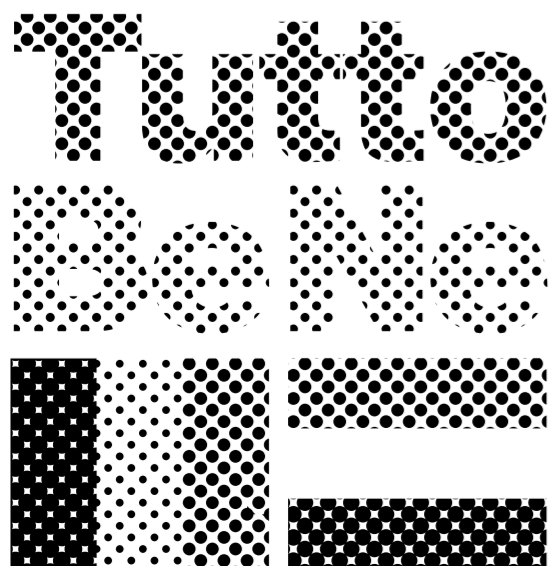
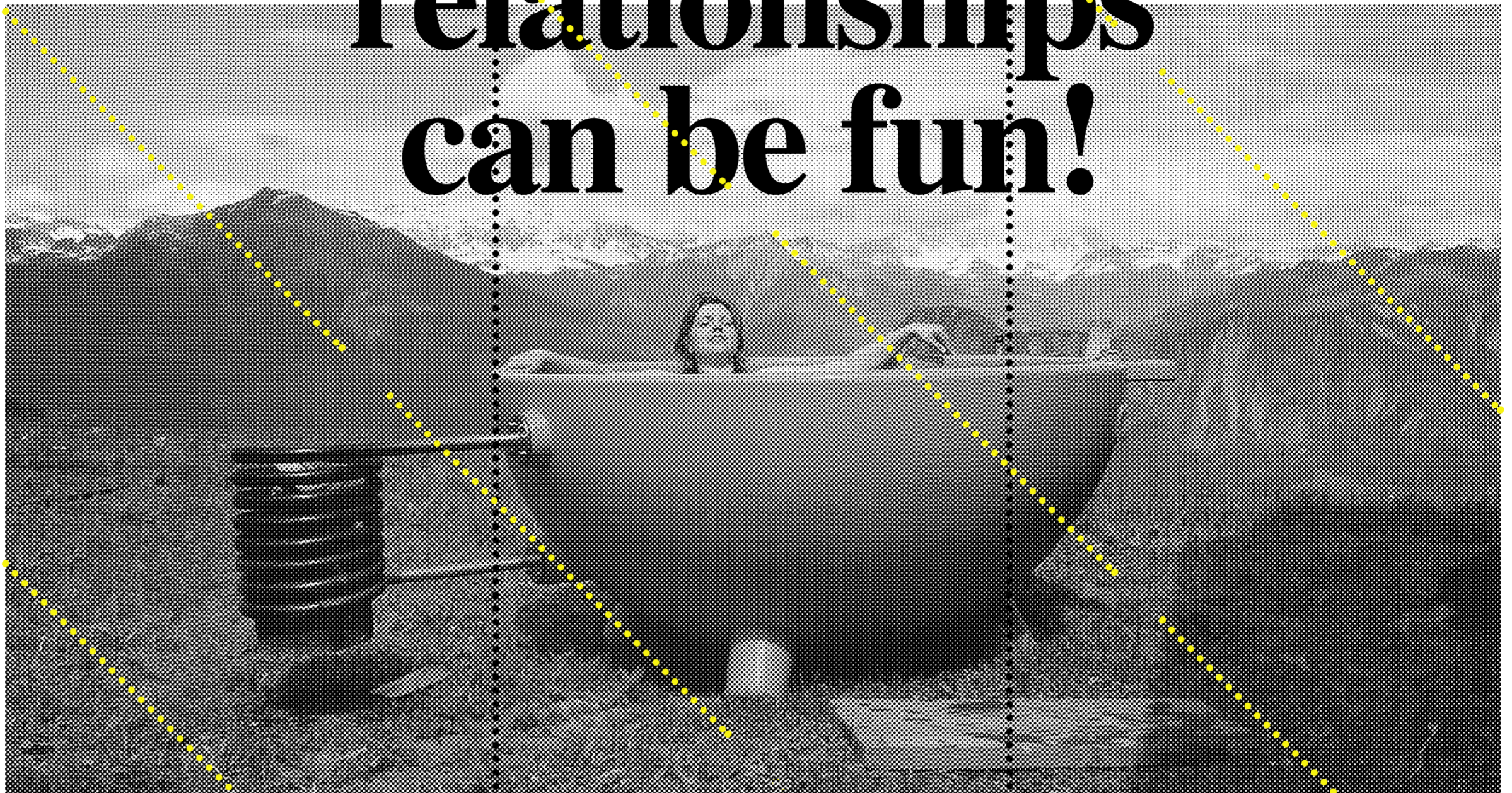


Article



Title

Living A Part Together: Lasting relationships can be fun!



