



The Concept according to Dominique David

Preamble : economist by training, now a furniture designer, Dominique David was a communication strategy consultant at Publicis, RSCG and then worked at FCA as a general manager. He worked for major groups such as Colgate, Nestlé, L'Oréal, Danone, Carrefour, BNP, Fiat, etc. He then became an adviser to Michel Rocard. He also a founding member of the Terra Nova think tank.



Introduction

What part does the concept take in the communication and advertising fields?

Marque & Management asked Dominique David, a communication strategist who conceptualised Carrefour's "Produits Libres" and came up with Decathlon's slogan "A fond la forme", to share with us his vision of the concept and its applications by using different examples of renowned brands.

How would you define the concept ?

To answer your question, I will take inspiration from the philosopher François Jullien¹ who gives a definition that sums up all the values of the concept : the concept is the lasting intelligible (meaning within everyone's reach) unity (meaning it must be simple) of a multiplicity of meanings.

There are 4 important points in this definition :

- **Lasting**
- **Intelligible**
- **Unity**
- **Multiplicity of meanings**

To illustrate this definition, François Jullien evokes love. Indeed, love is a unity, it is intelligible, it is shared, and it is lasting.

As far as communication is concerned, I find that this concept - which is philosophical at first - to be very enlightening. We will get back to that.

¹ François Jullien is a French Philosopher, Hellenist and Sinologist.



How important is the concept for you?

In the communication, marketing and more generally brand fields, the concept is essential because it is the bearer of a brand's operational development.

As an example, I would like to quote here Darty who came up with the **Contrat de Confiance** (which we can be translated by the *Trust Contract*). It was very innovative for the time because consumer's relationship with electrical appliances was unbelievably bad: people used to buy electrical appliances and there was absolutely no repairer in case it did not work. In short, it was complete uncertainty! In this context, Darty came up with the Contrat de Confiance which says that not only does the brand sell a product, but it also takes care of its upkeep and maintenance. By occupying the whole electrical appliances market, the brand created a **relationship contract** with its consumers which shook up the market. Small retailers practically disappeared.

To embody the concept, Darty also invented the triangle sign:

- « Price » at the top: I am cheaper
- « Choice » at the bottom left: I commercialise numerous brands
- « Trust » at the bottom right: you will never have broken down appliances

For the time, Darty was a fabulous marketing revolution!



What differences or links do you make between concept and strategy ?

The strategy is the structuring of all the means at the service of the concept. When I speak of means, I mean human, material, financial and technical means aimed at achieving the brand's objective and its concept. But, if we broaden the debate, it can also be the politician, the searcher or even the doctor's objective!



Therefore, the concept is the synthesis, the vital expression of the strategy. More than the synthesis in fact, the concept is the bearer of the entire organisation of the strategy. Thus, one cannot have a strategy without a concept.

This reminds me of a historical political example which is remarkably interesting: Roosevelt's New Deal concept. Let me explain, Roosevelt was elected President in a political situation similar to ours today. In this context, he came up with the concept of the New Deal, which consists of proposing a new contract of relationship with the citizens. The first strength of the concept is the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) program which goal was to irrigate the dry and eroded soil of the Tennessee Valley.

If you had to represent the concept schematically, what images come to your mind?

I cannot answer this question precisely because that would require me to be faced with a problem, but it is clear that to come up with a concept you have to go through these three conception stages:

- The name of the brand
- The logo
- The baseline

If it were a symbol, I would take the Olympic flame: originating in the Greek antiquity, it expresses the universality of sport and, to signify it, makes people want to carry the flame to the stadium where the competitions will take place. It is therefore a highly symbolic concept that is the bearer of a relationship, of a community.

I would also like to quote Nike - which means *victory* in Greek - who uses the Greek symbol of the comma - which also means victory - and whose baseline "*Just do it*" is meaningful. For these reasons, Nike is one of the brands whose concept moves me the most.



In your opinion, what are the virtues and qualities of the concept and what are the advantages of developing it?

The concept is there to give desire, to give hope. It is also there to be the bearer of a vision, an intuition of the finality of something (we almost come back to the initial definition, in the first question of the interview). The concept must also create a sense of community, of connivance for the receiver, that is to say those who receive it.

