The sound of Vattenfall - A brand promise is heard

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Vattenfall sounds off. The Swedish energy company, which has a strong presence in Northern and Central Europe, has created a new acoustic identity. Since summer 2006, the company has used an acoustic logo and theme as elements of its international identity. Harp tones with violin and cello notes convey the Vattenfall brand values: Easy, empathetic, collegial, progressive and reliable. The players: Vattenfall, Interbrand in cooperation with the Stockholm partner agency Essen and composer Milo Heller.

The Sweden-based Vattenfall Group is Europe’s fourth-largest energy company. In 2006, its 32,000 employees achieved a turnover of € 13.7 billion. Vattenfall aims to be a leading European energy company. The holding company Vattenfall AB is fully owned by the country of Sweden.

When the Nordic energy markets opened up in the 1990s, the company expanded beyond Sweden’s borders. In Germany Vattenfall acquired the companies Laubag, VEAG, Bewag and HEW and took over EW and GZE in Poland and lately Elsam in Denmark. The acquisitions were followed by the migration to one Vattenfall brand. Today, Vattenfall is active in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany and Poland.

With its first steps abroad and a dedication to continued expansion, Vattenfall began to invest in its corporate identity. The takeover of several energy companies as a result of deregulation in the respective energy markets dramatically accelerated the company’s growth. Vattenfall saw a need to develop a solid, sustainable international brand profile and to implement a monolithic brand strategy. Vattenfall gradually integrated all of the brands...
and now has a consistent international identity. In this context, the development of a local operator to an international brand within just a few years is a success story.

**1. One brand for many target groups and markets**

The speed of the international expansion wasn’t the only factor which made Vattenfall’s brand management so challenging: A central part of the process involved developing the identity for the Group, formerly managed as a national company, which would be unmistakable, relevant and credible for a wide range of target groups on an international arena. It was necessary to design a strategy suitable for the international arena of financial markets and regulatory agencies, which would also work effectively with industrial clients, household consumers and the public opinion.

Vattenfall encountered very tough competition, especially in Germany. Customers recently exposed to the newly deregulated market were bombarded by offers from a wide range of energy brands. After taking over energy companies with long traditions and strong local roots, such as the Hamburg-based *HEW* and Berlin’s *Bewag*, Vattenfall faced major challenges in creating one consistent European brand.

Since the beginning of 2004, Interbrand has supported Vattenfall professionals in the international development of the Vattenfall brand together with the Stockholm branding agency Essen. The work involved ranges from strategic consulting and corporate design development to supporting the implementation of the brand identity at all levels of communication.

**2. Aim: Enabling people to experience the brand identity**

The result is a striking brand identity, which can be experienced on both the visual and acoustic level. The brand has a clearly defined profile and an authentic brand personality at its core. Among competitors with personality characteristics, which can be described as cool and serious, Vattenfall is set on a route to position itself as an empathetic and progressive partner that is reliable and easy to deal with – one committed to provide its customers with a better quality of life. This is a brand which devotes its “heart and mind” to its business.

The purpose and aim of all integrated brand communication is to bring the brand identity to life in all touchpoints and interactions while ensuring that it is always clearly recognizable. The acoustic perception and recognition of the brand represents another element in the creation of an unmistakable brand experience, making it possible to address all target groups in an emotional manner within the sense of hearing.

*Stefan Nerpin, Head of Vattenfall Group Marketing Communication:*

*As our core product – electricity – is invisible and mostly accredited to other end-user brands of household appliances etc., we have to let our brand come alive through all dimensions possible. Therefore Vattenfall is communicating through a wide range of touchpoints. Our brand can*
be experienced by almost all senses: heated and lit up bus stops in Poland, customer service centers in Germany, electricity meters in Sweden, mobile services in Finland and group-wide environmental efforts such as the combating climate change initiative and building the world’s first CO2-free coal-fired powerplant. All major touchpoints were being thought of. Except one. We wanted to expand the interface to the public and use the emotional strength of the last missing sense, hearing, which led us finally to develop an acoustic identity. Another effect from the acoustic identity we hope for, is also to increase recognition of the Vattenfall identity in all communications investments we’s do anyway where sound might be applicable.

3. Experiencing the brand with all the senses
Vattenfall has recognised the increasing importance of effectively utilising images in this age of overwhelming stimulation, especially since Vattenfall’s primary product – energy – cannot be perceived directly. As a result, the target groups are forced to seek orientation via other communication measures instead of the product itself. Characteristic acoustic signals help people create associations and recognise trusted, familiar products and brands.