Article by

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Separating is a thing of the past, now that we are acknowledging our emotional side, right? There are some important stages in a relationship. You fall in love and you are completely blinded by it: what a feeling! After some time, you get used to living together, it gets normal or even too normal. But, instead of getting bored like so many do, you start seeing the beauty from other angles; you rediscover or reinvent your experience. You focus on the emotional qualities and appreciate how the experience makes you feel. You have discovered that a lasting relationship doesn't necessarily turn into a boring and numb daily experience, it can indeed be even fun, and you stick with it!

This could have been an introduction for a piece about relationships between people, but it isn't. This is all about relationships we have with products and brands. Products and brands that we experience on a daily basis have an enormous impact on our lives and therefore it makes sense that relationships will evolve out of this. There are extreme examples like the old-timer enthusiast clamping that his relationship with an old Jaguar is far more important than the relationship with his wife. But, those are exceptions. Instead, I will write about relationships we have with products and brands that we can all relate to. The ones we discover, rediscover and stick with, each and every day. Each subsection is supported by interesting and inspiring quotes and examples that have been taken from interviews I had with experts from the field of design and branding.

Discover

Recently, more and more researchers and practitioners have been acknowledging and investigating emotional effects of products and brands. With a focus on products, Donald Norman (2004) published his bestselling book "Emotional Design; why we love (or hate) everyday things", Pieter Desmet (2002) promoted with his inspiring thesis "Designing Emotions". With a focus on brands and branding, Kevin Roberts (Saatchi & Saatchi) published his book "Lovemarks" and Marc Gobé (d/g*) "Emotional Branding". All of them focused on the emotional impact of products or brands and how people connect with them at a deeper, more emotional level.

Just like with relationships between people, you search for or you bump into that one thing you are looking for. And just like with people, it has to click, excite and dazzle you before you will eventually give in to it. In discovering a product several levels can be differentiated. Donald Norman refers to three different levels in his book: visceral, behavioural and reflective. The visceral level is fast and makes judgements based on more superficial stimuli. In the behavioural level using the product makes us feel a certain way.

In the reflective level, we reflect on the previous levels and match or mismatch it with how we see ourselves. This way, we can get excited when we see the iPod for the first time (visceral), get curious and surprised while using it (behavioural) and feel pride when others see us using it (reflective). At the start of any relationship, the discovery phase is crucial. When it doesn't work for you, you will get out at an early stage. Therefore, a product should be able to attract your direct attention and flirt with you to get you involved immediately. It is very important for the product to startle you before you start evaluating and reasoning about what you see. Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, acknowledges the importance of the "heart" in this phase: "It should be about the heart, not the head. The senses, not the brain. Emotions lead to action. Reason leads to conclusions. It must add mystery, sensuality and intimacy and connect with what you feel." For Kevin, the best examples that "did it" for him are the iPod Nano, The Mont Blanc "Le Grand" roller ball pen and the Mini Cooper. I think we can all think of examples of our own, and honestly, did you really think about it very long before you purchased those items? I guess not, it was probably love at first sight.

What is it that makes us connect with a product or brand and draws us towards them? A very important factor is something you might call "personal fit", it has to match our personal concerns and self-image. Once you feel that something is really right for you, it creates a good feeling. I have seen it with many designers. They feel that the best thing for them as designers is to own an Apple computer. Can we ascribe this purely to the functional and performing qualities of the computer? Apple created the image very carefully. Gavin Proctor of Philips Design agrees: "When you think of the word Apple-user, you can not help but think of a certain type of person.

That philosophy is now carried through the entire brand. You instantly notice that upon entering the Apple Store. They are not pushing the product at you, but rather welcoming you to the experience of Apple." Marc Gobé, founder and CEO of d/g* Worldwide, confirms Gavin's arguments: "Apple has brought what I think to be one of the best emotional branding programs you could dream of. First, you have an entrepreneur whose surprising vision you respect, then the products that match that vision, and innovation that keeps you engaged. It does not stop there; Apple understands the need to connect with people in a sensorial and emotional way. The expression of the brand reinforces its promise through a design and brand presence approach through their stores that bridge the gap between the abstract nature of branding and its humanistic impact. The brand engages you throughout all your senses, through your intellect and gut feelings."

