



**BEST PRACTICE PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT**

# CUSTOMER AS TEAM PARTNER

In our case study, we examine the development of the Ford Vignale Collection as a successful implementation of brand values in a product collection by all parties involved. The special feature of our round table: In addition to a distributor and five supplier partners involved in the project, the industry customer was also at the table. This not only resulted in a deeper understanding of the interaction between industry representatives and the customer, but also provided an insight into the brand strategy and brand management of a global brand.

**C**reativity and competence – when it comes to the development of tailor-made products and custom designs, the industry shows what it is capable of. The path to the optimal product is sometimes long, sometimes short, sometimes smooth and sometimes rocky, but certainly always different. Every distributor and every supplier has his individual way of approaching the task of the customer and implementing a project. What we see at the PSI or in the showrooms are the results of development processes that demand a great deal of personal experience, knowledge and skill from the trade and the suppliers. Whether the products are really suitable, whether the handling works and the customer is ultimately satisfied depends on how all parties involved work together and interact.

It was precisely this part of the process that we closely examined in our case study of the „Ford Vignale Collection“ project. To this end, we invited a distributor and his customer, as well as five suppliers participating in the development of the collection, to the round table. Attending our roundtable discussion were: Steven Baumgärtner (cyber-Wear), Patrick Döring (Acar), Jörg Herzog and Claudio Marchi (zogi), Meinhard Mombauer (LM Accessoires), Tobias Köckert (Mahlwerck) and Toska Siekmann (Alta Seta) as well as the lead designer of the customer Ford, Erika



**Not commonplace, but purposeful: Supplier and industry customer engaged in a dialogue. From the left, Tobias Köckert and Markus Egbert from Team Ford Customer Service Europe.**

Tsubaki (Ford design) and Markus Egbert, Manager Accessories (Ford Customer Service Division Europe). Together we examined the question: What is important when a high-quality collection of design articles is developed for a brand manufacturer? How does such a process work and what stumbling blocks have to be overcome?

The lively and very open discussion not only provided answers to these questions, it actually went beyond the actual topic and critically questioned the traditi-

onal roles of the trade, supplier and end customer in today's promotional product business. Direct contact between the industry customer and the supplier is still judged to be problematic, although for good reasons, it is increasingly becoming the norm. The participants all agreed on this point: The more complex the projects and the more demanding the tasks are, the more meaningful and purposeful is the involvement of suppliers in the communication between distributors and the industry customer.

**To understand the requirements that lie behind the Ford Vignale Collection, we first of all want to clarify: What is Ford Vignale?**

**Erika Tsubaki:** Ford Vignale is the most exclusive line of equipment that a customer can choose for a Ford vehicle. It is initially available for the new Ford Mondeo. The design should not only be appealing, but should also fascinate the customer. The central element is the characteristic hexagon which, among other elements, also ap-

pears as a distinctive emblem on the radiator grille and on the seat cushion seams. The many details turn every Ford Vignale into something very special: In addition to the sleek lines of the exterior design, the Ford Vignale boasts a high-quality interior with comfortable seats made of soft leather with delicately handcrafted stitching, as well as various innovative technologies. The brand experience is complemented by tailor-made, personal service and individual

advice provided in Ford Vignale lounges exquisitely appointed in the same style, at 500 selected car dealerships in Europe.

**The namesake of the brand is the Italian car designer Alfredo Vignale...**

**Markus Egbert:** Yes, he has indeed been an inspiration for us. Vignale is regarded as an artist among carbody designers and created some of the most legendary cars of the 50s and 60s. Vignale represents a part

of our brand history because Carrozzeria Vignale was acquired in 1969 by Ghia, which has been part of the Ford Motor Company since 1970. The name is synonymous with the high standards that we as designers and carmakers still have today: We do not only attach great importance to technical perfection, but equally to aesthetics, equipment details and quality of workmanship. These features are reflected in the Ford Vignale brand which combines elegance with sportiness.

### How important is the Vignale concept in the Ford brand strategy?

**Erika Tsubaki:** Ford Vignale is a part of our brand strategy: We thus document that we can offer a premium line throughout Europe, without being a pronounced premium manufacturer. Our top equipment line Titanium has been very successful for years, hence with Ford Vignale we have really upped the ante and created a high-end range which the market is clearly receptive to. The underlying aim is to serve both discerning Ford customers and to entice new customers from the premium segment to take an interest in Ford. The core brand attributes are technology, safety, quality and environmental awareness. These features characterize not only all Ford cars, but also all other products that we develop. The brand strength is also reflected in the details that set Vignale apart.

