ExpertInsights@IBV

Design Language Systems for branded, end-to-end experiences

IBM Institute for Business Value

Branded experiences

While organizations strive to embed a differentiated brand identity into their products, services and marketing, a higher-value approach – *experience design* – is essential today to create competitive advantage. In fact, 63 percent of Chief Marketing Officers said that their top marketing priority is to create better experiences for their customers.[1]

Design complexity – Today's challenges

Designing for experiences means not just focusing on any one branded artifact like product packaging, event wayfinding or corporate websites. Instead, the entire end-to-end experience needs to be considered for all customer touchpoints and interactions, from conversations with customer service agents to using a mobile app.

With the introduction of so many new digital technologies, successfully designing branded customer experiences has become increasingly complex. In a recent IBM Institute for Business Value study on the integration of physical and digital customer experiences, more than 2,000 consumers from Asia, Europe and North America – Millennials, Generation X and Baby Boomers – reported trying businesses' new digital interactions, but then decided not to use them regularly. When asked why, an average of 66 percent said their initial digital experiences had been disappointing, with many claiming they didn't work as expected.[2]

Poor customer adoption is a missed opportunity for organizations to extend their brands. But even worse, if enough customers have experiences that lack the expected quality or relevance, their dissatisfaction could escalate into a brand calamity with serious repercussions for an organization's bottom line. According to Forrester, companies that rank near the top in customer experience grew revenue at a compound growth rate of 17 percent from 2010 to 2015. Those ranked poorly grew revenue at 3 percent over the same period.[3]

With this apparent linkage between customer experience and business success, there is a growing imperative for organizations to create improved, branded experiences. However, to do this, the many people who collaborate to design experiences need to be tightly coordinated. This includes in-house talent, agencies and other contractors. For large, multi-national organizations, there could be multiple global and local multi-disciplinary teams working across time zones.

Given the scope, scale and speed required for executing end-to-end experiences, plus the variety of people involved, many organizations now need a far more sophisticated system to ensure brand consistency and cost efficiency. We call this a *Design Language System* (DLS).

DLS – Next generation branding support

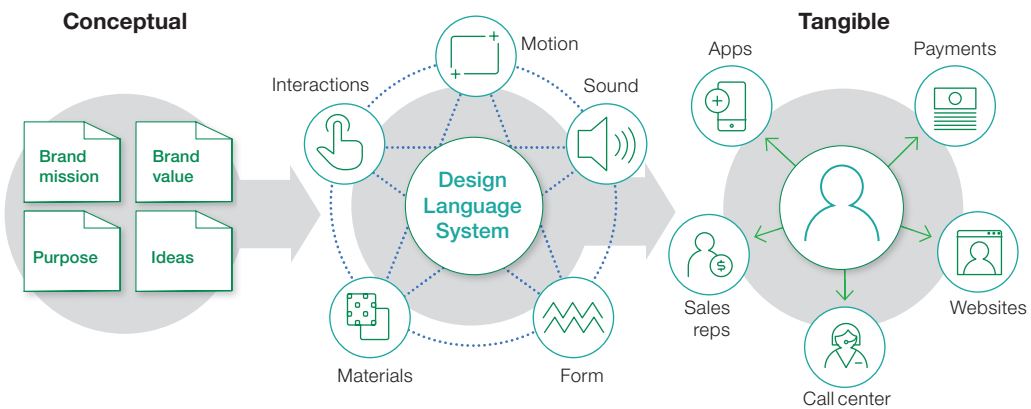
"There is no luck. Luck is the residue of design."

Branch Rickey, baseball executive

A DLS is a tool for design that unites the brand and creates a roadmap for future experiences and development efficiencies. It includes styles and principles to design experiences for products, devices, environments and activities. A DLS addresses traditional brand considerations such as colors and fonts, as well as brand guidelines for motion, sound, form, materials and interaction.

