

Design as brokering of languages

The role of designers in the innovation strategy of Italian firms

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“In an era of globalization, Italy has a major advantage:
its design, unclonable and inimitable
design is invisible, an heritage that cannot be shared,
it assumes arts and crafts resources
that may be developed only in generations.....
design will be a strength for the Italian system if you keep on
translating it ... into a world-class industrial production,
by simultaneously innovating the technologies”

John Kenneth Galbraith, 1997¹

“In no other country [than Italy] there is a so intense and fruitful
interaction between manufacturers and designers”

Vico Magistretti, 2003²

As Design is increasingly recognized as a strategic resource, corporations are exploring new routes for involving design consultants in their innovation processes. From traditional and functional involvement of designers in the development process, dealing with styling and ergonomics, to a more creative contribution in generating new product concepts; from full-range services, including product and process engineering, to field support in understanding customer needs; from brand design to strategic consulting. Corporations have nowadays a significant array of options to interact with design consultants.

What role should a corporation envision for designers? What type of design consulting to benefit from? As always happens, there is no a single answer nor a one-best-way. Rather, as design services becomes more relevant and options unfolds, the capability to build one's own unique system of relationships with design consultants is increasingly becoming a source of differentiation and competitive advantage.

This paper illustrates how successful Italian manufacturers have developed a unique approach to involve designers in their innovation process. It shows how leading Italian companies such as Alessi, Artemide, Kartell, have built their competitive advantage on a peculiar innovation strategy, based on radical innovation of a product language, where designers play a crucial role: they act as brokers of design languages. By capturing, recombining and integrating knowledge about socio-

¹ John Kenneth Galbraith interviewed by Ennio Caretto, *Corriere della Sera*, 9 Aprile 1997

² Vico Magistretti interviewed by Andrea Casazza, *Il Secolo XIX*, 30 January 2003

cultural models and product semantics in several different social and industry settings, designers help in creating breakthrough product meanings.

Exploring the possible future roles of design consultants by discussing the case of the Italian design system is interesting for two intertwined reasons. First, because of the success of the system (widely acknowledged, as testified by the Galbraith's quote, above): several Italian manufacturers lead the competition in design-intensive industries (such as furniture, kitchenware, lighting, small appliances), notwithstanding their small size and limited resources. Second, because of the central role of design consultants: at the foundations of system there is a virtuous, self-reinforcing, interaction between manufacturers and designers, that is considered to be one of the secrets of Italian design (see for example the quote above by Vico Magistretti, one of the most prominent Italian designers).

We postulate that the role designers have in the Italian case, as brokers of design languages, is an interesting option for all those overseas corporations that want to pursue a successful innovation strategy based on the radical innovation of product meanings and values.

Insights for this study come from a research study on management practices in Italian design, funded from the Italian Ministry of University and Research as part of the large research project "Sistema Design Italia", awarded the "Compasso d'oro 2001", the most prestigious design award in Italy. The project, coordinated by the Faculty of Design of Politecnico di Milano, involved 17 different research teams, mostly in Design Schools, and delivered more than 70 case studies of successful product innovations and management practices in several industries.

In the following, we first introduce a framework for interpreting the peculiar nature of the innovation strategy of leading Italian manufacturers. Next we discuss how this innovation strategy is supported by a unique relationship with design consultants.

Design Driven Innovation

The choice of the proper approach to involving design consultants depends on the specific *innovation strategy* of a corporation. The peculiar nature of the relationship between Italian manufacturers and design consultants is indeed strictly dependent on the specific innovation strategy pursued by those manufacturers. And vice-versa: thanks to the relationships developed over time with designers, Italian manufacturers have progressively shaped their own innovation strategy. Therefore, any discussion about the role of design consultants requires first an understanding of the innovation strategy they are asked to support. In this paper we focus on a specific innovation strategy, that we call *radical design driven innovation*. A strategy based on the radical innovation of a product language and meaning, that has allowed several Italian manufacturers to take the lead in design-intensive industries. In this section we introduce a framework for a better understanding of design-driven innovation and then position in this framework the innovation strategy of Italian manufacturers.