In fact, the concept is the result of a reflection process that is now **collaborative**: for a concept to work, it needs to be understood and shared by everyone.



I would like to insist on the word “collaborative” because in order to develop a concept you have to disregard hierarchical relationships and have collaborative relationships that allow you to build the concept together, on an equal footing! It must be the operational conclusion of this collaborative work. In other words, **it is the fundamental base of the action as well as a relationship contract between the sender and the receiver.**

I would like to take the Sécurité Sociale as an example - which is the healthcare system in France. Indeed, when the Sécurité Sociale was born it was a powerful concept which consisted in bringing together the social and professional life with the personal life, the individual security. In my opinion, this concept is just as strong today as it was back then.

How do you operationalise a concept, from thought to action, and how do you ensure that there is no loss from the moment the concept becomes action?

To answer that question, I would like to come back to the collaborative function of the concept: **a concept only becomes operational and valid if it is shared by all those who are going to bear it, use it and all those who are going to receive it.**

I will give here an example of a concept that I helped create: the *Produits Libres* by Carrefour (which we can translate by the *Independent Products*) in the 70s. To be more precise, there used to be several hypermarket brands that were all discounting branded products and making up for it on unbranded products. So, I went to Carrefour and proposed to them to also discount unbranded products, it was the beginning of the concept of the Produits Libres.

Therefore, the Produits Libres were products on which there was no brand name, i.e. they were free of all marketing constraints, of all brand codes. For example, the box of washing powder was white and “*All-textile washing powder, 500 grams*” was written on it with just a small Carrefour banner.

We also produced a commercial that shows a big man, symbolizing the brand, playing sitting at the top of a cliff with a glass jar containing the consumer, floating. After a while, he pierces the lid of the jar and, annoyed at his broken toy, throws it into the sea. A great white goddess comes out of the water, picks it up in her hand, and place it in front of white packages: the Produits Libres. Parallel to this film, images of seagulls, which is a free bird associated with the sea, were installed in the shops.

Finally, and before launching a product as a Produit Libre, it was tested in the laboratory with consumers: taste, composition and so on. I also recommended that Carrefour use the IFOP (the French Institute of Public Opinion) to find out how consumers received the operation and the survey showed that it was the best communication in thirty years - the Produits Libres exploded in terms of sales.

From the manufacturing of the product to the packaging as well as the production of the commercial, everyone was on board with this concept.



How did you come to consider the importance of the concept in your professional career?

Throughout my career, I have thought a lot about the role of the brand and the 3 moments that have affected its history:

- 1st moment: the brand is a sign of property, the word "*brand*" in English means to mark in the sense of branding an animal to identify its owner
- 2nd moment: the brand becomes the bearer of a quality and a know-how. It is the imperial and dominating brand that speaks for itself and imposes itself. For example: I am Nescafé, the best coffee
- 3rd moment: the one we are experiencing today, the one of the collaborative brand. For example, McDonald's and its concept "*Come as you are*", which changes for "*Come back as you are*" at the end of the lockdown due to the coronavirus health crisis. A fine example.

In France, the best example of a collaborative brand I have worked on is Decathlon with its slogan-concept "*A fond la forme*" (which we can be translated by *Be on top of your game*). Historically, when the brand was launched with the idea of making sports accessible to all in terms of price, distribution and product diversity, the name "Decathlon" referred to top-level sports competition. To counterbalance this, there had to be a baseline that corrected the brand and said that Decathlon is not there to help people enter competitions and win them at all costs, but to insist on the pleasure of doing sports - hence the slogan "*A fond la forme*". The advantage of this slogan-concept is that it can be declined, for instance during sales it can change into "*A fond les prix*"; when it is winter it change into "*A fond la neige*", etc.

In conclusion, I will say that the brand has become responsible for a relationship and equality contract between the sender, which is the brand, and the receiver, which is the consumer.



Conclusion

According to Dominique David, the concept is the unity of a multiplicity of meanings at the service of a brand's intelligibility. It must therefore carry a single, clear and targeted meaning to be understood and shared by all. In other words, it has the capacity to synthesize a thought in a few key words that will be heard and understood universally and durably.

The concept and the strategy are dependent on each other: without a concept, there is no strategy. Without strategy, there is no efficient action. The concept is, in the words of Dominique David, the fundamental base of the action.