3.1 Sounds enhance brand worlds
Over the last few years, Vattenfall has continuously worked to develop targeted communications that effectively convey authentic, positive experiences and clear messages across all media – with success. Using the sense of hearing and implementing conscious sound design help to refine and expand this brand world. They help to connect content and visual elements with acoustic signals. In the future, this should take place via two central elements:
- via the sound logo, which is used more frequently in connection with visual media (e.g. TV advertisements)
- and via sound themes or soundscapes which communicate the brand in areas where visual means cannot be used (e.g. phone on-hold messages or ringtones) or where a specific atmosphere is to be created (e.g. during events or in customer centres).
3.2 A consistent perception creates distinction
The central element of the Vattenfall corporate sound is the sound logo. Like its graphic counterpart, it represents the personality and promise of the brand. The sound world is created around the sound logo. It is essential that it meet a variety of technical requirements.

It must be possible to reproduce corporate sound in all relevant media - from film advertisements to screensavers. This essential quality factor must be taken into account during the first creation phases. The following illustration shows a selection of relevant acoustic points of contact with employees, customers or the public. The Vattenfall corporate sound should convey a consistent experience across all applications – from the service hotline and sponsoring measures to internal communication.

4. Creating the Vattenfall corporate sound

4.1 The missing acoustic dimension
After the Vattenfall brand position was defined and the corporate design was taken to the next step, the entire chain of experience was reviewed with regard to its completeness and consistency with all aspects of the brand personality.

At this point in time, Vattenfall had introduced the modernized corporate identity in Sweden and Finland. Preparations were being made for the conversion of the brands HEW, Bewag, EW and GZE to the new Vattenfall brand. The number of customers and employ-
ees under the Vattenfall brand was to increase considerably in the future. Radio, television and film advertisements were included in the planned communication measures to emphasize the emotional dimension of the brand identity. Events were supposed to expand the brand’s chain of experience. Activities and measures targeted towards employees aimed to strengthen the new shared identity. An acoustic dimension of the brand identity was needed in order to implement these communication aims in a consistent manner.

At the end of 2004, Vattenfall’s Group Function Communications initiated with the help of Interbrand Zintzmeyer and Lux a preliminary selection of possible providers. From three finalists, the agency Hastings Audio Network was selected and composer Milo Heller entrusted with the creation process. Heller’s previous work for top international brands as well as his diverse oeuvre played a decisive role in this decision.

4.2 Inspiration at the headquarters
The task was to develop a comprehensive corporate sound for Vattenfall consisting of a sound logo (incl. variations) and sound themes of varying lengths. A sonic expert team was formed consisting of the Head of Group Marketing Communication, the Marketing Managers of all markets and representatives from the advertising agency Lowe Brindfors. Interbrand worked with the Stockholm-based branding agency Essen to provide ongoing brand consulting services and project management.

Vattenfall’s Stockholm headquarters was chosen as the site of the first team meeting. This way, all of the people involved could get a better sense of the Vattenfall brand. The thematic and visual basis of the Vattenfall brand was introduced, along with sources of inspiration for the creative process: the brand image attributes and brand promise, the anatomy and colors of the Vattenfall corporate logotype and design, the significance of the name Vattenfall, industry-specific associations, the Nordic origins of the brand, etc.

It was decided that the future sonic identity should primarily embody the brand attributes “progressive” and “empathetic”. According to studies, these values hold a strong potential for differentiation from the competition. In addition, the new acoustic world should fulfill the brand promise: To devote both heart and mind to enhancing the quality of life for Vattenfall’s customers. In this way, the corporate sound would fit perfectly in the range of all communicative measures designed for the brand.
Milo Heller, Composer:
During the first meeting in Stockholm, I gave a general introduction to the topics of corporate sound and the sound logo. My intention was to establish a common basis for our continued work together. It isn’t easy to talk about music. First, I wanted everyone to become aware of the process involved in creating corporate sound, to find common language rules and specify evaluation criteria. It is challenging to assess such a short melody. Of course, personal taste does play a role – but shouldn’t play such a major role in the decision.

During this first meeting, it was also very important to me to get a feel for the brand and observe the company, the building, the employees. After having given a short impression of music of competitors, I wanted to learn more about the environment of Vattenfall: What national and international campaigns are planned? Will there be a different approach to local markets? Are there company divisions with independent marketing departments?