What is design driven innovation and how does it lead to competitive advantage? The debate on what is design is alive since the birth of design. It is not our purpose here to enter into this debate, that is authoritatively developed in design schools. We can assume, as a starting block, the most acknowledged interpretation of design as the integrated innovation of function and form. A definition, however, that needs to be further adapted to better highlight the peculiar approach of Italian manufacturers. Our adapted framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

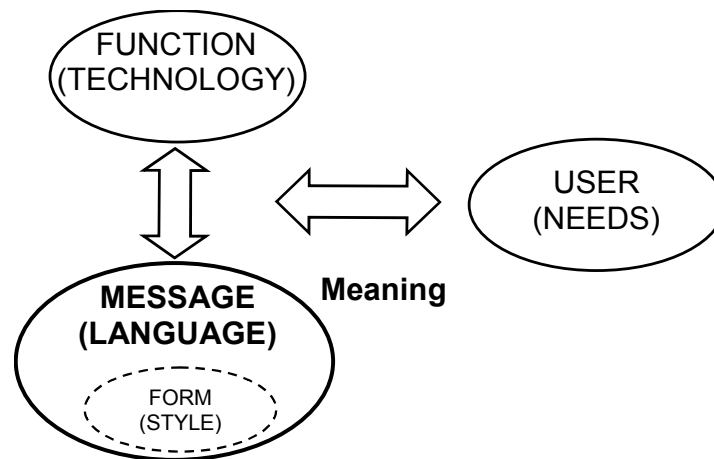


Figure 1. The dimensions of innovation

The scheme expands and elaborates the concept of form, to better capture the communicative and semantic dimension of products. Indeed, the classic dialectic of function versus form, sometimes leads the less expert observers to restrain the latter to the esthetic appearance of products. Many times, indeed, the debate of function versus form has been focused on the contrast between functionalism-rationalism, on the one hand, and styling, on the other hand. This intellectual seduction (and simplification) is more tempting when investigating industries (such as furniture and lighting) where esthetic content is deemed to drive competition. And many executives, still consider nowadays design as a matter of styling (which is sometimes an explanation of the difficulties design encounters when trying to climb the corporate ladder and to diffuse in business schools).

However, as many designers know, the product style (considered as its mere esthetic appearance) is just one of several ways a product may bring messages to the user. Apart from styling, what matters to the user, in addition to the functionality of a product, is its emotional and symbolic value, i.e. its *meaning*. If functionality aims at satisfying the operative needs of the customer, the product meaning tickle her/his affective and socio-cultural needs. It proposes to users a system of values, a personality and identity, that may easily go beyond style. Several scholars have recently recognized and underlined the semantic dimension of design³, and some of them have even postulate that, in short, design is “making sense of things”⁴. This is even more evident to those design managers dealing with brand identity and communication.

To support this perspective, let’s consider the example of the lamp *Metamorfosi* by Artemide, briefly illustrated in exhibit 1. This lamp is the result of a radical innovation of meanings. Here light is deemed as responsible for emotional conditions, thoughts, and memories and is therefore intimately connected with the wellbeing of people. Hence, the design of a lamp generating a “human light”, thanks to the proprieties of colors and light control. A user would likely buy this lamp not because of its “nice” style but because of its “nice” (human) light. The innovation of meaning (buying light instead of lamps) is in itself evident. The designers underline this innovation thanks to a proper choice of language: they hide in some extent the physical object (by minimizing the forms and using translucent materials), to give more value to the real message delivered by the product, the emotions produced by its light. What a breakthrough for an industry where style and appearance of the object is generally deemed to be the drivers of competition!

³ See for example Margolin, Victor and Buchanan, Richard (editors), *The Idea of Design: A Design Issues Reader*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, or Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, Eugenie, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

⁴ Krippendorff, Klaus, “On the Essential Contexts of Artifacts or on the Proposition that «design is Making Sense (of Things)»”, *Design Issues*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring 1989), 9-38.

The example also shows that a given meaning is achieved by using a specific design *language*. This is the set of signs, symbols and icons (of which style is just an instance) that designers can adopt to deliver the message. Translucency and minimalism of the object, for example, is the language of *Metamorfosi* to express the sense of human light.

*Exhibit 1. An example of radical design driven innovation:
Metamorfosi by Artemide⁵*

Artemide, founded by Ernesto Gismondi and Sergio Mazza in 1959, is a leading high-end manufacturer in the lighting industry. It actively participates to the international industrial design history, counting several products in prominent museums.