The process of matching the brand's identity and values with your self-image, is what I always like to refer to as brand sentiment: a person's long-lasting feelings for a brand. Not too long ago I purchased two antique Artifort chairs from 1957. My brand sentiment towards Artifort has always been very positive: Artifort is a known Dutch furniture brand with a long history and has a strong design character. Matching this with my self-image of being a designer who loves design objects and has to show that he knows his (classic) stuff, I felt that I had to purchase them. The "this-is-me" feeling seems to be very important in the discovery phase. Floris Schoonderbeek, designer of the new outdoor bathing experience "Dutchtub" (a mobile bath tub that heats the water by burning natural wood in a spiral system, presented at TuttoBeNe in 2004), thinks the biggest strength of his product is "the mobility and with that the independence. It inspires people to think about locations and situations where to use it."

Quote

"Emotions make us discover, rediscover and eventually stick with it."

It's easy to make it your own that way." In promoting their Dutchtubs, Floris and his partner emphasise the possibility to take and place the Dutchtub anywhere you like. And, it works. People love it and send in their own pictures of where they took their Dutchtub (on top of a car along to the winter sport, hanging over a valley on its way to a mountain cabin or just in a back garden in Amsterdam). The people really own it, even the marketing. We could conclude that in the discovery phase people want to be swept away, try to make a match with their self-image and make the product or brand their own.

Rediscover

In order to keep a relationship between persons healthy and alive, we have to rediscover it all the time. We try to look at it from other angles and grow along with inevitable changes. Relationships with products and brands are dynamic as well, be it slightly more one-sided when it concerns products that don't really change (your sofa doesn't change shape, though the cloth will wear out and colours fade). Relationships we have with the products and brands that we fell in love with, will have to be maintained. This is the time that we get to know the product and we get attached to it. Donald Norman explains that "we are much more emotionally attached to products for which we feel some involvement. So true personalization and customization makes a real difference. Once we have some commitment and involvement, it is ours forever." But, as he also points out in his book, just changing the colour or other minor details will not be sufficient. The person has to make

a real investment – they have to "own" the changes. So, each time we adjust, make changes or re-interpret the product (or brand), we are in fact rediscovering the relationship. Like a true Harley-Davidson lover, who never finishes working on his bike. Each time he adjusts the bike, the experience changes: he really owns it.

Rediscovering brands is a much more complex process, because a brand is a changing concept. It is both influenced by the people behind it as the people who interpret it, the consumers. The concept of "emotional branding" of Marc Gobé focuses on this ever changing character of brands: "It evolves and keeps changing based on circumstances that affect people's lives. In a time of fear, people's emotions or relationships with brands are different than what they would be in a safer environment. Emotional branding is a way to construct ideas by celebrating the creative process and people's imaginations. The business of ideas does not need dogma or rigid formulas, it is evolving and changing based on people's lives and aspirations."

Designers can help people rediscover the products better, from the very start of the design process. Gavin Proctor of Philips Design, argues that we have to "consider the designer as an artist with a pallet. Think of it as we are now exploring a larger field of colours, of paints, to express design. Immaterial qualities like sound, light, movement, all of those can be layered in the intangible qualities of the product. Finding how they tell our story. Our story, not that of the maker or the designer alone." Steven Kyffin also director at Philips Design, continues: "Remember that designers have always been doing these things, but they have done it implicitly. Designers were known for designing the thing, object or product, but in fact they were also designing the product as a host or as an initiator or inspiration to an experience. Nowadays you end up designing for the whole experience over much longer periods of time... the full love affair."

So, we have seen that in the rediscovery phase it is important that people are involved, feel committed, and really own the changes that make them look at it from other angles. Designers are able to help by making sure they tell the people's story and design for the whole experience over a longer period of time.

Stick with it

After the discovery and a longer period of rediscovering your product or brand, the chance that you will really stick with it becomes bigger and bigger. As we have seen in the previous phases, in order to create lasting relationships the discovery phase is vital to make you fall in love and match the product or brand with your self-image. Then, in the rediscovery phase, we want the product to become "us", we need to own changes and want to feel involved and committed.

In the Lovemark approach, Kevin Roberts argues that "once respect has been built (quality, price, performance, distinction) then you add love and create loyalty beyond reason." Every expert that I have interviewed until now mentioned Apple as (one of) the best example(s) of a product and brand that creates the best and most solid relationship with consumers. It seems to be the most appealing example of a true "emotional" product and brand. You could also imagine that a product like the Dutchtub might be a perfect example of a product you would stick with. The experience is wonderful and can be reinvented all the time by changing the location of the tub.

In the bulk of products and brands, many great examples can be found that show us that lasting relationships with them can indeed be fun. It is up to designers and brand creators now to learn from those examples and try to create products and brands that are worth loving, and stick with. I suggest "relationship therapy" for all of us!

*** About the author ***

Marco Van Hout (M.Sc.) is a Dutch design consultant specialised in consumer experience and the emotional side of design. On his website www.design-emotion.com he regularly publishes interviews with experts from the field of design and branding. He is a managing partner at Monito.

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