4.3 Creative workshop: What could Vattenfall sound like?
The creative workshop was held at the Hastings Music sound studio in Hamburg. Milo Heller presented around 30 examples featuring different rhythms, melodies, harmonies and instruments. One important factor: The sounds weren’t played on their own, but in a specific context. They were all played at the end of a Vattenfall corporate film in order to evoke an association. The purpose was to limit the creative playing field for the further design process. At first, however, there was a great deal of latitude: Since the participants (group marketing members and marketing managers from all Vattenfall markets) were able to allow their associations free rein and express their wishes and preferences, Milo Heller developed around 100 different variants on the original 30 proposals.

The participants were supposed to wait a few days before providing their feedback. Specific parameters were chosen in advance for their evaluations: Brand fit (consistency with the attributes “progressive” and “empathetic”, concurrence with the brand promise), memory factor (distinctiveness), uniqueness (differentiation to the competition and other examples) and overall impression.

The interesting part of this phase involved testing out various sources of inspiration, e.g. integrating themes reminiscent of Norwegian composer Edward Grieg or attempting to use typical Scandinavian instruments. This creation phase was important in order to develop an idea which corresponded with the Vattenfall brand.

The result of the creation phase was a selection of ten favorites (short list). It turned out that the attribute “empathetic” was conveyed especially well using string instruments. Other favorites included the clarinets (also “empathetic”), a quick series of electronic sounds which characterized pulsating energy. There were also experimental examples which featured nature sounds, wind, water or bird sounds – attempts which aimed to convey environmental associations.
At this point in time, it was important to include a larger group of people in the current status of the project. The relevant communication departments, such as Marketing, Internal Communications, Public Affairs, Public Relations and representation of the Executive Group Management were involved. As a result of this coordination process, four favorites are selected for testing in market research.

Integrating important decision makers was a critical and important factor in ensuring the success of the project. This laid the foundation for gaining a wide consensus for the future sound design.

A qualitative approach was designed to test the four sound logos on the various B2B and B2C target groups in Sweden, Finland, Germany and Poland: 120 test people per country (60 business and private customers each) were surveyed in phone interviews. The aim was to check the sound logo for its communicative power, quality and acceptance.

Once the market research was completed, a decision was made: The current Vattenfall sound logo with the working title “Grieg” only got the second best rating in the market research, but still came out on top. The team of experts felt that it had more communicative power. In contrast to the market research winner, the logo ends in an ascending series of tones which motivates listeners to finish the melody themselves. In addition to the strength in the aspect of “empathetic”, this was the decisive moment.

Composer Milo Heller:
With all due respect for market research as a means of insurance, it is better to allow creativity to develop with less restriction. In the process of forming opinions on the audio logo, market research results can be helpful in making decisions. The decision should not be completely dependent on it, because:

- Uninvolved market research participants make more impulsive decisions. Their assessment is always based solely on spontaneous impressions.
- Due to their short duration, audio logos require a willingness on the part of listeners to analyze them carefully.
- The people who truly understand the brand are the involved employees at the company. They have developed a sense of the brand over a long period of time and feel a connection to it.
- As a part of the brand identity, an audio logo should also be able to sustain long-term market processes and not be designed for the immediate market situation.

4.4 “Grieg” creates a unique acoustic position
The new Vattenfall sound logo “Grieg” is an acoustic sequence of four notes featuring plucked harp tones and string instruments (pizzicato). The new sound logo has a timeless, classic and very modern sound, which especially emphasizes the brand attribute “empathetic”. This piece has given Vattenfall a unique position.
Milo Heller developed several variations based on an original version. For example, the idea to integrate nature sounds from the integration phase was adopted. In addition, the team considered adding a voice-over — a voice which, pronounces the brand name “Vattenfall” — to the sound logo. In the end, this decision was left to the markets outside of Sweden. In these countries, it may be necessary to communicate the company name as well.

Two different sound themes were also created. These are two- to three-minute compositions which feature the melody, harmony, rhythm and instruments of the sound logo throughout the piece. Since the possibilities for creation were limited by the tempo of the selected sound logo, Milo Heller chose the following arrangements:

- “Theme Splendid” was intended especially for pure listening situations. It should be subtle, relaxing and enjoyable, making it suitable for use on phone messages/hot lines or at the POS.
- “Theme Deep” is suitable for audiovisual applications. It reflects the Vattenfall specifications such as the company size, international orientation, etc.

