

Case study: Océ



The purpose of this case study

The following case study will help you to understand how the brand can drive innovation in a high-technology, business-to-business (B2B) organisation, and to explore how organisational culture and branding are connected.

About Océ

Océ is one of the world's leading providers of document management and printing for professionals. The broad Océ offering includes office printing and copying systems, high-speed, digital-production printers and wide-format printing systems for both technical documentation and colour-display graphics. Océ is also a foremost supplier of document-management outsourcing. The company was founded in 1877. With headquarters in Venlo, the Netherlands, Océ is active in about 100 countries and employs some 23,000 people worldwide. Total revenues in 2008 amounted to €2.9 billion (US \$ 3.8 billion dollars – figure obtained March 2010). For more information on Océ, visit <www.oce.com>.



THE OCÉ

COLORSTREAM 10000
One of Océ's thoroughbred printers, for high-speed, high-volume jobs like printing brochures, books, manuals and direct mailings. It boasts Océ's distinct brand design language.

By making the embedded brand explicit, the brand starts to serve as a lighthouse for developers to orient themselves by. The artefacts we produce are ingrained with the unwritten assumptions we derive from being part of the Océ culture.

Innovation at Océ

Océ is a typical high-technology, capital-goods manufacturer: its products are highly complex, based on proprietary technology, and are aimed at a very demanding professional market. Océ's machines often play a role in their customers' core business (printing drawings for architectural firms, local editions for newspapers or account statements for banks). This puts very high demands on the durability and reliability of Océ's products. Typically, companies like these are very technology focused. This holds true for Océ, which has nine research and development sites, and more than 2000 people active in R&D (out of which one per cent are active in design).

It's unsurprising to see that Océ's innovation process starts with technology development. When we look at Océ's product portfolio, we see a tremendous attention to design and a keen focus on usability and productivity. These 'soft' values are not part of the R&D team's explicit brief, and yet they are still recognised and valued by Océ's users (Convent, 2008). How does this work? How can a company that is so focused on developing new technology introduce products to the market that have such a strong sense of consistency and which seem to stem from a powerful vision of user-centred design and attention to all stakeholders (Keus, 2008)?

Let's ask Guido Stompff, senior designer at Océ, who has been involved in researching what he calls Océ's 'embedded brand' (Stompff, 2008). Stompff has discovered that various brand-building exercises with his design and R&D teams over the years have yielded surprisingly consistent results. When it comes to framing what Océ's all about, Stompff has found that values clustered around the themes of 'involvement', 'drive', 'pragmatism' and 'independence' have consistently appeared.

Stompff says that he was 'surprised to find such consistent brand results over the years, while no one ever stated these values explicitly to my colleagues, who seemed to know what Océ was about without having to have it spelled out for them. This has led my research into the realms of organisational culture, through which I became acquainted with the seminal work of E.H. Schein (*Organisational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed. 2004). Schein found that within any organisation many tacit assumptions exist about what is considered "good" and "not good". These assumptions are the result of shared learning from a common past, or put differently: the result of successes and failures previously experienced. As an example, when an organisation experiences great success due to the use of innovative technology, it will assume that in order to be successful, one needs to innovate. If an organisation experiences great success in reselling and repositioning the products of others, it will assume that good marketing and not innovation will do the job.