### How did the idea of the Ford Vignale Collection arise?

**Markus Egbert:** The definitive idea was: The customer should be able to take something from the experience of driving his Ford Vignale model – on trips, but even when his car is back in the garage the contact with the brand should remain a lasting experience. Hence a collection of extravagant, high-quality lifestyle accessories, in which we set the same high standards as the vehicles themselves, has been developed to match the vehicle equipment line. The implementation was carried out in close cooperation with cyber-Wear, our longstanding partner for merchandising.

**Steven Baumgärtner, cyber-Wear:** “Partnership and trust must be both the aim and the way.”



**Erika Tsubaki, Ford Design:** “We understand and respect each other and everyone pulls together.”

**cyber-Wear has been in charge of the Ford Merchandising division since 2010 and is responsible for the development, production and marketing of the Ford Lifestyle Collection. How did this collaboration actually come about?**

**Steven Baumgärtner:** Ford had found that the standard products available on the market did not optimally represent the brand and began taking the design of individual products into their own hands. The aim was to create a collection whose products are perfectly tailored to the target groups and match the respective vehicles in all aspects. For this purpose, a partner was sought and cyber-Wear was able to prevail as a supplier in a Europe-wide tender. Today the Ford Lifestyle Collection includes around 235 products, such as bags, textiles, caps, watches, model cars, as well as mugs, key chains and numerous other accessories. The collection is marketed through a shop operated by us. Thus a very friendly and trusting relationship between us and the designers and marketing managers of Ford has developed over the years. When the Ford Vignale Collection project was discussed, we were again chosen owing to our experience as a supplier to European markets. With the Lifestyle Collection, we actually demonstrate that we understand the brand, that the quality is right and that distribution works very well.



**Jörg Herzog, cyber-Wear:** “We were involved as true partners and everyone acted professionally.”

Meinhard Mombauer, LM Accessoires: "The Ford Vignale Collection is an exceptional project with the right balance between communication, performance and price."



Silver-plated brass with laser-engraved lettering: The Ford Vignale money clip is an elegant accessory.

### What are the differences between the Lifestyle Collection and the Ford Vignale Collection?

**Erika Tsubaki:** Each article of the Ford Vignale Collection is a specially designed product innovation. In addition, the Ford Vignale Collection has a far higher claim – in terms of design, materials and workmanship. The Vignale products are luxurious, elegant lifestyle products with a touch of extravagance, yet appearing very discreet, not least because of the choice of colours. The customer should intuitively associate them with fashion, elegance and Italian design. We unmistakably adopted the styling language of the brand in the design, which was nevertheless very subtly implemented. We are therefore some way from the Lifestyle Collection. However, it must be clearly stated here that the Lifestyle Collection consists of well-conceived assortments with carefully selected finished products. Here, too, cyber-Wear guarantees us a top quality – promotional products off the shelf cannot be found here. After all, all the products should adequately represent the brand, even if there are different levels.

### Which aspects were paramount in choosing the product range?

**Erika Tsubaki:** The strategic objective of the Ford Vignale Collection is to emotionally charge the brand and increase brand loyalty. The question was: What accessories are useful, practical and bring enjoyment to the customer on the go and at home?

What can emotionally extend the driving experience? Together with cyber-Wear, we quickly arrived at a travel bag, ladies' handbag, iPhone case, purse, silk tie and scarf, USB stick, money clip and set of espresso mugs. The designs were submitted by Ford Design whilst cyber-Wear selected the suppliers and coordinated the production. It was important to us that all products form a uniform line and that everything comes from European production. Product – quality – experience: These three aspects cannot be separated. That is why the collection is a part of the brand.

### What was the decisive factor in the choice of suppliers?

**Steven Baumgärtner:** We asked ourselves: „Who can do what?“ And „Who understands what Ford wants?“ Accordingly, we approached partners we trust and with whom we have had good experience. What was decisive was whether they would be able to deliver the required high quality on schedule.