In 1998 Artemide launched its first release of the *Metamorfosi* system (consisting of several products, of which an example is provided below). *Metamorfosi* is based on the concept of a Human Light, a light that may contribute to the biological, psychological and cultural needs of people. Rather than being a traditional lamp, it may be considered as a system to produce light, and in particular coloured light, that can be customised according to the specific emotional needs of an user. Technically, the system consists on a novel patented technology, based on a small electronic control system, that, through a remote control, allows to create and memorise several colour atmospheres (combinations of monochromatic lights and haloes), that are generated by three parabolic reflectors equipped with dichroic filters. Eventually, the Human Light vision became the strategic driver of the whole company mission.

Several competitors are nowadays imitating Artemide by working on light colours and on the sense of well-being produced by light, while Artemide is continuously moving ahead by innovating the system.



Metamorfosi Yang, Artemide, Design by Carlotta De Bevilacqua, 2000

⁵ The complete case is illustrated in Zurlo Francesco, Cagliano Raffaella, Simonelli Giuliano, and Verganti Roberto, *Innovare con il Design. Il caso del settore dell'illuminazione in Italia*. Il Sole 24 Ore, Milano, 2002 (in Italian).

Radical Design Driven Innovation and Italian Design

Given the above framework, we may define *design driven innovation* as an innovation where novelty of message and design language is significant and prevalent compared to novelty of functionality and technology. Successful Italian manufacturers in design-intensive industries have demonstrated unique capabilities to master design driven innovation. In particular, their innovation strategy is punctuated by endeavors to take the lead of competition through *breakthrough* changes of product meanings, what we call *radical* design driven innovations (see Figure 2). In addition to Metamorfoosi, other extreme examples of radical design driven innovation are the well-known product line “Family follows fiction” by Alessi, a set of colored plastic kitchenware products filled with irony, provocation and childhood, or the famous bookshelf “Bookworm” by Kartell, a personalized painting of written knowledge and culture rather than a functional place to store books. Not to forget Memphis, the designers’ firm, led by Ettore Sottsass, that revolutionized the word of design in the ‘80s by proposing a breakthrough design language (based on bold patterns, daring colors and plastic laminate surfaces) delivering a message of irony and provocation that contrasted the peaceful conformity of “good design” of that decade.