5. Combining the sound and animated corporate logotype
The sound logo is most often used with the corporate logotype in moving images. In order to strengthen the impact of this interplay, the recommendation was made to synchronize the corporate logotype with the sound logo using computer animation.

In order to avoid interfering with the acoustic design process, the Vattenfall corporate logotype was only animated after the sonic logo was completed. The result involves animated graphic elements in the logotype, which correspond to the rhythm and duration of the sound logo. The animation features the sound logo as the soundtrack and can be used in all audiovisual media. It is never shown as a silent version.

Vattenfall’s identity and design is documented in the Brand Manual which is part of the groupwide Management Instruction System. The Brand Manual exists out of a Core Manual,
appendices and best practive examples. Together with The “Brand & Communication Toolbox” on the company’s Extranet it forms a binding tool for day-to-day work which is updated and expanded on an ongoing basis.

After production was completed, all elements, formats, application principles and technical data including the animated logotype were described in a systematic manner and added to the Toolbox as an Appendix to the Brand Manual entitled “Sound and Animation”.

It is possible to download the sound and image files directly from the Toolbox. The Toolbox also contains a description of the role that acoustic identity elements play in the Vattenfall chain of experience. The information in the Toolbox is accessible to all relevant employees and selected suppliers.

7. Legal aspects
Vattenfall will have unlimited rights to use the sound logo and sound themes in any media in relevant markets. For this reason, the usage rights were purchased from Milo Heller. A written agreement with the composer confirms the Vattenfall’s right of usage. However, Milo Heller retains the copyright. In addition, Vattenfall registered the sound logo as a trademark, enabling the company to take action against possible imitators.

Milo Heller, Composer:
In my opinion, it is important to ensure the most comprehensive trademark protection possible for a sound logo. I register every logo I develop with the GEMA (= German copyright association). In this way, it is registered as a composition and protected by copyright. This excludes the possibility of plagiarism, at least in the scope of legal possibilities. This protection primarily

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8. Summary and lessons learned

Corporate sound represents an extension of the basic elements in the brand identity. In essence, the acoustic logo is a representation of the brand using sounds and notes.

The development and decision process for the corporate sound and animated logotype for Vattenfall took a total of nine months. This is a realistic amount of time to ensure the success of the project. The internal coordination processes involved in this type of work should not be underestimated. Overall, the following points were decisive in the successful development of the new Vattenfall sound world:

A strong intention. Vattenfall has recognized the value of the acoustic logo and expressed a clear intention to create a striking and distinctive solution. Experience the brand.

A wide foundation. The team of experts was formed of marketing representatives from the holding company and subsidiaries in the respective countries. This constellation made it possible to achieve a wide consensus and acceptance. The team was supported by professional brand/sound identity experts who brought an outside perspective as well as the point of view of the brand into the creation process.

Keep your eyes and ears open. What is the competition doing? What has already been done? It is important to take a look at the market and differentiate yourself from the competition. However, Vattenfall’s target groups are also exposed to communicative influences outside of the energy industry as well. Such aspects are to be taken into account to ensure that the company stands out and is not considered an imitator of popular trends.

Use reason to control impulsive decisions. At the beginning of the development process, clear criteria for decision making based on the specified brand identity should be developed. The sound designs should be evaluated according to these in the creation phase.

Define the playing field. It is important not to limit the search at the start of the creative process. Hearing a lot of different sounds, rhythms, harmonies, melodies and instruments makes it possible to gain a feeling for the sound world and future corporate sound of the brand. Over the course of the process, the playing field becomes better defined and the decision options more limited.

Integrate top management. Getting top management involved early on is a factor for success. Once a feel for the characteristic sound world has been developed, the management should listen to what has been achieved so far. At Vattenfall, this ensured that there were no unpleasant surprises at the end of the process.
Set trends. It is important to test the favorites on the market and among the relevant target groups. However, it is important not to blindly follow the results of the market evaluation. When it comes to creating the new acoustic identity, it is difficult for the test people to effectively assess the new sounds. If the team of experts feels that a sound design other than the test winner has greater communicative potential and is better suited to the brand, it is important to trust this feeling.

Protect rights. As a new basic element of the brand identity, the developed sound logo should be protected by copyright. This ensures that the exclusivity of the sound world is protected in the future as well.