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COMD 3504-OL01

October 14, 2020

Universal Product Code, 1973

Have you ever gone to the market to buy some vegetables, waited in a long line and at the end you get to the cashier who does not remember the code for the celery? The item does not have a barcode, so it cannot be easily scanned. Now imagine a life in which there is no barcode. That is exactly how life looked like 50 years ago.

While looking at one of my favorite books, *The Psychopath Test*, I started thinking about how I got the book… I remember going to the store, picking up the book, and waiting in line to pay. Until now, I have not thought about the cashier who scanned the book so I can take it with me. The design I am going to talk about next is the UPC, short for universal product code. It has been around us for a short period of time, forty-five years, to be more specific. It has helped us make the scanning process a lot easier because now all we have to do is scan the things we want to buy.

Having to wait hours and hours to pay for your grocery shopping was not the best thing to do back in the seventies. In 1973, the idea of accelerating the grocery checkout process was seen as a way to improve customer service and to reduce labor force. A group of supermarket executives led by Alan Haberman made the decision of creating a symbol that can be scanned in order to make the checkout line move faster.. For that reason, they asked multiple companies, including IBM to come up with a solution.

George Laurer, the creator of the universal product code was working in IBM by the time the executives asked them for help. He was inspired by Joseph Woodland, an engineer who in 1948 was already looking for a way to create a symbol that can help scan objects easily by looking into the morse code, for that reason his design was circular. The creation of the UPC code took place in 1973 by George Laurer, he came up with a rectangular design that included symbol and 12-digit printed code that comes along with bars and is located in all product packaging to help identify items.. The UPC code was first used in Wrigley's chewing gum, Ohio 1974. According to Mars, the "…GS1 (Global Standards One), the agency which issues bar code numbers, there are now about 5 billion bar codes scanned every day around the world."

Walter Gropius once said "Man, who creates and constructs, must learn the specific language of construction in order to make others understand his idea." (312) Guess what? He is absolutely right! Design theory has been around for decades and it has been used in most of the inventions we have now. A designer must know and understand design theory in order create, inspire, and share our ideas to the world.

The development of the UPC code reminded me of General Linguistics because it is something that we use in our everyday lives. This design embodies this theory in a lot of different ways. First of all, it is associated with a double entity: concept and image. The UPC code concept hides all the information about the object and the vertical lines together with the numbers are the clear representation of the image.

In De Saussure article, he talks about the immutability of the sign. He states that "No individual, even if he willed it, could modify in any way at all the choice that has been made" (71). The UPC code is also immutable, it cannot be modified because otherwise it will

lose its original meaning. Both of them help us convey an idea, language is used to communicate with each other, while the UPC code is used to share information about a product in order to make the buying process much easier.

It also refers to the Bauhaus because this design has a function, it is not meant to be hung in a wall as part of the decoration, its purpose is to improve customer service and accelerate they way we shop. The idea of creating something like this came along after realizing that they needed to improve the service. It was done with help of observation and representation.

Attachments
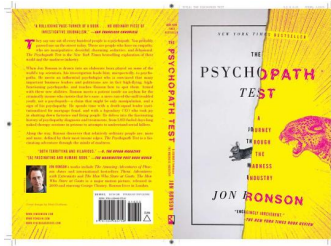
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