### What role did cyber-Wear assume?

**Steven Baumgärtner:** We were and are the coordinator, mediator, problem solver. And of course, the link between Ford and the suppliers. Due to the high quality standards and the complexity of the project, we chose to bring the Ford team together with the suppliers/manufacturers. This has proved to be very practical in order to quickly clarify issues and to be able to make adjustments: For instance, the designer should see for himself why a seam at a certain point of the pocket is not possible. Or what problems occur when implementing the Hexagon pattern on porcelain. Hence he was able to adapt his design accordingly or practical solutions were sought together. This worked well in practice and accelerated the entire project. It is important that all parties communicate openly and that everyone knows his role and assumes responsibility.



### How well did the cooperation work from Ford's perspective?

**Markus Egbert:** We knew from experience that cyber-Wear and we speak the same language. We also hit it off immediately with the suppliers. That in itself is already a solid basis. By the second meeting, cyber-Wear was already very well prepared. The professional expertise as well as the enthusiasm with which the cyber-Wear team addressed the tasks really impressed us. One advantage is certainly that our Ford team of four people is quite small and able to make decisions. I think all parties reacted very quickly and flexibly and were open to suggestions and changes. This accelerated and simplified the whole process, and ultimately led to great results. This is also perceived externally. It was not without reason that the luxurious Vignale Weekender was distinguished with the coveted IF Design Award.

### How was product development and what special challenges emerged for the suppliers?

**Patrick Döring:** Acar produces the Vignale Weekender, a travel bag with a spacious design made from exquisite, hand-stitched leather, reflecting the appearance of the soft leather seats. There is a matching ladies' handbag in the same trapezoidal silhouette, the lining of which reflects the pattern of the car seats. As for the procedure: We received a detailed inquiry which already included a lot of information, and therefore we were soon able to begin producing a prototype. The claim for a higher, uniform quality, especially in terms of a natural material such as leather, is a major challenge. For example, it is not easy to evenly dye a large area of beige leather. After just two samples, however, the decision was made. The blind embossing required some experimenting. Here, too, everything was relatively uncomplicated: The approval came direct from Ford in our production facility in Turkey, where the de-

signers themselves had inspected the facility. Of course, something like this is only possible when the distributor and supplier have a trustful relationship.

**Meinhard Mombauer:** The Vignale money clip made of silver-plated brass comes from our company. We needed just two tests before we had achieved the specified quality. The lasering process was eventually carried out by us in Cologne. I see this as a learning process in which you get to know your strengths and weaknesses. What counts with such product developments is alone the result which we and the customer must be satisfied with.

**Toska Siekmann:** Alta Seta produces the silk scarves and ties according to the specifications of Ford Design – naturally from the highest quality fine silk made in Italy. We initially presented several material qualities and specified the dimensions and colours. Once the material had been specified, a sample was immediately produced. During production in our Italian facility, we made modifications together with the designers: For example, it was found that the silk in the chain had to be more tightly woven to bring the pattern and the logo to bear. I personally found it great that the Ford designers worked together with us in a team to implement our ideas. The result has convincing: The four-colour lining at the tip of the tie, which reflects the design of the silk scarf, met with an outstanding response. Thus, the requirement to create an exclusive design was fully met.

**Jörg Herzog:** A USB stick in the design of a vehicle key – this is really something special and an exciting task for us. Ford gave us invaluable support here, enabling us to make a prototype based on CAD data. Once a decision on the size and material had been made, the task was solved. We understood the idea and everything instantly worked perfectly.

**Tobias Köckert:** When it comes to fine porcelain, one naturally thinks first of Meissen porcelain manufacture, and in fact this op-

tion was briefly discussed. However, this option was priced well beyond the specifications. We therefore invited cyber-Wear and the Ford team to our own factory and collectively brainstormed ways to implement the hexagon design on a set of espresso mugs. Luckily we had some time and a budget to try out some variations. After we showed what is possible, we specified a variant that in our opinion would provide the best result. That is the difference to normal merchandising products: When developing a design product that must reflect the brand values and an idea, a dialogue always takes place in order to create the optimal product. In the case of simple merchandising products, the result is more likely than not determined by the budget and therefore the options are limited.