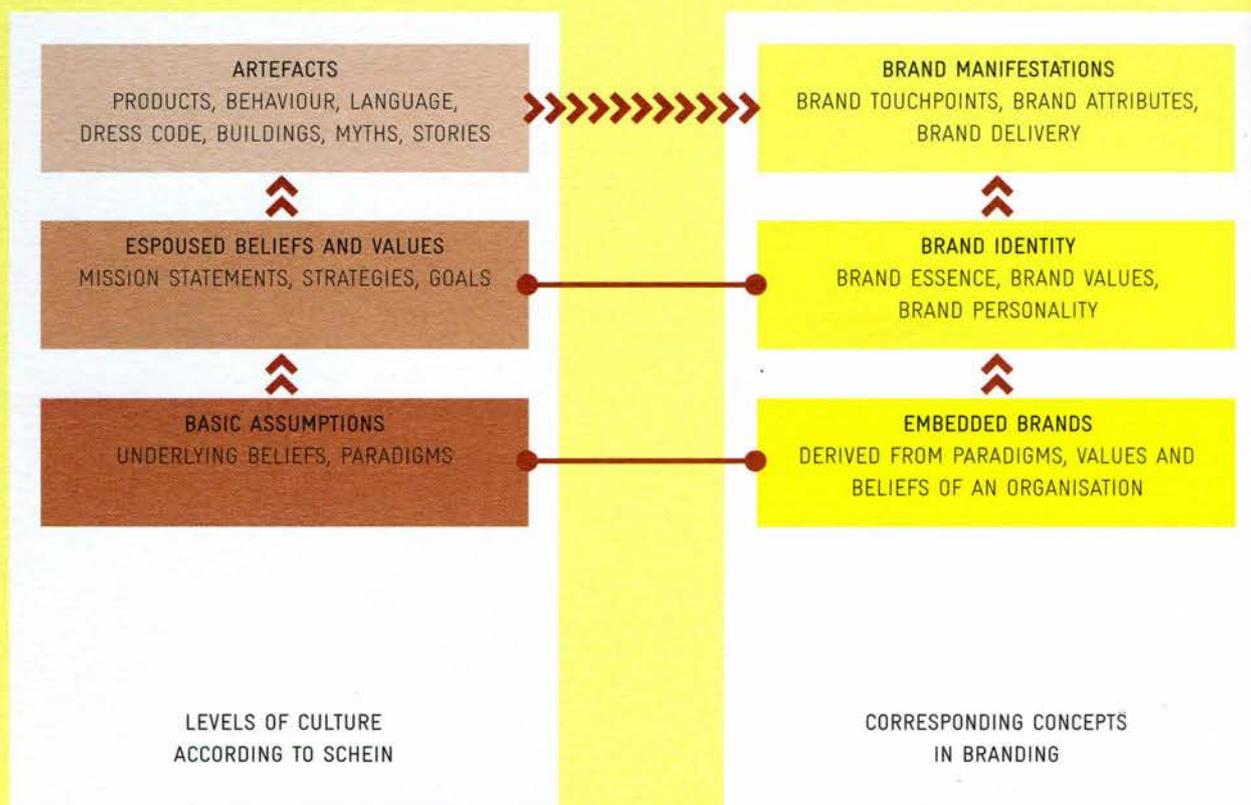
'Schein derived the following significant relation: artefacts (such as buildings, dress code, but also employee behaviour) are a result of these underlying tacit beliefs. To make this more explicit: the products that an organisation develops and/or sells are the enacted beliefs of this organisation. Whether or not organisations like it, the beliefs of the organisation manifest themselves "authentically" in all sorts of artefacts (Gilmore and Pine II, 2007), and therefore contribute strongly to the brand as it is experienced by users. For organisations like Océ, in which the brand and the organisation strongly reflect each other (as is also the case for Apple, Microsoft, BMW and Sony), the brand should fall in line with this belief system.'

Stompff continues: 'It is easy to relate Schein's "levels of culture" to brand-related topics. (The model in figure 3 (below) clearly demonstrates the parallels that exist.) According to Schein, culture has three levels: a primary level of basic assumptions that are taken for granted (for instance, Singapore Airlines believes that the best way to differentiate is through pampering clients travelling on their planes, above all through personal contact); a further level of espoused beliefs and values that are made explicit (the service manual for the stewardesses, which details the values that they should endeavour to communicate); and a final level of artefacts, the physical manifestations of these beliefs (the behaviour of the stewardesses, the seats in Singapore Airlines business class, the food that is served). Brand touchpoints are fully in keeping with these cultural artefacts (a passenger will experience Singapore Airlines through its food, the kind stewardesses, the chairs); and the espoused values are similar to "formal" brand descriptions, such as the brand personality.'