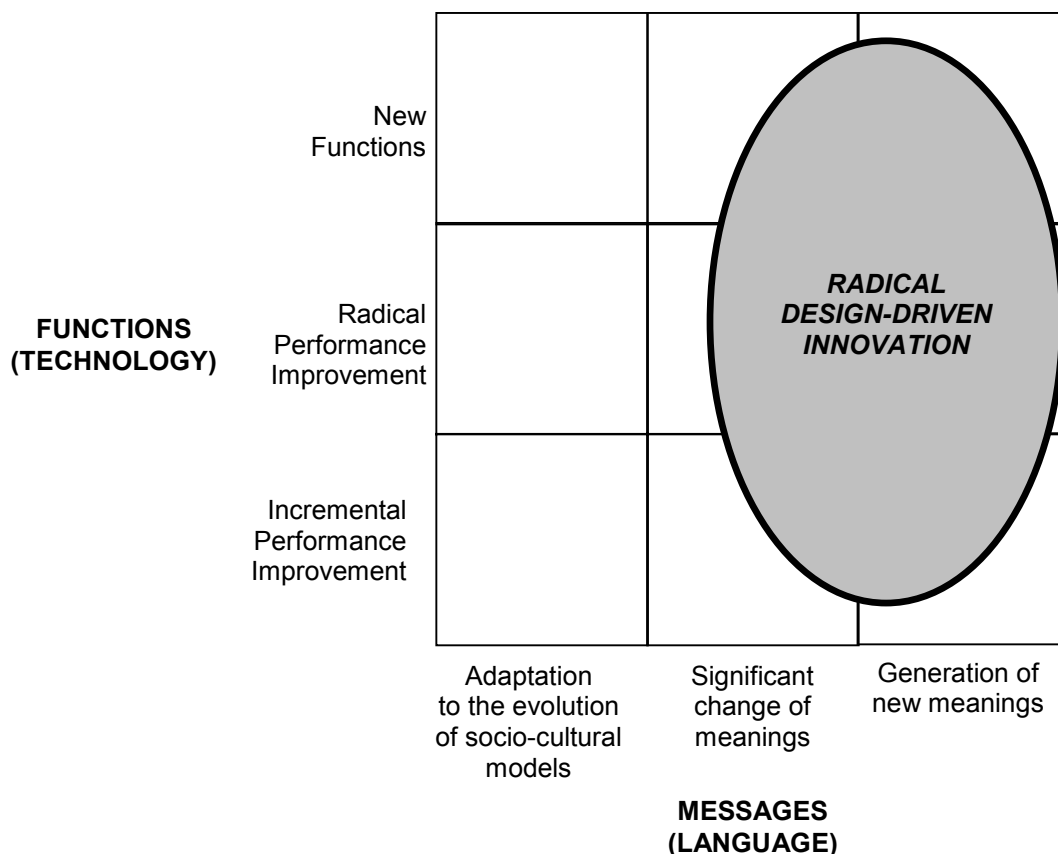


Figure 2. The innovation strategy of leading Italian manufacturers: radical design driven innovation

Sources of Knowledge in Radical Design Driven Innovation

Innovation may be seen as the result of a process of generation and integration of knowledge. Where does this knowledge come from when dealing with radical design driven innovation? What type of knowledge do design consultants may fruitfully bring into the innovation process when supporting this innovation strategy?

There are typically three types of knowledge that are essential for an innovation process. First, knowledge about user needs. Second, knowledge about technological opportunities. Third, knowledge about product languages. The latter is the knowledge about the signs that can be used to deliver a message to the user and about the semantic context (socio-cultural models) in which the user will give meaning to those signs (for example: what symbols, indexes and icons should a designer chose to deliver a message of a “human light” to the user?).

Figure 3 illustrates the role of these three types of knowledge in radical design driven innovation, and contrasts this strategy with two other typical situations: technology-push innovation (where innovation emerges from the availability of new technology principles and devices) and market-pull innovation (where innovation tries to answer explicit and immediate customer needs)⁶.

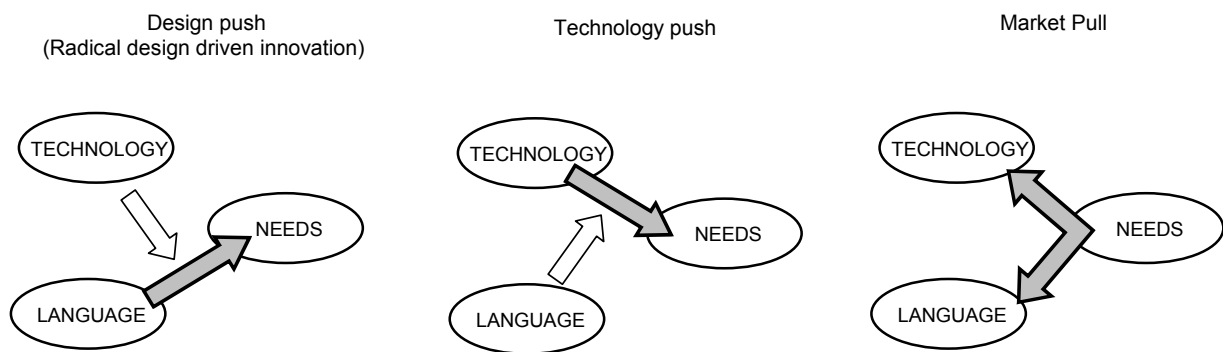


Figure 3. Knowledge drivers in different modes of innovation

In all three situations knowledge about a product language is present. In fact, as said above and depicted in figure 2, innovation of function and message occurs in any novel project. However, what is remarkably different across the three situations is the role played by this type of knowledge. The major drivers of innovation in market-pull and technology-push endeavors are knowledge about user needs and knowledge about technology, respectively. In these two cases knowledge about product language is ancillary; it usually enters the innovation process along the way.

Radical design driven innovation, that is an innovation that proposes breakthrough messages, has a completely different balance among the three types of knowledge. Here the driver of innovation, the starting point, is not technology (although technology is crucial, as a mean to create meanings) nor a customer requirement. No one would seriously imagine that a user would ever explicitly ask for a

⁶ The debate on market pull versus technology push innovation is even older than the debate on what is design (for a theory and critique see Dosi, Giovanni "Technological paradigms and technological trajectories" *Research Policy*, 11 (1982) 147-162). These simplified categories are used here to stimulate a reflection on the peculiarities of radical design driven innovation.