### What experience did you gain from the project?

**Steven Baumgärtner:** Transparency is the most important principle of cooperation in the framework of a project. Anyone who acts accordingly need not be hesitant about doing direct business. In our industry, however, this fear is still widespread, as well as a certain overestimation of one's capabilities. As distributors we have to admit that we cannot do everything. That is why we need to involve competent partners who can overcome unusual challenges with enthusiasm and passion. Accordingly the results are good – a vivid example of this is the Ford Vignale Collection. I would appeal to my fellow distributors to further develop this concept of partnership and not to stigmatise distributors or suppliers who work as transparently as we do.

**Markus Egbert:** We are glad that there are companies such as cyber-Wear who support us in a field that is not part of our core business: We can build cars and support dealers, but the distribution of merchandising products is an entirely different kettle of fish. cyber-Wear has filled this gap

and supplied us with ideas and concepts for the Ford Lifestyle Collection and the Ford Vignale Collection that fit into our brand strategy. Our long-term cooperation and friendly relations confirm that we are welcome as a customer. Approaching difficult tasks in a constructive dialogue also gives us a good feeling.

**Erika Tsubaki:** The human aspect is also important in this context: We understand and respect each other and everyone pulls together.

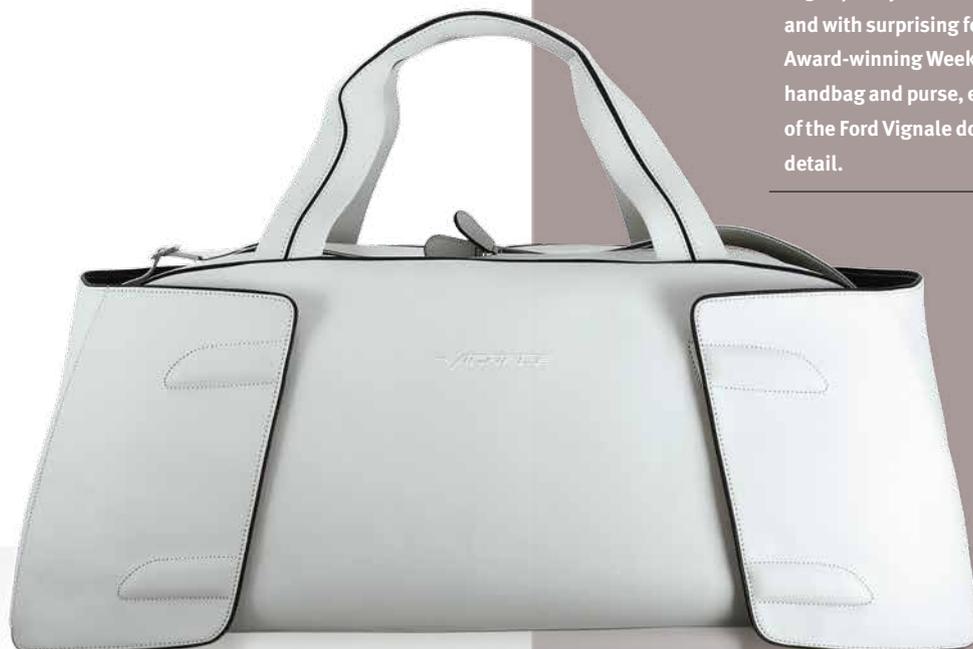
**Jörg Herzog:** Everyone involved has acted professionally. It was encouraging to see how we as suppliers were involved as true partners. cyber-Wear prepared the entire project very well and we were perfectly briefed. In this respect, I really became aware that we often do not adequately know the needs of our customers. Information is (also intentionally) withheld, leaving us to make product proposals or designs on spec. We could purchase and develop much more efficiently if we had more information.

**Tobias Köckert:** For me, it was an extraordinary experience of constructive cooperation and we were equal to the requirements placed on us as a manufacturer. The project was a lot of fun, not least because Ford recognized our production expertise and all parties were prepared to deal objectively with the issues at stake.



A top design product has been created with the Ford Vignale Weekender. What is important is "open communication, transparency and cooperation", explains Patrick Döring, Acar.

High-quality leather in a striking form and with surprising features: The IF Award-winning Weekender, the ladies handbag and purse, echoes the styling of the Ford Vignale down to the last detail.



**The creatively adapted signet on the finest silk puts the brand values of the Ford Vignale elegantly in the limelight.**



**Toska Siekmann, Alta Seta:**  
 “Detailed briefing, clear guidelines and the customer works in the team on the implementation – I would like to see that more often.”