Yet, a DLS is much more than a set of technical guidelines. It includes a coded component library and also offers a vision for designers to deliver optimal customer experiences on different platforms. It employs descriptive guidelines, and some prescriptive ones, for user experiences and behaviors, platforms, design patterns, elements and structures, and reusable elements. The combination of descriptive and prescriptive guidelines allows designers to bring conceptual ideas to life (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
A DLS enables designers to translate the meaning of their brand into the design of tangible customer experiences



A DLS checklist

There are numerous advantages to creating a DLS. To help determine if a DLS makes sense for your organization, we have developed a DLS readiness checklist. Consider these questions:

- *Imagine you are your customer trying to research, purchase and receive post-sales service. Think of your engagement collectively across channels and the assets you encounter, as your customer would. Is it a fragmented brand experience?*

  As customers move from one channel to the next, they should always feel they are in your uniquely branded world. Customers purchasing online, shopping in a store or calling customer service expect the same positive brand experience, regardless of channel.

- *Are you starting from scratch each time you need to design an experience and its components?*

  If your branded assets can't be reused or customized, you are wasting valuable time, effort and money creating "one-off" solutions. As new types of digital touchpoints continue to grow in popularity – such as the use of virtual or augmented reality to showcase products – teams have to create and implement new assets. They can do this much more quickly by repurposing established principles and branded components.

- *Are you on your own to reconcile confusing, inconsistent or incomplete design guidelines?*

  Many organizations today have decentralized design teams residing inside matrixed organizations with multiple priorities. Establishing an overarching committee for design governance can put teeth behind your brand principles, resolve ambiguity, and make it far easier to verify brand compliance and support across the organization. Instead of limiting designers' creativity, this structure will empower them to make informed design decisions with speed and confidence.

- *Do you often create new assets because you don't have a quick, efficient way to find what already exists?*

  Access to a centralized digital library can help designers easily locate the assets they need, or quickly determine if new ones might be necessary. This can save precious time searching, as well as development time.

Getting started

If you answered "yes" to any of the checklist questions, a DLS may be the solution you need to streamline your brand design efforts. To get started, we recommend the following four steps:

- *Build a clear business case for your DLS to obtain executive support.*

  The business case for a DLS is compelling. It enables your organization to deploy more quickly to markets with reduced effort, which translates into reduced cost. You could receive a compounded ROI, since consistent investment in the design system increases opportunity for design innovation, can lower startup and production costs, and help build competitive advantage over time.

- *Introduce new opportunities for your team to build and champion your DLS program.*

  Managing a brand using a DLS can be a significant transition for a design team. Identify employees who have experience or an interest in building your DLS. You will need subject matter experts in numerous areas, including technology, process redesign, asset management and brand strategy, as well as an intimate knowledge of your current design process and asset inventory. Implementing a DLS could represent a short-term growth assignment for your future design leaders. Even if you decide to partner with an external organization for more DLS expertise, make sure key members of your internal design team are invested in the process.

- *Conduct an asset and process audit to help define your DLS requirements.*

  Knowing the scope and scale of your future DLS at the onset will help you determine a realistic budget and approach for building your DLS. To understand where your gaps and process pain points are, you need a comprehensive view of your current state. Avoid trying to short-cut this effort. Having a solid understanding of what needs to change – and why – is essential if you are to devise a system that truly resolves your root challenges, and doesn't just digitalize a worn process that isn't working especially well.

- *Establish a brand design governance committee.*

  If you don't already have a group like this in place, consider creating a governance committee at the beginning of your DLS development process. By doing this at program start, the committee can evaluate current brand design principles and guidelines, and either confirm, revise or create new ones that will need to be coded into the DLS. They also may need to establish processes for using the DLS and for adhering to their new governance structure. Better to do this before the DLS is functional, so no time is wasted after it is deployed. And be sure to create a formal feedback loop with your design teams so they can contribute new ideas for adoption into the system. A DLS is only truly effective if it can continually evolve and scale.

Building a trusted, consistent brand

Without a DLS, an organization may have beautifully branded assets that don't share a common point of view or strategically work together. This results in disjointed and dissatisfying customer experiences. Without a DLS, the effort and cost to deliver a consistent omnichannel experience may be considerable and not scalable. And the introduction of emerging technologies may require designers to create new solutions in a vacuum that are ambiguous or off-brand.

All of these challenges can be mitigated with a DLS that unites distributed design teams with shared principles and guidelines, helping them build relevant, branded customer experiences that embody your corporate values across digital and physical solutions. Your customer experience and brand could be stronger, coherent and engaging, and delivered faster and at lower cost – these are the possibilities a DLS offers.

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Notes and sources

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