“human light”, or for a flexible spiraliform bookshelf, or for a spaceship-like squeezer (the famous Alessi’s Juicy Salif lemon squeezer by Philippe Starck). And indeed, Italian manufacturers rarely rely on classic market analysis based on surveys or focus groups, nor they invest intensively in those ethnographic research techniques that recently have achieved so much attention in the business arena. Simply, they know they would never get a radical innovation of meanings out of these methods, since a *radical* innovation of meaning is not pulled by the market. Rather, it is the result of a vision about a possible future. As Ernesto Gismondi, CEO of Artemide, says: “We make *proposals* to people”. And again, Alberto Alessi, CEO of Alessi supports the same view: “Working within the metaproject *transcends the creation of an object purely to satisfy a function and necessity*. Each object represents a tendency, a *proposal* and an indication of progress which has a more *cultural* resonance”. In some extent, behind these words there is the willingness to be a driver of change in the society, or at least to increase, through the company offering, the probability that the world will change in a direction that is closer to the system of values and beliefs of the entrepreneur. Ultimately, we can claim that radical design driven innovation is a design-push activity, i.e. it is the result of a vision, almost an ideology, that resemble the typical driver that moves a designer (we will come back later to this similarity between the attitude of top Italian executives and the attitude of designers). Take it as a provocation, radical design driven innovation (a design-led process) is closer to technology-push (an engineering-led process) rather than market-pull innovation.

Yet, these “proposals” by Italian manufacturers are not dreams without a foundation. We are talking of great market successes and of leading firms in the global arena. In a way or another, these design-push proposals eventually satisfy unmet (latent) user needs. How do these companies manage to make radically innovative proposals that are profitable? How do they create breakthrough messages, that eventually emerge as those messages that (some) users were implicitly looking for?

These manufacturers have developed superior capability to *understand*, *anticipate* and *influence* the emergence of new product meanings. They search for radically new design languages by looking at those socio-cultural phenomena that are less visible nowadays, but that will be the trends of tomorrow, and the likely reality of the future. They do not look at major band-wagon phenomena. They *detect* some whispered talks in the current socio-cultural models, *identify* those feeble voices that are likely to grow up in the future (and also *select* among them those whispers that most meet their own values), and *help* these voices to become understandable and meaningful thanks to their new product offering. And here is where knowledge about product languages play a crucial role, and where design consultants give their central contribution.

Designers as brokers of knowledge on product languages

The meaning a user gives to a product depends on her/his cognitive model, that, in turn, is significantly affected by her/his socio-cultural context. Proposing new product meanings therefore implies understanding the *inner* dynamics of socio-cultural models, beyond what is explicitly visible nowadays. This knowledge about the subtle and unexpressed dynamics of socio-cultural models is not written in books, nor in sociological scenario of the future (which usually describe *dominant* trends, and are *extrapolations* of current phenomena, while radical design driven innovation assumes a *modification* of the scenario by mean of the proposals of our company). This knowledge is not codified. It is tacit and implicit: it has to be looked for and developed through a continuous process. Further, this knowledge is *distributed*. There is not a single repository where to retrieve this knowledge. The shaping of socio-cultural models and their impact on the interpretation of product languages depends on millions of unpredictable interactions between users, firms, designers, products, communication media, cultural centers, schools, etc.. In other words, this knowledge is diffused within our environment in a *design discourse*: a continuous dialogue on

socio-cultural models (foreseen and desired) and its implications on patterns of consumption, meanings and product languages, occurring through several explicit and tacit interactions among several actors both in the global and local setting.

A firm that wants to deploy an innovation strategy based on radical design driven innovation, needs to access knowledge on product languages and on the dynamics of socio-cultural models. It may have several channels to access this tacit and distributed knowledge. It may develop several interactions with users, suppliers, other firms, training institutes, etc.. And indeed, Italian manufacturers develop all these types of relationships. However, above all, they recognize that design consultants may act as focal actors in this network of interactions. They are a crucial gate that may give access to the design discourse and therefore to those discussion that are going to shape the future of product meanings. In other words, they act as gatekeepers in the evolving flow of socio-cultural models. They are brokers of knowledge on design languages.

