

Perceived quality is not a question of money

Article published on Les Echos.fr - 21 September 2004

The idea of perceived quality first surfaced among motor vehicle manufacturers at the end of 2000/start of 2001. Perceived Quality can be defined as how much care is seen to be taken in the design and production of a vehicle. This involves multi-sensory perception resulting in an overall quality assessment, including an assessment as to whether a vehicle is likely to provide long-term satisfaction. This is based on a complex process, influenced by the manufacturer's brand image and how attractive the design is, that is to say, first impressions as well as details that are only sometimes noticed.

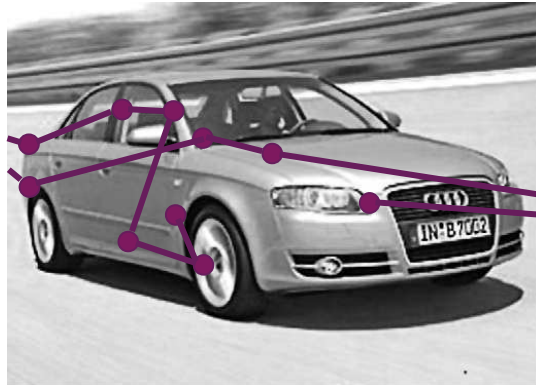
A key factor in the purchasing decision-making, a major challenge for the brand

Included in comparative studies published by the press since the end of 2001, perceived quality is now a vital criterion in a very active competitive market. The challenge facing manufacturers is to enhance the perception of their brand in the long term so as to secure the loyalty of customers who have become experts at assessing vehicles. Since quality of manufacture and performance are now taken for granted, perceived quality has in fact now become a key factor in the purchasing decision-making process. Upon being attracted by a design, customers want reassurance that when they get their vehicles on the road they will be pleased with them in terms of aesthetics, comfort, safety, long-term performance and they would also like to think that they've made a good investment. Success generated by several models in terms of perceived quality progressively creates a reputation for quality that reflects favourably on the brand in the future. But initiatives to improve perceived quality are part of a long-term plan, even though they result in lasting benefits. Bernd Pischetsrieder, the Chairman of Volkswagen, therefore admits that he prefers to be confronted with a real quality problem than a quality perception problem. According to him, "A real problem can be resolved much quicker than a perception problem". This focus on quality perception is also central to Patrick Le Quément's way of thinking. Design Manager at Renault Patrick Le Quément was behind the "Touch Design" concept, "sensual and emotional ergonomics" making for user friendly controls. On the other hand, a mistake in a product's finish can be enough to dent a brand's reputation as was proved by the Mercedes A-Class first generation.

Increased attention to details

Studies show that customers have developed an organized and keen perception of cars which they examine methodically looking for "features to watch out for" in the following order: front headlamp unit, radiator grille, bonnet-windscreen transition area, door opening pillar-wing pillar-door pillar structure nodal point, rear wheel housing, boot, side windows, then rocker panel, front wheel rims and finally front sides.

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While it is now established that front headlamps are one of the main features used to assess a vehicle's exterior, it also seems that translucent headlamps (used for example on the Skoda Fabia or the Fiat Punto) are appreciated by customers who consider them to be "modern", "top of the range", "chic". These headlamps' translucent look, although seemingly fragile, is appreciated for its aesthetics and because it gives the impression that it will provide more effective lighting. Equally, in the case of the wheel housing, the area between the wheels and the vehicle, the vertical play and the flushing between the wing and the tyre come under particular scrutiny. Finally, in the passenger compartment, the quality of materials and assembly (crimping, fastenings, couplings) as well as the ergonomics, durability and functionality of the various controls and buttons on the dashboard are also critical features. To receive a positive assessment, the dashboard and door panel materials must for example have a matt finish (evidence of depth and smoothness), be soft to the touch (positive sign of resistance and safety), and elicit a feeling of nobility (the texture must conjure up leather rather than plastic). Peugeot has fully understood this, since, in order to compete with German estate cars, it has paid particular attention to the dashboard trim and the seats of its 407. The new challenge facing manufacturers is to avoid hitting the wrong note and above all to create overall harmony.

Better allocation of resources

In an effort to take up the challenge some manufacturers have altered their development process. As a common denominator among different departments (design, marketing, purchasing, research), the pursuit for perceived quality in fact enables such departments to direct their sometimes divergent goals towards a common objective: to obtain a result that customers both notice and like. It becomes a deciding factor in choices pertaining to technical feasibility. The challenge is even greater in that an element rated poorly during a test clinic can lead to additional costs. In general, improvement in a vehicle's perceived quality does not result in additional costs for manufacturers. Rather it pushes them to better allocate resources. Above all it involves investing in criteria valued by the customer. Therefore, "slush", a non-rigid plastic used on dashboards, is perceived as a quality material by customers. But it costs more than traditional plastic. It is therefore up to manufacturers to use these two materials in a way that enhances only those parts seen by the customer. This is what Renault has done on its Megane, reserving slush for very specific areas in the passenger compartment (handle surfaces that come into contact with users' fingers). Are we witnessing a race for differentiating details? Nothing is less certain insofar as the changes to come will be major ones. In the short term, the benefits of perceived quality are more tangible for customers. Equally, manufacturers can see more clearly new areas where they can optimise costs. Structural changes are expected in 2005. They are to affect seats (which are to be of a more delicate design, light weight, fixed and adjustable). There are also to be improvements in aspects relating to roominess and general aestheticism. In terms of costs, cutbacks will affect seats that are to be made less restrictive by the removal of runners, and active and passive safety devices. Finally, the weight of a vehicle is to be reduced. It seems that perceived quality has turned a corner, making way for a new series of customer benefits and new challenges for manufacturers.