter of fact, under such a logic there is no such thing as value before the start of the value chain is identified. So, if the start of that value chain is the identification of design value, the precedence of design value reinforce the importance, but not the primacy, of business value.

Concluding remarks

Postulating that design value precedes business value, and the corresponding demand that business explains its design value, seem to be supported theoretically, through existing studies as well as by different frameworks of business logic. There seem to be some intrinsic dependence between the two, and thus one might want to view them as co-determined rather than separated constructs.

In essence, the question what business value there is to design should be countered with the question what design value there is to business, because design value precedes business value.

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