The idea of designers as *brokers* of knowledge is not novel. A recent study on IDEO showed how this design firm acts as a *technology* broker, having access to as much as 40 different industries and exploiting its network position to move solutions across industries⁷.

What is peculiar in radical design driven innovation is that designers act as brokers of knowledge on *languages* rather than technology. Of course, their technological competence is still crucial (as a mean to speak new languages). But their value comes from their capability to understand the subtle dynamics of values and meanings in the society, and their impact on product languages; or even better, they facilitate the access of their manufacturing clients to the ongoing discussion about these dynamics and languages. They bring bits of knowledge, help their clients to interpret the design discourse, and to position themselves into this discourse.

Note that we are talking of knowledge on languages rather than knowledge on socio-cultural models. This is to specify that designers do not act as sociologists. They may talk about hidden and emerging phenomena in the society, but more often they talk about new, unexpressed, semantic needs of users. Remember, they are designers and we are considering their involvement in *radical* design driven innovation. They not only *observe* the socio-cultural models, they make *proposals* to affect the emerging dynamics in socio-cultural models. In some extent their attitude reminds more an *architect attitude* (and indeed most designers that Italian manufacturers involve in their innovation strategy have an architecture degree). Architects design buildings, e.g. products that usually *survive* their customer. Architects are used to look beyond immediate needs, to have a vision about an unexpressed future, to propose signs that inevitably *modify* our context.

Another difference with sociologists is that the involvement of designers is pragmatic. Their knowledge is *applied* to products. Hence, more than socio-cultural models, they talk about product meanings and languages, about product *signs that are moving and spreading across different contexts*.

First, product languages are not industry specific: they move *across industries* even more fluently than technology. Look for example to the diffusion of colored translucent materials from home furniture to computers (a linguistic exercise that let the Apple I-Mac speak the language of home rather than office).

Second, design languages moves *across different socio-cultural worlds* (for example across different countries). This is indeed a more complex process than fertilization of signs across industries. Meanings are significantly culturally embedded. Yet, right for this reason, a global corporation willing to propose a radical innovation of meanings needs to access knowledge on design languages beyond the borders of its socio-cultural context.

⁷ See Hargadon, Andrew and Sutton, Robert I., "Technology Brokering and Innovation in a Product Development Firm" *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 42, Issue 4 (Dec. 1997), 716-749. An interesting study of designers as knowledge brokers is also provided in Bertola, Paola, and Texeira, J.C. "Design as a Knowledge Agent. How Design as a Knowledge Process is Embedded into Organizations to Foster Innovation" *Design Studies*, 24 (2003) 181-194. This study investigates the role of designers by comparing 15 case studies of large corporations from the Design Management Institute collection with 15 case studies of small Italian enterprises from the research Sistema Design Italia, mentioned above.

Hence, similarly to the action of technology brokers, designers exploit their network position to move languages (and the meaning and values attached by people) across industries and socio-cultural worlds. With this action they support the creation of radically new meanings that simultaneously have a socio-cultural foundation. Indeed, Italian manufacturers involve a great deal of foreign designers in their innovation process, combining and integrating the brokering of knowledge on both the local and global setting.

Involving designers as brokers of languages

We have seen that design consultants may act as brokers of languages, especially when dealing with radical design driven innovation. Our final question therefore is: how a corporation may effectively involve designers in its own innovation process, profiting from their brokering capabilities? The example of the innovation process of Metamorfoosi (see Exhibit 2) provides some excellent insights and help us in identifying some general guidelines.

- *Involve design consultants early in the innovation process.* A peculiarity of the Artemide's approach is the intense involvement of designers in the first macro-phase: research on new languages (see also Figure 4). This *research* process is where the seeds of radical design driven innovation are nurtured. Here is where understanding meanings and languages provides the maximum strategic impact. And here is where the role of designers as brokers of languages have the maximum value.