**Tobias Köckert, Mahlwerck:** “An exceptional experience of constructive cooperation.”



**Patrick Döring:** I can also confirm that for Acar. I wish that more distributors would adopt such open communication, transparency and cooperation with a view to achieving a clear objective. For me, this project means a genuine partnership of distributor and supplier. In my experience, distributors who work like cyber-Wear in our Vignale project develop positively and enjoy more success.

**Toska Siekmann:** I was impressed by the highly professional preparation by cyber-Wear and Ford Design. We had clear guidelines and were able to act immediately. This is something we would like to see more often. I also think we all learned from each other.

**Meinhard Mombauer:** The project showed me that the more information we receive from the distributor, the more professional we can work as a supplier. It is naturally advantageous if a distributor knows his customer as well as in this case, and the supplier gets the chance to discuss details directly with the customer. However, I want to emphasize that the Vignale project is not an everyday task: Unfortunately, in daily business, we are often reduced to the buyer status. Although distributors have great ideas, they usually have little opportunity to implement them – especially when the customer’s purchasing department is responsible for sourcing. Time after time, the purchasing department is not briefed properly and eventually an inadequate product is created. The Vignale project is thus rather an ideal case that was enjoyable because communication, performance and

**With the set of espresso mugs, the Ford Vignale also has a seat at the table: The characteristic hexagon also cuts an outstanding figure on porcelain.**



price were spot on. The fact is: As a supplier I need small distributors just as much as large ones, creative ones as well as pure resellers, and of course high-volume orders.

#### Do you have a message for the industry?

**Steven Baumgärtner:** As distributors, we are only as good as those who work with us. Really good projects only work in a collective manner, and to achieve this it is helpful to show customer the production. Being intransparent and withholding information is counterproductive. Partnership and trust must be both the aim and the way.

**Meinhard Mombauer:** We have to accept that the market has opened up and that in principle everyone can sell to anyone. Everyone can now import themselves and everyone can do business. We have the possibilities to do this. But it is wise not to do that, but rather to perfect what you can do best and to act together in the market.

#### Finally, let us return to the Vignale

##### Collection: What is the marketing strategy?

**Markus Egbert:** Distribution is carried out exclusively through the marketing channels of Ford: These are the Europe-wide targeted 500 Ford Vignale Lounges at selected flagship stores and the e-commerce platform operated by cyber-Wear which can be accessed via the Ford website. In addition, we present the Vignale Collection as well as the Ford Lifestyle Collection at all major trade fairs where we exhibit. We are supported by cyber-Wear whose own team looks after the shop integrated into the stand. Of course, the characteristic design elements of Ford Vignale are reflected in the design of all distribution platforms mentioned. Whether it be lounges, online shop or displays at the stand – everywhere the uniform design line conveys that Ford Vignale is synonymous with comfort, exclusivity and sophistication. Inci-



Attending the round table were: (left to right) Claudio Marchi, Jörg Herzog, Erika Tsubaki, Markus Egbert, Steven Baumgärtner, Meinhard Mombauer, Daniela Nieleck, Toska Siekmann, Patrick Döring and Tobias Köckert.

dentally, cyber-Wear produced luxurious cushions for the seating area of the Ford Vignale lounges that also reflect the material, colour and design elements of the Vignale models. The salespeople and hostesses wear Vignale scarves and ties, thus complementing the professional appearance of the brand. Fittingly, cyber-Wear has developed a high-quality aluminium name badge for the lounge managers.

#### Can you tell us whether sales of the Vignale Collection have got off to a good start?

**Markus Egbert:** The preparations for the launch of the Ford Mondeo Vignale are currently in full swing. More than 70 new Ford stores with integrated Vignale Lounge are already in place in Europe. We are continuing our efforts to enthuse distributors

for the lounge concept and the collection, so that they can pass on this enthusiasm to the customer. The lounges act as an interface between the customer and the brand; the brand can be experienced here in all its emotionality. Whoever receives individual advice here automatically comes in contact with the Vignale Collection and can be inspired by its elegant design. In addition to private customers, the so-called 'user choosers', corporate customers who can configure their vehicle themselves within a budget, have been especially selected as the target group of Ford Vignale. However, some of the items of the Vignale Collection are offered as a gift or premium – for example, if the seller gains the impression that an expensive bag is more likely to affect the customer's purchase decision than a discount on the purchase price. <