'These "lower" two levels can also be evidenced in the brand at Océ, and this teaches us a lot about how our brand drives what we do with design and R&D. However, the level of assumptions had no counterpart in branding until recently, so at Océ I started to name this the "embedded brand". Our brand is "embedded" in our organisation much like assumptions are: after working at Océ for a couple of years, it becomes part of our own way of doing things. Sometimes, this embedded brand is made explicit. The brand-building exercises were designed to enhance awareness of these underlying assumptions and to articulate their positive aspects. By doing so, the brand starts to serve as a lighthouse for the developers to orient themselves by and so align their work. But, regardless of this step, the artefacts we produce are ingrained with the unwritten assumptions we derive from being part of the Océ culture. This not only applies for Océ: any organisation that develops products has a belief system and a frame of reference about what is "good", and these beliefs always shine through in the products it develops.'

3 LEVELS OF CULTURE AND BRANDING

The levels of culture as Schein (2004) distinguishes them correspond with the levels in branding as distinguished by Guido Stompff.



Very often, the way in which brands are presented to the organisation does not contribute towards a shared understanding. Only when they are experienced as authentic will they serve as a source of the organisation's identity.

It appears that for Océ, the act of articulating the brand drives the innovation process by helping engineers and designers decide on how to do things and what to focus on. But this is a process that seems to fit only small teams of designers and developers, due to the efforts that it requires. How should a manufacturer employing 25,000 people articulate its tacit assumptions? And is it then possible that users appreciate these products consistently because of ease of use, productivity and ergonomics?

Guido Stompff considers that this is 'precisely why the concept of the brand is so relevant. Though Schein is widely acclaimed to be the founding father of organisational culture, he focused on defining and demonstrating it, but didn't make it operational. Put differently: he understood culture, but left it up to others how to manage, change or even transform it. I think branding could serve as an excellent platform from which to articulate, discuss, explore, change and even manage what the underlying assumptions of developers are. By discussing the brand one can discover what is "good" and why it is considered such. In my experience, in cases of contesting requirements - let's consider the classic cost price versus product quality discussions - the brand often serves as a perfect tool with which to align actions. By just asking the simple and straightforward question, "Is this an Océ solution?", or "Is it worthy of becoming an Océ product?", team members quickly come to conclusions that go beyond the realms of their usual turf. It provides a platform, a larger common goal, that enables the balancing of often complex matters.'

But if the organisation's beliefs and assumptions crystallise into good products (because development teams similarly hold these beliefs and assumptions), why the need to explain them by means of the brand? It seems that you could potentially leave them 'embedded'.

Guido Stompff argues that this is true, but that 'it ignores the nature of modern product development. Most - maybe even all - products that Océ develops are co-developed in some way. Océ has eight sites, and some products are developed by four sites: parts or modules are outsourced to external parties; some products truly are co-developed by a group of companies. In short, whereas until a decade or so ago organisational culture could serve as a source for alignment, nowadays teams are comprised of people who do not share the same organisational background, yet still need to align their actions. Explaining what the brand stands for, telling the mythical stories of past successes, demonstrating which existing products are real brand ambassadors, designing future products that show what the brand is about; these are all ways to speed up the process of teaching and learning what the "tacit" assumptions and beliefs are. And make no mistake: as Schein argued, very often the espoused formal values (the way in which brands are mostly presented to the organisation) do not contribute towards this shared understanding. Only when the brand is experienced as genuine and authentic will it serve as a source of the organisation's identity.'

Conclusions to be gained from the Océ case study

- 1 | The brand at Océ is 'embedded', much like cultural assumptions are.
- 2 | Branding, in the context of innovation, is closely connected to organisational culture.
- 3 | Innovations at Océ are brand-driven in a tacit way: Océ's culture gravitates around high ambitions regarding ease of use and productivity and this manifests itself in all of Océ's touchpoints.
- 4 | A brand that is shaped by history and is ingrained within the skin of the organisation is more likely to drive innovation than a brand that was constructed from scratch.
- 5 | The brand is a way to make assumptions and beliefs explicit, and thus shareable between teams.