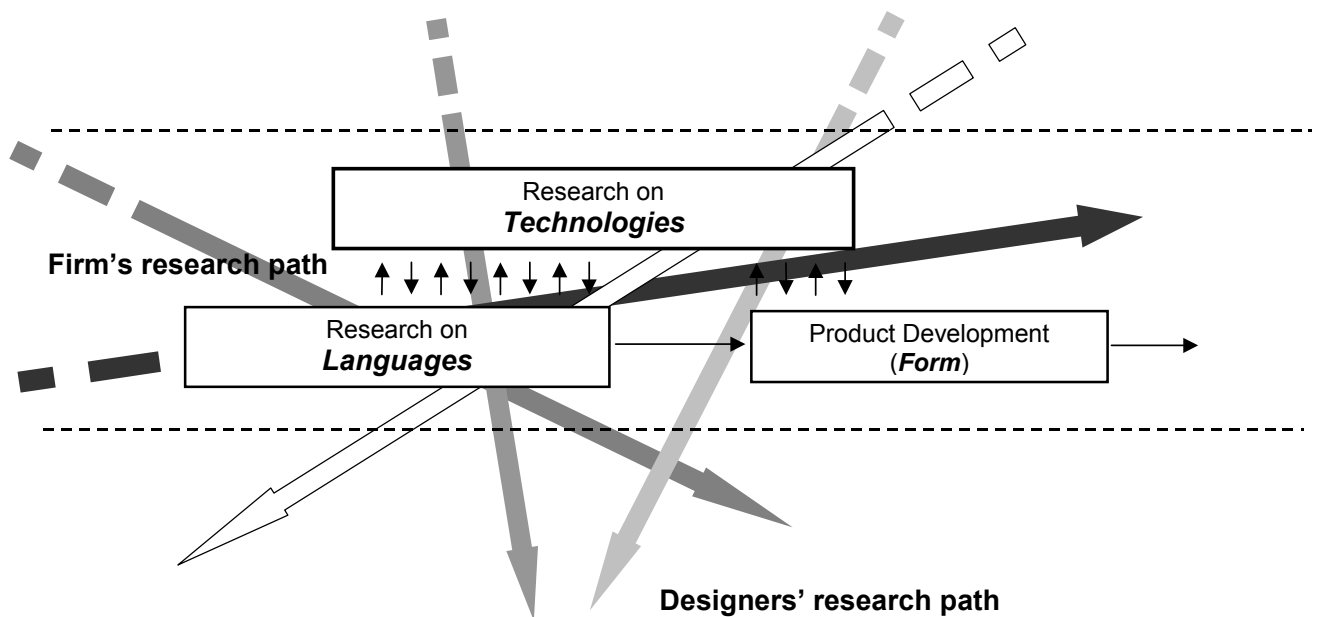


Figure 4. The process of radical design driven innovation and the alignment with designers' research path

- *Have brokers of languages talking with top managers.* Given radical design driven innovation is a strategy to build long term competitive advantage, it asks for a direct involvement of top executives. The process of research on new languages is rooted around interactions between executives and designers (see the Artemide example, or the sentence by Vico Magistretti quoted

at the beginning of this paper). In this exercise, given that designers act on the strategic resources of a corporation (its system of values, the messages it bring to users) they act as strategic consultants. However, differently than traditional strategic analysis, the process of research in languages is based on talks and discussions. It is hardly squeezed into a report or a study. Therefore the interaction between executives and designers implies significant investment of executives' time. By the way: radical design driven innovation does not occur by chance or by pure intuition. It is the result of a research process and therefore it calls for strategic investments. This is one of the reason why this innovation strategy is hardly imitable.

- *Involve design consultants according to their capability to brokering knowledge, besides methods and analysis tools.* We have discussed how knowledge on languages is not codified nor developed through methods. It is diffused throughout a complex network of actors. Designers should be selected according to their capability to give access to this network, to connect local and global languages and to broker signs across a wide range of industries. You should value your consultants' *knowledge* (the knowledge of languages they can access and recombine), more than their creativity and tools.
- *Select design consultants according to shared values.* Radical design driven innovation implies an action to propose new meanings. A firm project its own values to somewhat change the environment. Design consultants, on the other hand, have their own path of research on the dynamics of socio-cultural models, and have their own system of values. We have highlighted above the similarity between the attitude of top Italian executives and the attitude of designers: both of them are design-pushed and are driven by visions and ideology. When these research paths (the firm and the design consultant) encounters, they need not to be in counter-phase (see also Figure 4, where the dark gray arrows denotes those consultants' research path that move in a direction that is more compatible with the innovation strategy of their client). Ideas may be contrasting; basic values need to be somewhat aligned. Opinions may be changed; basic values cannot be adapted to suit a particular client or designer.
- *Nurture your long term relationships with the design consultants you involve in radical design driven innovation.* Given that radical design driven innovation asks for some kind of alignment between the research path of firms and designers, it asks for trust. And this requires time and long term cooperation.
- *Talk beyond contracts.* The exchange of tacit and diffused knowledge, the access to the design discourse, the sharing of values, the development of trust, all these activities cannot be restricted within the rigid walls of contracts between the client and the design consultant. Research on languages is a continuous process. It occurs out of space and time frames, and only occasionally takes the explicit form described in the Artemide's case-study. It requires an intimate relationship that goes beyond contracts. Indeed, most top executives of leading Italian manufacturers merge professional and personal relations with their design consultants.
- *Do not talk only with your design consultants.* Design consultants are only one of several channels to access knowledge on languages. Artemide, for example, combines approaches ranging from cooperation with design schools, to promotion of cultural events, from studies on trend of socio-cultural models, to discussion with occasional designers, managers, experts, not to forget the direct dialogue they have with customers.
- *Develop your own research path.* Design consultants should be considered as gatekeepers: they provide an easier access to knowledge that otherwise would be difficult to grasp. They cannot substitute the internal research process through which a firm develops its own vision. A firm

may outsource product development, not the development of values and meanings. A firm that has not the inner capability to develop knowledge on languages will be hardly capable to understand and embed contributions from brokers of languages.

Exhibit 2 – The innovation process of Artemide Metamorfosi

To develop the Metamorfosi system, Artemide followed a process consisting in three macro-phases:

- *research on new languages*: this was the driver of the whole endeavor. Through this activity Artemide was exploring in 1995 radically new systems of values to enforce its leadership position (threatened by new global competitors). Several approaches were used to access knowledge on new systems of values and product languages. A core part of this process was a workshop, that involved beyond the founder and CEO Ernesto Gismondi and his wife Carlotta De Bevilacqua (who acts as Managing Director for brand strategy and development direction), five well-known designers (including for example Michele De Lucchi) and a professor of Design. The workshop, who aimed at exploring new meanings of light, pertaining the biological, psychological and cultural spheres of people, was coordinated by Paolo Inghilleri, doctor and psychologist. The result was the creation of the vision of Human Light.
- *research on new technologies*: through this activity, directed by the R&D department of Artemide, the firm searched for technologies to express the new meanings of Human Light. This led to the development of a basic “technology kit”, including the dichroic filters and the computer for controlling the lamps and customizing / memorizing different light scenarios (the technology kit is eventually also sold as a stand alone product).
- *product development*: this is the development activity where new languages and technologies are integrated into products. Here Artemide provided different designers with the basic message (the Human Light) and the technology kit, and asked them to develop lamps based on the Metamorfosi concept. Some of these designers had already participated in the research phase (including Ernesto Gismondi and Carlotta De Bevilacqua); others were newly involved. In this phase the focus of languages moved from meanings and messages to the form of the object.

Conclusions

The choice of the proper approach to involve design consultants depends on the specific *innovation strategy* of a corporation. This paper has illustrated the central role of designers for those corporations whose innovation strategy is centered around *radical design driven innovation*. An innovation that act on the emotional and symbolic attributes of products, i.e. on their semantic dimension more than on their functional and rational content. An innovation that consists in the generation of breakthrough product meanings. We have shown how corporations pursuing this strategy may benefit from the contribution of design consultants. Designers act as brokers of

languages. They are gatekeepers in the movement of product languages and signs across industries and contexts. By giving access to knowledge on the unexpressed dynamics of socio-cultural models, designers help to understand, anticipate and influence the emergence of new product meanings.

The guidelines to involve designers, discussed in this paper, have a basic principle: brokering of design languages is not a consulting service that can be easily bought in the consulting market. Ultimately, the approach to involve designers is a source of competitive advantage in itself, as demonstrated by leading Italian manufacturers. This approach needs to be built over time by combining three unique ingredients: a personal network of long-term relationships with brokers of languages, an entire array of alternative channels that complement and enrich the access to this knowledge, and an internal process to integrate all these contributions. Only the unique, firm specific, combination of these factors may really lead to sustainable, not imitable, competitive advantage.

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